

The Expression of Indian Sensibility in the poems of Nissim Ezekiel

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Abstract

Ezekiel has made a substantial contribution to Indo-English poetry by his poems depicting Indian life. Most of the poems of Ezekiel having this kind of Indian sensibility deal with Indian culture and language. Interestingly, the metropolitan city of Bombay figures most prominently in the poetry of Ezekiel. Indeed, Ezekiel has identified himself completely with India and, more particularly, with the city of Bombay; and this identification sustains him as a writer and as a human being. In fact, Ezekiel has said that India's backwardness coincides with his own. He has further stated that India is his environment and that a man can do something for his environment not by withdrawing from it but by remaining in it. Thus, this paper endeavours to discover as to whether Ezekiel's poems have such true depth of Indian sensibility depicted in them or they fall to poetic satire and thus become a bit anti-Indian.

Key Words: Sensibility, Metropolitan, Culture, Language, Satire.

The term Indian Sensibility means the acquisition of those traits in the character of a man which show him to be an Indian, and certainly not those traits which show him as a foreigner or which show that, though an Indian by birth, he behaves like a westerner and has picked up not only western tastes in food and dress but also in his mode of speech. Now, Nissim Ezekiel is, by his parentage and religion, a foreigner whose ancestors had migrated to India from their own country and had settled down in the metropolitan city of Bombay. Ezekiel was born in Bombay, brought up in Bombay, and educated in Bombay. Leaving aside his three-year study in England and his occasional trips to various foreign countries, he has lived, worked, and earned his livelihood in Bombay. Thus he is steeped and soaked in Indian life and, as a poet, he has observed and experienced much more of Indian life than the native Indians themselves.

The question which arises is whether Ezekiel has merged his being with most of the typical features of Indian life: and, if so, to what extent. The degree of his Indianness would be determined by the extent to which Indian life has entered his blood and changed his temperament, his personality and his way of life. Now, the fact of the matter is that he has largely rebelled against the Indian way of life, the Indian modes of behavior, and the Indian way of speaking the English language. He has felt more annoyed than attracted by Indian life and by the Indian people. His poems show more of anti-Indianness than of Indianness. He has written a large

number of poems depicting the Indian conditions of life, and more particularly the conditions of life in the city of Bombay; but in these poems he appears more of a critic and a censor than an admirer or a champion of those conditions of life. Thus those readers, who regard Ezekiel's recourse to the theme of the Indian conditions of life in his poems as a sign of his love for India or his attachment to India or his admiration for India, are entirely mistaken in their view.

Actually, Ezekiel's Indianness lies only in his commitment to this country and in his earnest and sincere endeavour to bring about some improvement in the conditions of life in this country through his poetry. And we should appreciate this Jewish author's identification with this country to the extent of wanting to bring about certain improvements in the depressing, degrading, and disgusting conditions of life in this country as represented by the metropolitan city of Bombay. The desire to see better conditions of life in this country connotes a certain degree of patriotism; and in Ezekiel's case it certainly shows his love for the country of his adoption.

Before examining some of Ezekiel's poems which depict the Indian conditions of life, we may take a look at a poem in which Ezekiel has declared his commitment to this country. He first did so in the concluding lines of the poem *Background Casually*. Here he wrote:-

*I have made my commitment now.
This is one: To stay where I am,
As others choose to give themselves
In some remote and backward place.
My backward place is where I am.*

Ezekiel's backward place is this country, the country of his adoption where he decided quite early in his life to continue to live; and, of course, he has never regretted his decision in spite of his strong discontentment with the living conditions here.

Apart from this, in his famous poem entitled *Night of the Scorpion*, the speaker's mother was stung by a scorpion one night. The scorpion had crawled into the house and hidden itself beneath a bag full of rice. It had been forced to enter the house because of the rain outside. It had then crept towards the speaker's mother and had stung her. After stinging her, the scorpion had swiftly moved away from her and gone out into the rain again, though it was because of the rain that it had come into the house.

The peasants in the neighborhood, on learning about a woman having been stung by a scorpion, had come to the woman to express their sympathy and to relieve her of her pain if they could. They chanted the name of God again and again in order to nullify the effect of the scorpion's sting. The scorpion was a devil whose sting could be rendered ineffective only by this method, they thought. Then the peasant tried another device also to relieve the woman's pain or at least, to prevent the pain from becoming more acute. They began to search for the scorpion in order to kill it because, according to a general belief, with every movement which the scorpion made, the poison, injected by it into the woman's blood through its sting, would also move and

would increase her pain. Then, they all wished fervently that the scorpion should remain motionless wherever it was. They also expressed the wish that the sins, which this woman had committed in her previous life, should be burned away that night by the pain of the sting and that, furthermore the pain which she was suffering at night should lead to a decrease in the misfortunes which she might have to undergo in her next life. To quote a few lines:-

*May he sit still, they said
May the sins of your previous birth
be burned away tonight, they said.
May your suffering decrease
the misfortunes of your next birth, they said.
May the sum of all evil
balanced in this unreal world*

*against the sum of good
become diminished by your pain.*

The peasants gave utterance to some more wishes of the same kind. They expressed the wish that the woman's pain should diminish the sum-total of evil in this world which is unreal (or a kind of illusion). They expressed the wish that the poison should rid the woman of her bodily or physical desires, and should also free her of all worldly ambition.

The peasants sat around the speaker's mother on the floor with the other in the centre. They had an expression of tranquility on their faces, indicative of their belief that they understood the situation well. Then they brought more candles and more lanterns to look for the scorpion. The light of the candles and lanterns threw huge shadows on the walls of the house. But they did not find the scorpion. More neighbors came and joined the ones who were already present there. The woman in the meantime suffered all the agony of the sting; and she twisted and turned her body this way and that way, groaning all the time. The rain continued outside, and the woman continued to suffer.

The speaker's father was a man with scientific attitude to life. He did not share the views of the peasants who were superstitious. The speaker's father was a rationalist. He applied some herb to his wife's flesh and, next, a combination of the juice of certain herbs. He even went to the length of pouring a little paraffin over the affected flesh and applying a burning matchstick to it in order to burn away the sting from the woman's bitten toe. The speaker watched the flame burning his mother's flesh; and he also watched a religious-minded man performing certain rite to subdue the poison of the sting with an incantation. After a lapse of twenty hours, the effect of the poison wore off; and the woman ceased to experience the pain of the sting. To quote a few lines:-

*My father, sceptic, rationalist,
Trying every curse and blessing,
Powder, mixture, herb and hybrid.*

*He even poured a little paraffin
Upon the bitten toe and put a match to it.
I watched the flame feeding on my mother.
I watched the holy man perform his rites to tame the poison with an incantation.
After twenty hours
It lost its sting.*

At the end of it all, the speaker's mother simply thanked God for allowing the scorpion to choose only her for the sting and for not allowing the scorpion to sting any of her children. To quote a few lines:-

*My mother only said
Thank God the scorpion picked on me
And spared my children.*

Thus, *Night of the Scorpion* is a poem clearly exhibiting the Indian sensibility of Ezekiel.

Even in the poem entitled *Background Casually*, he says that he was, at his birth, a child endowed with a poetic talent but he was also a child having in him a potential for roguery and for clowning. He was a child easily frightened, with the result that he did not eat well or sleep well, and he was very thin. As a boy he could not learn the art of flying a kite or making a top spin.

Ezekiel was sent to study at a Roman Catholic school where he learnt his lessons by heart but where he was very callously treated by his school fellows because he was the only Jew among the Christian, Muslim and Hindu boys. The Christians accused him of belonging to the race which had been responsible for the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ; and yet he was the boy who won a prize for having studied the Christian scripture well. Muslim boys were so intolerant of him that one of them one day gave him a beating. As a result of that beating, he developed a fear of boys who had well-built and muscular bodies. The Hindu boys were not very strong but he felt repelled by them because of their excessively passive nature. One day, when he was being teased and tormented by his school-fellows, he used a knife against one of them in sheer desperation.

At home, Ezekiel's parents offered the usual prayers on Friday nights. It was the parents' view that his behavior was deteriorating, and that he was not paying sufficient attention to his religious duties. He heard some of the boys speaking of the Hindu Yogic exercises, and he also heard some people talking about the Jewish religion and its gospel. He asked himself if he could become a rabbi and thus become a saintly kind of person. But the more he questioned himself and the more he inquired into this matter, the less was he able to learn about what he was fit for.

When he had attained the age of twenty-two, it was felt by his parents that he should go abroad for higher studies. The parents had, of course, no money to pay his expenses for this visit to a foreign country – namely England. A family friend then agreed to pay for Ezekiel's passage to England. In London he took a basement-room for his lodgings; and there he had three companions, namely philosophy, poverty, and poetry.

Time passed, without Ezekiel's being able to do anything conspicuous. He spent two years in London without much company. Then he became acquainted with a woman who began to keep company with him and who made him conscious of his manhood. At the same time he realized that he had not made any progress in any direction and that, in fact, he had failed in every way. It was a bitter realization; and so he decided to get back to India.

He had no money to pay for his passage to India by a passenger ship. So he took up a menial job on an English cargo-ship carrying French guns and other weapons of war to Indo-China. As this ship was to stop at Bombay on its way to Indo-China, Ezekiel scrubbed the decks in order to be brought to his country. It was only when he had arrived in Bombay, where his parents were, that he was able to laugh once more.

However, Ezekiel found it difficult to regard India as his real home because here he had always been treated by the Hindus with contempt and because his father had told him that all the Hindus were alike in their behavior which, according to him, was offensive and obnoxious. In any case, Ezekiel now got married, changed his job and then realized that he had committed a folly by getting married. The offensive attitude of the Hindus towards him continued. One of the reasons for their contempt for him was that he was descended from ancestors who were oil-pressers by their trade and that he was not therefore a member of any respectable community or family.

One of Ezekiel's ancestors had served the British army as a Major and had fought in the Boer War. When he had first come to know about this ancestor of his, he had begun to have nightmares and had visualized himself as a prisoner in the hands of enemy forces. However, subsequently his nightmares had given way to dreams about the kind of words which he should choose for writing his poems. In the beginning he did not know that words could betray a poet and could create misunderstandings in the minds of his readers; and, therefore, he wrote his poems just as the words came to him. This carefree and spontaneous manner of writing poetry led to his losing his grip on things; and he then decided not to continue with that facile manner of writing but to adopt a more worldly style which consisted in commercializing his poetry and to exploit such themes as the inner tumults of his fellow-human beings and the external, social upheavals.

Ezekiel's final view of this country is that its heat is scorching but that he has become so much a part of his environment that even the foreigners get the impression that he really belongs to it. However, in his opinion, the foreigners in their letters to him exaggerate his identification with this country. He, on his part, feels sure that he has made his commitments one of which is that he would stay on in this country where he finds himself, and that he would stick to it even if he is regarded as a man who has settled down in a backward country. To quote a few lines:-

I have made my commitments now.

This is one: to stay where I am,

As others choose to give themselves

In some remote and backward place.

My backward place is where I am.

Apart from this, we cannot shut our eyes to what we have called his anti-Indianness. In poem after poem he has depicted the living conditions in India, and more particularly in *Poverty Poem*, with an obvious resentment against, and disgust for, those conditions, though in each of these poems he has adopted an ironical and satirical manner of disapproval and condemnation, and not a tone of indignation and denunciation. There are, number of Indians use the English language, making mistakes of grammar, syntax, idiom, and tense. He has seized upon one of the major grammatical mistakes which the half-educated or semi-educated Indian most often makes; and that is a use of the present continuous tense instead of the simple present tense. This is he mistake which Ezekiel ridicules in poems like *Good-bye Party to Miss Pushpa T.S* and *Very Indian Poem in Indian English*. Ezekiel certainly achieves a comic effect by writing such parodies of the behavior and the talk of the Indians; but his real object here is to give an outlet to his feelings of displeasure and dissatisfaction with the people of his country, and thus to his unmistakable and undeniable anti-Indianness.

Ezekiel's pictures of Indian life show a strong emphasis on the negative aspects, though he does not ignore the positive aspects completely. In a poem entitled *In India*, he has enumerated the following sights which are common in this country: the beggars; hawkers; pavement sleepers; slum-dwellers; burnt-out mothers; frightened virgins. The city, its tall buildings, its factory chimneys, and its human souls choked by the buildings and the chimneys, compel Ezekiel to pray to God to grant him privacy and to grant him a kinship with the sky and with the air, earth, fire, and sea. In other words, Ezekiel seeks an escape from the suffocating and unwholesome atmosphere of an Indian metropolis.

In a poem entitled *A Morning Walk*, Ezekiel describes his reaction to the city of Bombay by describing it as a barbaric city sick with slums, deprived of seasons, blessed with rains, full of hawkers and beggars crying themselves hoarse by soliciting customers and benevolent persons respectively. In another poem, entitled *Standing at the Crossroads*, the poet gives expression to his view that the people in Bombay are men of straw who are checkmated, defeated, and lost in hell. Here even love fails, and marriage cannot make good. In the same poem he contrasts the state of affairs in the city with his dreams of it. In the poem called *Urban* he again gives us a somewhat depressing picture of the life in the city.

Ezekiel's pictures of the urban scene in India depict the inhabitants as sick people. The city, with its sprawling vastness, pollution, and sickness seems to be having a death-wish. In the poem called *Healers*, he explicitly describes Bombay as an unplanned city having a death-wish. And it is not only the city which is sick but the entire modern civilization is also sick and needs healing. But the only medicines, which are freely on sale, are those manufactured by quacks who advertise their products through posters offering to sell health and happiness in bottles. The city also offers large financial returns to small investors who stake their money on the results of

football matches. The people of Ezekiel's city need peace of mind and comfort, but cannot achieve these. The people are, indeed, directionless.

Even the man-woman relationship in Ezekiel's city is not satisfactory one. In the poem entitled *To a Certain Lady*, Ezekiel finds his encounter with a woman to be a futile exercise in sex. In the poem entitled *The Couple*, the woman is frankly sensual and sex-hungry, while the man is equally eager to gratify his own sexual urge, though he has to put up a show of loving her genuinely. This poem is a satire on the man-woman relationship in which a lot of pretence is thought to be necessary by both the partners.

In the conclusion of this discussion, it can be pointed out that Ezekiel's relationship with this country is a love-hate relationship, and that the Indian elements in his poetry have certainly enriched it. It is for the individual reader and the individual critic to decide how far these elements represent Ezekiel's Indianness or anti-Indianness.

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