

Life as a Quest for Wholeness: A Socio-Cultural Analysis of Nissim Ezekiel's Poetry

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Abstract:

The glorious saga of Indian English poetry in the post-independence era is almost incomplete and irrelevant without the mention of a phenomenon called Nissim Ezekiel. His contribution in the form of brilliant poetry forms the very foundation, upon which stands the fabulous edifice of modern Indian poetry in English. The mammoth contribution and services that Ezekiel renders towards the elevation of the status and stature of Indian English literature on the whole, in various capacities remains unparalleled and speaks volumes about the man and his conviction. From time to time throughout his illustrious and prolific career Ezekiel essays several roles in the literary field, always achieving excellence in various arenas and leaving behind a rich legacy for future generations in the form of poems, essays, articles, criticism, etc.

His greatness lies in the fact that he is one poet who actively participates throughout his life on almost all fronts of the Indian socio-cultural milieu. He touches almost all the aspects and sections of the Indian socio-cultural scenario. Even a cursory glance at the life and the times of the poet bears the testimony to the fact that he is definitely one of those few poets who can literally boast of having tasted the first hand experience of the crude and bitter as well as the sweet and the sour Indian realities of a wide range throughout his life. The present paper aims to chart Ezekiel's quest for wholeness in life, as depicted in his whole corpus of poetry.

Keywords: Socio-cultural milieu, mammoth, testimony, corpus.

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Stop praising me, my friends.
Let me learn
to live without teaching,
until I find my soul—
or even lose it
on that different road. ("A New Poem" 11-16)

The lines above are taken from a poem that was written by Nissim Ezekiel much later, towards the fag end of his life, in the year 1996. The poem appears in a book taken out by the Sahitya Akademi, aptly titled *Nissim Ezekiel Remembered*. The lines sound almost prophetic and charismatic not only because they emanate from the pen of the poet who is undoubtedly one of the biggest literary stalwart that the nation has ever seen, but also because they come out from him at the time when he is having the Indian summer of his life. Just like an old wine, the words too are intoxicating and mesmerizing, hinting at one of the finest and enduring aspects of Ezekiel's poetry—his longing and cravings for improvements and the desperate urge for attaining a sort of balance or a sense of wholeness in life. He wishes to learn and improve with every passing moment and wishes to do away with all the flattery and undue praise that he finds to be dissuading and distracting. In fact, his whole poetry constantly displays this quest and thirst for finesse, wholeness and harmony in life.

A closer look at the life and times of Ezekiel makes one thing very much clear and obvious about him that throughout his poetic career, on the professional as well as personal front, Ezekiel remains a restless soul and it will not be a misnomer to say that he often seems to be in the possession of a vagabond spirit that refuses to die down and gains strength as the time advances, thereby making his life an endless quest—a quest for wholeness. He always finds his current fate or status lacking in one way or the other and relentlessly switches over to something

new in pursuit of completeness or totality, most of the times ending up empty handed as he was on the prior occasion.

This quest for wholeness, if something it could be termed as such, thus remains insatiated and unfulfilled and he finds almost impossible to let himself go of it, and, gradually over a period of time, this quest becomes an inseparable aspect of his life with which he carries on till the very end. Though Ezekiel takes up his case and tries to discern and comprehend it in many of his poems but one poem that remains outstanding in this regard is “First Theme and Variations” which appears in his second poetic volume titled *Sixty Poems*. Here Ezekiel seems to be defining his status and the turmoil that he faces. He says:

I know a man whose definition in a word is chaos, but listened
to his cry because he strove to be a finished man. I found him
haunted by a passion for the truth about himself; he had been
long in abandoning the urge to be loved and understood. (1-4)

In the above lines, the person Ezekiel speaks of is definitely his own self who is in a way a chaotic self, for he finds himself unfinished and incomplete on various accounts. Internally the person is torn apart by his turmoil and the crises, and desperately seeks wholeness in life. He strives to be, in Ezekiel’s own words, a “finished man” (2).

The repercussions are very much overt and obvious. His shifting stands, uncanny and unfathomable temperament, uneven job trotting, and all those broodings and contemplations that form a major chunk of his poetry are only few of the many side-effects that get visible. This urge to move on and to be in a sort of a voyage all the time eventually becomes his comfort zone. This quest of his manifests itself in two ways—inwardly and outwardly. Inwardly, it affects Ezekiel the poet and, outwardly, it affects Ezekiel the person. Both the effects are almost simultaneous and equally powerful. Whereas, at the outer level, this quest results in the restlessness and instability, in a way, alienating him and jeopardizing his life; on the other hand, at the inner level, this thirst of his proves to be a blessing in disguise and lends a totally different colour to his poetry.

In fact, the very title of almost all his major poetic volumes, from time to time, significantly resonate this quest-quotient in his poetry loudly. The very first title of his maiden poetic venture, *A Time to Change*, marks the starting point of his long enduring voyage in his quest for wholeness as far as his poetic career is concerned. It marks the beginning of a voyage that he embarks upon in pursuit of the poetic finesse and perfection for which his heart craves since the time immemorial. Significantly, all the titles of his major poetic volumes hint at this eternal quest of his. *A Time to Change*, *Hymns in Darkness*, *The Unfinished Man*, *The Exact Name* all these titles seem to have a strong undercurrent of a degree or a sense of admittance of the lack of completeness and a parallel display of the subtle pursuit for perfection and wholeness

in life in many ways. Regarding the quest, longing and the inward journey or the self realization of Ezekiel in the first three poetic volumes of his, Shirish Chindhade observes:

In all the three books the mood is permanent one of self absorption, inwardness, introspection: all roads lead to the city within, the city of soul. There is a consistent attempt at self search and self definition. The holy grail of the search is hidden within the soul and poetry affords consolation in such a state of mind. (30-31)

A letter written in 1950 by Ezekiel, from London to his sister Asha A. Bhende, very well elaborates his pursuits in all shades and colour:

In financial matters I am a bit helpless at the moment but I don't regret having given up my job. Mummy and all of you should believe that there was absolutely no alternative if I am to live a creative life. There is no other life for me. In a sense, of course, I am beaten, since I cannot organize my life as a whole. (10)

He always seems to be under a cloud of doubts and apprehensions regarding his bearings, the issues of alienation and fractured identities always remain central to him throughout his life and he consistently seems to be finding a way out of these problems. This desperation thus generated out of the disillusionments and dichotomies eventually paves the way for his quest for something full and complete in life. In this context the famous critic Emmanuel Narendra Lall very correctly remarks, "Most of the critics seem to agree that Ezekiel's poetry is a personal quest for identity, commitment, and harmony in life" (66). A sense of wholeness in life is something that he finds lacking most of the times and this thirst can be traced from the very start of his career to the very end of it, for it is out here in his poetic domain that he addresses his concerns and fears most of times: "He has to silence no one but himself" ("A Time to Change" 58).

This is the precise thought that turns out to be the fuel or the stimulus for him to embark upon the poetic voyage that continues for the whole life. Ezekiel very well know that if he has to seek the answers for the means of attaining this sense of wholeness in his life then the only person accountable for all his queries is he himself, for it so happens very often that most of the times it is his own individual self that gets caught in the web of these tormenting queries. Regarding this attitude and this unique but positive concern of the poet, H.M. Williams, a renowned critic, says, "Ezekiel's most attractive element is the honest saga of self-discovery. He pursues in his intensely personal but always accessible poetry. Using his poems as experiments, he seeks to dive deep into the psyche, into his own psyche" (116).

The very first poem of his career entitled "A Time to Change" resonates time and again with the pros and the cons of the symbolic journey that he embarks upon. As the poem progresses there is a progression in the voyage too and he takes the readers along with him. The journey or the voyage that thus starts with this poem carries on throughout his life and he too like

a hopeful and a passionate voyager carries on with it, going to places and gaining the varied experiences in life. In the present poem too, he comes up in front of the readers with a panoramic picture of the voyage presenting all the shades of life and experiences in a nut shell. The voyage that he embarks upon in this poem is in many ways symbolic of the struggles and the miseries that he suffers in the course of the journey of his life. Sometimes the journey proves to be apprehensive and hazardous, whereas at other times, it proves to be exciting and prospective as he mentions in the following lines:

But who can say:

There shall be no more surprises,

Discovery of the cities fresh as brides,

Bright legends of a recent birth,

New orchids or unimagined seas? (“A Time to Change” 29-33)

Ezekiel from the very word go remains fully aware of the pitfalls and the challenges of the journey that could be, for him, anything but not a cakewalk yet it is the sheer enthusiasm and the allure for the unknown and the unseen that eggs him on to carry forward with his journey. He seems to be always in the quest for these unimagined seas that could bring about a sense of completeness or the wholeness in his life.

Very early in his life, he develops this strategy of undergoing an inward voyage in order to seek the answers within. A number of examples in his poems can be traced, whereby he is seen undergoing a sort of symbolic journey inwardly in order to ascertain the things and to seek for the answers that continually haunt him, “We who leave the house in April, Lord, / How shall we return?” (“A Time to Change” 1-2). In the very first lines of his poetic career, Ezekiel heralds the beginning of his life long quest or journey that is full of apprehensions, turmoil and upheavals. The journey that begins with a question mark thus remains an enigma most of the times. In these very first lines, he seems to be raising his concerns for the wholeness of life. A bit bogged down by the apprehensions of the voyage, he starts pondering over the prospects of the culmination of the voyage. In a way, he seems to be seeking a sort of harmony and wholeness in his journey, for immediately after starting the voyage, he displays the grave concerns regarding the return. He seems to have fixed his eyes on the two genuine points of start and that of return, thereby making up a whole and putting rest of the things in the backburner. He sounds as if he is ready to weather any storm during the journey if he is given the promise of a safe return home. He seems to be vying desperately for a sort of commitment or assurance from within that would lend a touch of wholeness to his voyage. “How shall we return?” (2), is the question that haunts him continuously. In prioritizing the issue of the conclusion of the journey, even before embarking upon it, speaks volumes of the grave concern of his for achieving a sort of wholeness in life that he longs for. Even before leaving the house he displays his concern for the return,

thereby, trying to fathom the pros and the cons of the journey and its prospective culmination. In this regard, Dr. Manju Roy observes:

A time to change reads like a piece of confession as well as a testament in which the poet wishes to reorder his life as well as his art. The question posed in the opening lines, refers to the poet's dilemma of how he could return home after going through the seemingly unwholesome experiences relating to the body. (156)

Ezekiel very well recognizes the fact that, in order to achieve wholeness in life, it is very much essential to maintain a healthy balance in it; for him, a sense of fine order becomes the need of the hour most of the times, and he is seen going to any extent to achieve it and is even ready to disown anything for it. Such desperation is clearly visible in the following lines:

I do not want the yogi's concentration,
I do not want the perfect charity
Of saints nor the tyrant's endless power
I want a human balance humanly. (29-32)

The above lines which appear in the poem titled "A Poem of Dedication" also focus somewhat upon the basic philosophy and the approach that Ezekiel adopts towards poetry on the whole. Being an urban citizen, having spent a major part of his life in the streets of the city does teach him a lesson or two in life. After having written poems about the here and now of the life in a city, Ezekiel never aspires to opt for some lofty or sagacious way or methods to achieve the much required balance, harmony or a sort of wholeness in his life. He clearly points out what he wants. He seeks neither the power nor the concentration, all he longs for is the healthy human balance in life without which he feels that his quest or longing remains inadequate and incomplete.

What lends a degree of authenticity to his remarks or what makes his versions of the story more real and authentic is the fact that, unlike many of his predecessors and even contemporaries, Ezekiel often avoids being in the possession of an aura or a self-invented halo of sorts that alienates the poet from the masses; on the contrary, Ezekiel goes a step further and mingles with the masses, thereby, observing them more closely. He proves to be one of those very rare poets who believe in leading from the front. The moralist within him first takes into consideration the vice and the follies residing in his own heart before cleansing the hearts of the others and this is the reason that most of the times he is seen openly admitting his follies and searching for the paths of salvation. It is only after addressing and conceding his own chinks in the armour that he moves on to hit hard at others:

The vices I have always had

I still have.

The virtues I've never had

I still do not have. ("The Egoist's Prayer" 7-10)

The lines above bear the stamp of typical Ezekiel attitude that he carries throughout his life. He openly declares the lack of certain positive virtue in his character and also, without mincing the words, concedes to be in the possession of certain vices too.

A similar sort of declaration is being made in another of his poem where once again he seems confessing his vices. His admittance to the fact that there is indeed a deterioration of his morals as the materialism of the world has taken a toll on his essence as a human being and has reduced him to a mere bundle of corrupt vices: "I am corrupted by the world, continually" ("The Double Horror" 1). Later on, after confessing his guilt in the same poem, he is seen ruing the fact that, despite being aware of the vices, his morals are at such a low ebb that he instead of eradicating them aims to sharpen their edges to take a vengeance of sorts from the world outside and in a tone of vengeance he declares:

Corrupted by the world I must infect the world

With my corruption. This double horror holds me

Like a nightmare from which I cannot, wake, denounced

Only by myself, to others harmless, hero,

Sage, poet, conversationalist, connoisseur

Of coffee, guide to modern Indian Art

Or Greek antiquities. ("The Double Horror" 21-27)

Carrying on in the tone vengeance, in the same poem, he further on says that, "Between the world and me there is a frightful / Equipoise, as infected I corrupt the world" (29-30).

He often tends to adopt the stance of moralist and feels the need of making the adequate reforms by being not a mute witness but, on the contrary, by coming out in the open often criticizing and even castigating, if needed, the hollowness and the shams of others in his own typical way. Apart from lashing out at the innate foibles and the idiosyncrasies of the people around him, most of the times in his poetry, he is also seen coming down heavily upon the religious dictates that are so fanatically and hypocritically pursued by all and sundry in the domain of the Indian socio-cultural milieu. He simply finds it difficult to fathom the logic lurking behind the socio-cultural fanaticism and the obsession of the masses toward the religious practices in India.

Ezekiel has his own ways of lodging the protest. Being a person of a logical and a modern mindset he approaches the problem in his own typical and subtle way. He passes on the message by the means of his poems where he is seen launching a broadside and immense degree of scorn at the hypocrisies and the religious and social vices that make his poetry resonate with strong moral-secular overtones that run throughout his poetry covering all the facets and the aspects of the Indian socio-cultural milieu. This trait of his poetry could also be seen as the manifestation of the general trend that the majority of the Indian poets in English follow in the contemporary times, a point which Shiv K. Kumar elaborates in one of his essays on Indian poetry in English. He says:

What strikes one about the contemporary Indian poetry is its distrust of religious orthodoxy. Our poets seem to be concerned more with phenomenal or empirical reality than anything transcendental-life beyond death or birth. Their attitude may be termed somewhat Lawrentian since, according to them, 'it is not before or after, but now'. It is the earthiness that lends an unmistakable dimension or concreteness to their poetry. (6)

A number of his poems show him praying for the purification of his innate self and that of the others. His basic concerns are the purification of the intrinsic and the innate human heart and this is what he seeks through several of his poems. "Psalm 151" which appears in *Sixty Poems* echoes with these concerns and these sentiments:

Deliver me from evil, lord,
Rouse me to the essential good,
Change the drink for me, o lord,
Lead me from the wailing wood. (13-16)

A similar tone is heard in the poem "Morning Prayer" where once again he seeks the redemption of internal human soul:

God grant me certainty
In kinship with the sky,
Air, earth, fire, sea—
And the fresh inward eye. (9-12)

The fresh inward eye is the demand that he puts up in front of the God in order to see the world objectively without any bias or prejudice, in fact, "Ezekiel's God has a much more common, unpedigreed denomination to Him, in His presence as a kill-all, cure-all Pop-God, a

metropolitan Bombay God, an urban contemporary without hang-ups about origin. He may be addressed with reasonable familiarity” (Patel xvii-xviii).

Ezekiel addresses the God in a quite unconventional fashion and shows very scanty signs of being in the awe of him. Unlike many others, he approaches the Almighty with aplomb and is straightforward in his prayers and pleas. He rues and hates the fact that the Almighty is so inaccessible to the common man and is so elusive and hard to comprehend when the modern day world requires an always available and rapid intervention from Him. In a poem titled “Theological” he gives a full vent to his grudges with Him and also seems to be going on to the extent of taking him to task for being so elusive:

I’ve stripped off a hundred veils
and still there are more
that cover your creation.
Why are you so elusive? (8-11)

In the same poem, Ezekiel seems to be openly pointing out the shortcomings of the Almighty and also seems to be putting forth some amendments and suggestions. Taking up the cause of the whole humanity in a frantic world he accuses Him of not being that much potent and effective as he should be, considering the steep rise of the vices in the modern day world and the helplessness of the mortals in front of them. He says, “Your truth / is too momentous for man / and not always useful” (5-7).

Carrying on in the same reprimanding tone, in another of his poem titled “The Egoist’s Prayers” he speaks on the behalf of the whole mankind and reminds the almighty of his duty. He puts forward a very simple but logical question in front of Him and asks defiantly:

From this Human Way of Life
Who can rescue Man
If not his Maker?
Do thy duty, Lord. (11-14)

Ezekiel is seen contemplating his vices, brooding upon his follies and lashing out at them. He is also seen praying for fresher avenues in life and is also seen sharing his insights with the readers. He is seen openly conceding to his flaws and seeks a rectification of his trauma and longings. A candid confession is made in one of the poems in which he announces:

The vices I’ve always had

I still have.

The virtues I've never had

I still do not have. ("The Egoist's Prayers ii" 1-4)

He openly confesses the consistent lack of virtues and the constant dominance of the vices in his character but in conceding this a very beautiful aspect of his character surfaces and that it is the honesty in admitting his discrepancies. Unlike many others, Ezekiel does have the boldness and the innocence of admitting his faults. The very fact that Ezekiel is aware of and open towards his vices and the virtues speak volumes of the man and the self-realization that he seems to have attained. Being fully aware of one's virtues and vices and having the courage to openly concede to them does, in a way, serve as the replenishment to the already nourishing spiritual seed within Ezekiel.

Further, Ezekiel as though pointing towards the limitations of a mortal, tries to suggest that all that is possible for him, in such corrupt and tainted world, is the admittance and the total surrender in front of the divine power that alone can come to his rescue and save as well as deliver him from his fallen state:

From this human way of life

Who can rescue man

If not his Maker?

Do thy duty, Lord. (5-8)

The statements and the prayer that Ezekiel makes in the above lines are of utmost significance for these lines in way symbolize an almost whole attainment of spiritual self-realization of Ezekiel. His stance of openly seeking the refuge in the aegis of lord does suggest that he has indeed come a long way and has indeed gained a lot from his voyage in terms of wisdom, knowledge, enlightenment, awakening, and self-realization on various fronts. He seems to have surrendered totally and sincerely to the almighty and wishes his intervention for the salvation of the mankind. In this regard, Jagdish V. Dave aptly remarks: "This kind of surrender to the divine will, the acceptance of whatever time unfolds and the flux of time itself as the divine will, suited to Ezekiel's nature.....in fact, sincere surrender is even more difficult than renunciation or any spiritual effort." (175)

There is indeed a sea change in the total personality of a person who very early in his life denounces religion and is seen caught in the web of turmoil and tensions of various sorts. A similar sort of wish that has got a human and a spiritual touch to it is made by him in the poem "At 62". Out here, he wishes:

I want my hands

to learn how to heal
myself and others,
before I hear
my last song. (29-33)

Life thus seems to have come a full circle for Ezekiel and he seems have truly attained a sort of spiritual self-realization and above all the much needed wholeness in life. The wish that seems to have emanated directly from his heart resonates with a spiritual and a healing touch that is very rare in modern-day world. The people are too selfish to understand the definition of charity and social bliss. They only make rounds in their self centered domains, whereas the awakened ones like Ezekiel attain self-realization in their lives. Out here too, he wishes for the strength to heal not only his personal woes but also those of others. Ezekiel thus through a series of lifelong struggles and pursuits eventually reconciles with his fate and manages to attain a sense of wholeness and harmony in personal as well as professional front.

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