Abstract

The post-independence poetry underwent a sea change as far as the themes are concerned. The poets are faced with the crisis of identity so their poetry is one of quest, a search of their self, a search for their cultural roots. The reason for such a theme of Indian poetry is not far to seek. The Indian poets who express themselves in English have their cultural roots in their community. Many of these Indian poets have been educated abroad but since they belong to the middle-class, they find themselves alienated within their own immediate circle and even from the westernized ethos.

Some of the poets come from different racial backgrounds but are nationals of India for example, Nissim Ezekiel is a Jew, Dom Moraes is an Anglo-Indian, Daruwalla and Jussawalla are Parsees, Eunice De Souza is a Goan Christian. The Indian poet writing in English therefore finds himself alienated. So the poetry of modern Indian poets naturally turns on the theme of identity crisis. Poets like Ramanujan, Parthasarthy and Arun Kolatkar are preoccupied with the problem of roots. Their examination of Hindu ethos has been in several directions. Ramanujan, for example, conjures up his early childhood memories with strong sense impressions. At the same time his mind keeps examining the strong and weak points of his cultural heritage. Parthasarthy too is obsessed with his roots in India while leading a westernized life style. His poem 'Rough Passages' is an attempt to deal with the theme of identity exposed to two cultures namely the Indian and the Western.

Key Words: Philosophy, Psychology, Modernity, Nissim Ezekiel

Introduction
Nissim Ezekiel was born on 14 December 1924 in Mumbai. His father, Moses Ezekiel, was a professor of Botany at Wilson College, and his mother was Principal of her own school. His father died in 1969 while his mother died in 1974. The Ezekiels belonged to Mumbai’s Jewish community, known as the ‘Bene Israel’. After finishing primary and secondary education he went to college and he completed B.A. in literature from Wilson College, Mumbai University. Also he completed M.A. English in Mumbai University in 1947. Then, he studied Philosophy at Birbeck College, London. He married Daisy Jacob in 1952, she was also Jewish. Then, for a short period he worked as a lecturer in English in ‘Khalsa College’, Bombay. The next stage of his life came with his departure to England for higher studies. He spent three and half years in London. During his stay in London, he evinced a keen interest in the theatre, in cinema, and in art. He also studied Psychology and Philosophy under the guidance of Professor C.E.M. Joad.

Nissim Ezekiel is acclaimed as the father of post-independence Indian –English verse. He is a trend-setter, who started modernity in Indian –English poetry. A group of contemporary Indian-English poets follow the simple, conversational style of Ezekiel. Not only in the style but also in the selection of themes one finds the influence of Ezekiel in the contemporary Indian English poets. However, he showed a much greater inclination towards literature.

Ezekiel was an editor of several Journals encouraging writing poetry, plays and criticism. He also asked many writers for translation, affecting the theory and practice for the young poets. The writers like Rilke and W.B. Yeats influenced Ezekiel. Like Yeats, he treated poetry, as ‘the record of the mind’s growth’. His poetic bulk indicates his growth as a poet-critic and shows his personal importance. He died on January 9 th, 2004 after a long illness. Chetan Karnani states that “at the centre was that sincere devoted mind that wanted to discover itself. In the process he managed to forge a unique achievement of his own.”

The Philosophy means the study of the phenomena of mind and matter and Psychology means the science of the mind. Nissim Ezekiel has subjected the poems of Philosophy and Psychology. He has made a tangible contribution to the philosophical poetry produced by indo-English poets. Indeed, Ezekiel has shown a certain profundity in his nature; and this profundity has found an expression in several poems written by him. The poetic self of Ezekiel has experienced too divergent pulls—the existential enigma on one hand, and the poetic enigma on
the other. It is said that the poetic enigma implies the need for a correspondence between art and life. He has the sensibility of a modern poet whose self-confronts the fallen world and stands in an ironic contrast to the ideal world. He shows that the culture of the city and the repressive social codes in the modern world inhibit a man’s individuality and his freedom to grow. This culture spreads perversion in all walks of life. Thus, marriage has become more of a bondage in which a man and a woman lose their freedom and their identities, with the result that a ‘man is damned in that domestic game’. He therefore stresses the need of commitment, sincerity and integrity as essential conditions for the completeness of a poet; and without such completeness there can be no association of sensibilities so that a poet’s imagination would remain fragmented.

Ezekiel has illustrated this view of his in the poem entitled ‘Enterprise’. In this poem the pilgrims face a paradox which is due to their want of commitment, sincerity and integrity. towards the end of their journey, the pilgrims discover to their dismay that their destination called the centre of vision is as unacceptable to them as the city from which they have tried to run away. In this poem, he points out which conviction that the grace of fulfilment consists in the identification of the self with the objective world. If such identification is achieved, the art, philosophy, religion and reality would all appear to be a unified concept. The poems entitled ‘Philosophy’ and ‘A Time to Change’ shows Ezekiel’s philosophical bent of mind, although the former poem shows a distinct title towards poetry as compared to philosophy.

Nissim Ezekiel is also known as the Psychologist and poet of the mind. He shows a marked tendency to probe the human mind, and his poems reveal not only the conscious but also the sub-conscious thoughts and conflicts of human beings, and more particularly, his own thoughts and conflicts. Indeed, his primary concern is with man and man’s mind. The poem entitled ‘Case, Study’ is one of his several attempts at an exploration of his own mind. Here he portrays his own personality and his mind, though he appears here in disguise, making it seems that he is portraying somebody else. Self-exploration is also very much in evidence in the poem entitled ‘London’. Here the protagonist is searching and probing and the innermost recesses of his self. His personal quest goes on relentlessly. ‘Island’ is another of Ezekiel’s poem where we find the same search for the self-leading to a resigned acceptance of his environment. Indeed, Ezekiel may be described as an endless explorer of the labyrinths of the mind. Satyanarain Singh
observes that Ezekiel has been called “a pilgrim with a sense of commitment” whose poetry is “a metaphoric journey to the heart of Existence.”

Nissim Ezekiel’s poems are also the embodiments of some views about metaphysics, ethics and principles of life and so a study of these poems can enable one to arrive at what Ezekiel thinks on metaphysical, ethical and such other questions. So far as Ezekiel’s views of man’s relationship with the Supreme Being and man’s place in the Universe are concerned, he seems to believe that a man can know about the Supreme Being only what the Supreme Being reveals to him, and what that the reality is unfathomable. These views lie embodied in his ‘16th Hymns in Darkness’ in which he writes;

You are master
neither of death nor of life
Belief will not save you,
nor unbelief.
All you have
Is the sense of reality
Unfathomable
As it yields its secrets
Slowly one by one

This assertion of his brings him close to the upholders of the theory that man cannot know more than what has been revealed to him in the field of theology. According to these theologians the Supreme Being reveals himself to man through prophets who plays the vital role of the medium. Ones efforts to know God according to them are, not of much consequence in case God chooses not to reveal Himself to one. Nissim Ezekiel seems to be of the opinion that the man desirous to know the reality has to make efforts as in this poem the unfathomable reality “yields its secrets” the use of the word. “Yield” is significant here as it signifies that the seeker is making efforts to seek. His describing reality as “unfathomable” signifies that, he is an agnostic as he holds that it is beyond human intellectual capacity to understand the reality. Ezekiel finds God’s creation to be covered by humorous veils with the result that one who wants to know the universe has to remove these veils. Veil is the outer cover of the person. This view of his finds embodiment in the following lines of the poem ‘Theological’;
I’ve stripped off a hundred veils
and still there are more
that cover you creation
Why are you so elusive?

Ezekiel says that in this poem even man is hidden behind veils and it is not easy to remove all the veils and know the real man, as he writes in his poem ‘Theological’. Even as myself, my very own Incontrovertible, unexceptional Self, I feel I am disguised. Ezekiel disagrees with Wordsworth when in ‘Dilemma’, he says in this poem,

“I shake with intimations
not of immortality” [Latter Day-Psalms –p-30],

Ezekiel rejects sectarian approaches according to most of which one is going to be saved only if one belongs to a particular sect. He adopts the secular approach enshrined in the constitution of India according to which it is regarded as immaterial as to what one’s sect, is and one gets the civil rights if one is citizen of India. Ezekiel says in Latter-Day Psalms; Salvation belongs unto the

Lord - it is not through.
One or other church
They blessing is upon
All the people of the earth [LDP-40]

Ezekiel’s assertion that salvation belongs into the “Lord” signifies that god accords salvation to people irrespective of their churches or sects. In other words he rejects the claims of those who claim that one can attain salvation only when one is a follower of Jesus Christ as Jesus sacrificed himself in order to save man. He believes that only Lord gives salvation.

However, there are poems which make it evident that Ezekiel also posits his belief in mysticism for instance, when in the ‘12th of the Hymns in Darkness’, he writes; Don’t curse the darkness

Since you’re told not to,
But don’t be in a hurry
To light a candle either.
The darkness has its secrets
Which light does not know.
It’s a kind of perfection
While every light
Distorts the truth [HD –P-59]

This statement has an appeal not to the ordinary reason but to the higher reason. Nissim Ezekiel is aware of the fact that even if one makes a detailed plan and proceeds working in accordance with it, there do occur unforeseen interferences. He calls them the doing of; a long/Arresting arm, the unseen, the unknown. In his ‘Philosophy’ , Ezekiel does not trust all spiritual teachers as many of them are spurious. He does not believe on holy person. He exposes one such teacher in his poem ‘Guru’, when he says, that this teacher lived a life of sin in his past days, is faithless to his friends, in “ungratified” for “favours done” and it greedy enough to be polite to foreigners but rude to visitors from his own country because he is likely to be given more money by the foreigners than by his own country-men.

In his poem ‘Portrait’, he ridicules a man who is “foolish still”, even though he is “(n) longer young”, and is wanting in will to change himself, and make improvements in his thinking. The poet further ridicules the man when he gives some other details of the man; his faith has broken, his toughened will have taken the form of sadness, and he hopes to change himself by play. The poet seems to be suggesting that one can attain improvement in the spiritual field when one discards one’s follies, and has a will strong enough to improve oneself spiritually. The poet also ridicules of the healers who adopt widely divergent may even contradictory, approaches. Some of them prohibit meat and drinks while other allow it, but they assure everybody that god’s love remains everyone’s heritage and they ask everybody to get his Shakti –awaking. The poet records the healers’ teachings in the following words;

Sex is prohibited or allowed.
Meat and drinks are prohibited
Or allowed. Give up
everything or nothing
and be saved. The Master
knows the secret.
God’s love remains your heritage.
You need not change
Your way of life
Know your mantra, meditate,
release your Kundalini,
get your Shakti awakening
and float with spirit
to your destination. [LDP-14]

Ezekiel is highly optimistic in his poetry. There is no atmosphere of dejection. Even though life is full of sorrows and problems one aspires to live a happy life. In the words of Shreehar Gautam, “Ezekiel rejects dejection because poetry is central to his life. Unlike many other poets, he brought a sense of discipline, self-criticism and mastery to Indian English poetry.”

Ezekiel portrays the lives of the extremes in the society. The negative features of the lower strata as well as the elitist world of five-star hotels make contents for his poems. ‘Night of the Scorpion’ is one of Ezekiel’s poems which is very favorite to the westerners as it reinforces one of their comforting myths about India. It is about a typical incident in an Indian village. The poet describes Indian social situation. The speaker’s, mother is bitten by a scorpion. All the neighbourhood rushes into help. They come in the rainy night with lanterns and try all kinds of remedies. When nothing helps, they resort to prayers for the lady. Fortunately, the pain decreases and she recovers after a day. The poet makes the incident sound real of Indians, he writes:

The peasants came like swarms of flies
and buzzed the name of God a hundred times
to paralyze the Evil one. [Ezekiel, collected poems-131]

V.M. Madge writes on the poem, “The Metropolitan contempt for the rural population is reflected in the image of peasant coming “like swarms of flies” and “buzzing” the name of God a hundred times. Pests they are, they cannot come any other way, and they cannot rush to the scene of the tragedy like brothers in a family but only as “swarms of flies.” Ezekiel copies an incident in this poem which is practiced even today in several villages of India. Holy men performing
rites and incantations as to cure diseases are usual sights in many parts of the country. Majority of the villagers are superstitious and they believe that prayers and incantations are the only solution for diseases. The speaker’s father in the poem is representative of a few educated people who are rationalists and sceptics. The mother’s exclamation at the end –Thank God, the scorpion picked on me and spared my children (cp.131) has been duly singled out for praise as indicative of Ezekiel’s “Indian sensibility”. What has sadly gone unnoticed is the image of India being doled out to the world, the note of patronization and condescension in this poem. No matter how much India has progressed; it needs cause no flutter in the rest of the world. Ezekiel, the leading poet here gives out a comforting reassurance that it continues to be a land of superstition and foolish sentiments, as if patients are not taken to hospitals for scorpion bites, as if Indian mother do not thank doctors for relieving them of pain.

R. Parthasarathy points out that in ‘Night of the Scorpion’, the scorpion is identified with the Evil one, and hence an impressive ritual is enacted to exercise this Evil one.”

The poem reads:

May he sit still, they said.  
May your suffering decrease  
the misfortune of your next birth, they said.  
May the sum of evil  
balanced in this unreal world  
against the sum of good  
become diminished by your pain,  
may the poison purify you flesh  
of desire, and your spirit of ambition,  
they said, and they sat around. (Ezekiel, Collected poems-131)

The poem is indeed, rich in many aspects; stylistically, structurally and thematically. The tension between two clashing attitudes is also brought out effectively: the attitudes of traditional world of superstition and the modern scientific scepticism and rationalism.

Ezekiel is perhaps the first Indian poet consistently to show Indian readers that craftsmanship is an important to a poem as its subject matter what Thomas Hardy was to
England in the early twentieth century, Ezekiel is to India in the post-independence era. In fact, he is a great spirit to Indian poets in English for several decades.

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