

NISSIM EZEKIEL: APOET SINGING THE SONGS OF MODERN INDIA.

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Abstract

Ezekiel is the first poet to express modern Indian sensibility in Indian English poetry. His greatest contribution lies in modernizing poetry, in giving it themes and techniques in consonance with the spirit of the age. The poet is much interested to present the modern man's predicament, and man's question of identity. Ezekiel covers wide range of themes from personal integration, the Indian contemporary scene, modern urban and spiritual life. He is also interested in presentation of Indian rural,cultural and traditional outlook in his poems. Apartfrom his presentation of alienation, cultural plurality,frustration and agony. Ezekiel's poems have humourous effects also. He is a keen observer of contemporary life and increasingly socio-political and socio-cultural situation in ironical way. His poetry is unique flight from personal to universal or individual to general. He is conscious about his own identity in multidimensional or pluralistic nature of Indian society.

Key Words: Image,Metaphor,Idiom,Hymns,Paradox

NISSIM EZEKIEL: A POET SINGING THE SONGS OF MODERN INDIA.

- Dr. Shrikant B. Sawant

Nissim Ezekiel is certainly the most outstanding representative poet in modern Indian English poetry. He is a versatile genius and his poetic achievement inspires the millions in India. He sings the songs of Modern India in remarkable and comprehensive manner.

He was highly influenced by the poetry of T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound and Rainer Maria Rilke, and he, in turn, had been influential in the careers of Dom Moraes, Adil Jussawalla, and Gieve Patel. In fact, many claim that he taught Post-Independence poets how to deal with present-day India, especially through his use of language and his frequent thematic variations on alienation (Hawley 222).

Ezekiel's first collection of poems *A Time to Change*, is said to be a landmark in the history of Indian English poetry. The title poem 'A Time to Change' is a 'moral allegory using the journey and quest motif' (King 92) is a long poem divided into five sections.

We who leave the house in April, Lord,
How shall we return? (Collected Poems 3)

The poet describes a man's departure from the home, the consequent desolation and the search for a new life. He constantly moves between two poles—quest for personal identity and concern for the people. Michael Garman rightly

observes here, 'The poet's religion sympathetically assumes: a double aspect - the introspective-contemplative, and the outward- active' (39).

Ezekiel considered poetry to be a way of life a continuous flow, something like an integral part of life.

A poem is an episode, completed

In an hour or two, but poetry

Is something more. (13)

'Poetry' contrast a 'poem' which is an episode with poetry which is something more. 'On an African Mask' shows how conflicts and contrast of opposites - 'Acquire the equilibrium of art'. The poet returns to his own self in 'On Meeting a Pedant' which begins with 'Words, looks, gestures, everything betrays / The unquiet mind, the emptiness within'. 'The Double Horror' holds the poet 'Like a nightmare' from which he cannot escape. 'I am corrupted by the world, continually/ Reduced to something less than human by the crowd (7)'

P. K. J. Kurup rightly says, 'Ezekiel's essential self discovers its own loss of vigour due to corruption caused by the paradoxes of modern world with all its trivialities and superficial existence.' (27).

One of the very important poems in his collection 'Something to Pursue' brings out the theme of meditation and prayer which runs through his poetry:

Empty of faith in the comeliness of God,

Empty of faith in the shapeliness of Man,

Contemplation turned to pus, incapable

Of action (17)

'The Great' takes peep into history of the great lives who appear on the pages of history.

The great are egoistic, sensual
Self- sacrificing, self – controlled, unique
And universal, lovable and damnable,
Selfish and sympathetic. (22)

He finds that he has a lot to learn from that lives and from the paradoxes in them.

'A Word for the Wind' presents poet's selfsearch for accessible poetry He says, 'I cannot find a word for the wind'. The poems like 'Communication', and 'The worm' present predicament of the moral self of the modern artist'. In 'An affair' a woman could not distinguish between the real and unreal :

And then she said : I love you, just like this
As I had seen the yellow blondes declare
Upon the screen, and even stroked my hair,
But hates me now because I did not kiss. (11)

'To a Certain Lady' builds up the conflicting emotion that husband and wife experience :

Destroying or creating, moving on or standing still,
Always we must be lovers,
Man and wife at work upon the hard
Mass of material which is the world.(30)

Life is made of compromise and working together is a kind of promise for keeping marital bliss.

Ezekiel's next collection *Sixty Poems* continues the same thematic preoccupation, but with little success. In the process he (Ezekiel) discovers his

own 'authentic voice' which, at times modulates between echoic reverberations of some of the romantics like Blake and Yeats and the modernists like William Carlos Williams and Stevens' (Amga 34).

In 'A Poem of Dedication', Ezekiel stresses the need for a poetic culture of sympathetic bond with the humanity around.

I do not want the yogi's concentration,
I do not want the perfect charity
Of saints not the tyrant's endless power.
I want a human balance humanly
Acquired, fruitful in the common hour.(40)

Karnani says 'Ezekiel tried to formulate his manifesto for the days to come'(28). The next poem 'The Stone' is influenced by W. B. Yeats' 'Easter 1916'. Likewise the lyrical simplicity of Herbert and Blake seems to have inspired the poem 'Song'. In 'Speech and Silence', Ezekiel concerns himself with the poetic art which can purify the self through speech.

All speech is oneself others
Overhear and miss the meaning.
And yet to speak is good, a man
Is purified through speech alone(53)

Ezekiel considers love as a device to search for identity. In 'Invocation', he invokes the powers that to be the 'ballast of Reality' with the flights of fantastic thoughts.

Likewise in 'Creation' love and creativity are fused together. The poet says 'The sunshine of a kiss' can glow 'Within a dozen poem' and sees 'A spring of words as fresh as women's eyes'. The poems 'Situation' and 'A Short Story' deal

with romantic love situation, but end in failure in one way or the other bring Ezekiel's use of colloquial idioms and conversational poetic style. The poems 'A Visitor' and 'Portrait' show Ezekiel's gift of verbal portraiture through the commonplace and ordinary words. In 'Boss' the mechanical life of the big official is described in terms of mechanical objects.

Above the bent and busy head

The fan turns; the dream-window

Stares back into the busy room. (47)

A number of poems like 'A Poem of Blindness', 'Nothingness', 'Sotto Voce'. 'Nakedness', 'Confession' and 'Penitence' are the poems that fall in the category of a portrait where the poet persona emerges a quester after solutions. Poem like 'Situation', 'Lines', 'Marriage Poems', 'Tribute For Her', 'Question', 'Report', 'A Short Story', 'Two Nights of Love' and 'The Old Abyss' are under the category of poems of body, revealing the man-woman relationship. Linda Hess in her study of Indian-English poetry, characterizes, Ezekiel's as -

a poet of the body; and an endless explorer of the labyrinths of the mind, the devious delving and twisting, of the ego and the ceaseless attempt of man and the poet to define himself, to find through all 'the myth and maze' a way to honesty and love (30-31).

In 'The Stuffed Owl' and 'The Company I keep' Ezekiel protest against those who see the world of poetry and reality as different entities. 'The lyrics impulse frozen/What is the poet but a bore?'(70)For Ezekiel poetry is all inspiration, a difficult craft to be mastered with painstaking efforts.

Ezekiel's third collection of verse called *The Third* stands mid-way between *Sixty Poems* and *The Unfinished Man*. The songs of this collection established Ezekiel as 'a persona of mature wisdom' (King 96). The very first poem 'Portrait' sets the tone of the entire collection.

No longer young but foolish still
He wakes to hear his words unspoken,
A sadness in his toughened will,
And all except his faith unbroken. (37)

The poems 'For Her', 'Declaration', 'Encounter', 'For Love's Record', 'The Language of Lovers', 'In the Queue' and 'At the Hotel' reveal Ezekiel to be the poet of human relations. Sex continues to be a predominant theme. However he does not deal merely with the physical aspect of sex and the human anatomy, but sex is also seen spiritualised and sumblime in number of lyrics 'Tonights I hear my woman breathing/ Who loves me till my world is waste' (94)

Ezekiel makes an attempt to fuse the image and meaning is 'Declaration'.
Whatever is beyond my reach
I shall not reach for, certain vases
And women are too expensive, or else
Fragile, exacting, best enjoyed
From a distance, with delicate affection.(93)

'The poem is remarkable for its tine fusion of sense and sound, image and metaphor into a purely colloquial idiom' (Amga 37).

In 'Conclusion', Ezekiel treats women as about other beauties of nature.

That women,trees, tables, waves, and birds,
Buildings, stones, steamrollers,
Cats and clocks

Are here to be enjoyed.(96)

The poet concludes 'The true business of living is seeing, touching, kissing/

The epic of walking in the street and loving on the bed.' (97)

In 'The Language of Lovers', the poet says — 'Poetry some foolish critic said /Is the natural language of lovers- /Looking at her destroyed even my prose' (1) and confesses that he 'turned to poetry for consolation'.

The woman persona as portrayed in poems like 'Encounter', 'At the Party', 'In the Queue', and 'For Love's Record' is a seductress. The poet watches the woman in 'For Love's Record' - 'Who gathered men as shells and put by them'. The protagonist in 'Encounter' says:

And after, sporting brown and green,

With her in white,

I knew that love is always right; (100)

He has strong desire to possess 'Ethereal beauties, may you always be / Delicate to love and reckless shopping'.

'In the Queue', the poet says 'Adam in the busy street / Is tempted to be indiscreet'.

Exposed to mountain air and sea,

Her unashamed anatomy;

I turn to kiss, the sun goes down,(96)

That is why the Protagonist in 'At the Hotel' says 'Our motives were concealed but clear/not coffee but the Cuban dancer took us there' (112)and he is eager to see 'the naked Cuban dancer'dropping the 'thin transparent skirt she wore'.

In the poems, 'Insectlore', 'The Cur', 'Sparrows' and 'Aside' reveal Ezekiel's love and sympathy for the dumb creatures of nature. In 'Aside' he described the love making of animals.

One cannot imagine
Elephants making love,
But it seems they do.
So also tortoises
And snails (93)

Talking about the first phase of Ezekiel's career as a poet ShirishChindhade's comment is pertinent.

In all the three books the mood is permanently one of self-absorption, inwardness, introspection: all road lead to the city within, the city of the soul. There is a consistent attempt at self-search and self- definition (30).

Ezekiel's *The Unfinished Manis* 'the most perfect book of poems written by any Indian in English.....Ezekiel at his most honest and lyrical best' (Jussawalla 69). The first poem 'Urban' provides a summary to the whole collection.' At dawn he never sees the skies/Which, silently, are born again.' (118)

The poet is aware of the existence of

Barbaric city sick with slums,
Deprived of seasons, blessed with rains,
Its hawkers, beggars, iron-lunged,
Processions led by frantic drums,
A million purgatorial lanes, (119)

The poem 'Case Study' expresses the dilemma of weak-willed man. Ezekiel defends the protagonist sympathetically from the change of being an idealist. He says-

Whatever he had done was not quite right.

The master never failed, however weak,

To know when they had sinned against the light.(124)

In the poem 'Love Sonnet', Ezekiel writes about lovers' 'A passionate and perpetual mystery'-

We lose ourselves in mingling with the crowd,

Not unafraid of this ambiguous fate.

We look inquiringly at road and sky,

A certain happiness would be — to die. (121)

'Urban', 'A Morning Walk' and 'Love Sonnet', says Michael Garman. 'together reinforce the appeal to the city as the purgatory beforeblessedness' (47). Other poems like 'Events', 'Enterprise', 'Commitment' and 'Morning Prayer' etc. are good pieces of Ezekiel's poetic corpus. The poetic self prays for perfection of the vision and art in 'Morning Prayer'.

God grant me certainty

In kinships with sky,

Air, earth, fire, sea-

and the fresh inward eye. (122)

The poet asks for the gift of metaphor-'To make it human good.' (122).

Ezekiel's in the volume *The Exact Name* is concerned with the defining process of poetry and his search for an appropriate word or metaphor gives exact names to things and human emotion.

Intelligence, give me

The exact name of things!

Let my word be

The thing itself

Newly created by my soul. (127)

In the poems 'A Warning' and 'Paradise Flycatcher', Ezekiel tries to beautify the common place incidents of life in the world of art, juxtaposition of dream and reality which the prosaic and the commonplace to the level of poetry. 'A Warning' written for Linda Hess about world's uncertainty and

'Paradise Flycatcher' is written for the birdwatcher Zafar Futehally. 'The Visitor', 'The Virginal' and 'A Woman Observed' are the other poems which show Ezekiel's interest in the human situation in the 'ordinariness of most events.

In 'The Virginal' the poet tries to create the picture of woman who has been denied the free play of natural instincts.

You breathe the bitter air of loneliness,

Pretending that it does not matter when

You close the door and switch the wireless on,

Remote from prospect of the wedding kiss.(138)

In 'A Woman Observed', the poet transmutes every ordinary happening into poetic perception.

I am ashamed

to witness it. The life
in the woman's belly
swelling her erotic lines
depresses me the seed
and source denied by this
expression on her face. (140)

The poem 'Night of the Scorpion' is an excellent piece of art that delivers an Indian theme. Ezekiel rightly says 'the best poet waits for words' in 'Poet, Lover and Birdwatcher'.

In 'Poetry Reading', 'Philosophy', Ezekiel writes about the brighter aspects of life. In 'Retrospect' he dwells upon the 'invisible landscape of love' and 'Love Poem' shows transformation caused by love. Ezekiel's ability of making out of the ordinary is indeed immense. The best examples are 'Simplicity', A 'Conjugation' and 'Art Lecture' etc.

In his *Hymns in Darkness* Ezekiel reveals an entirely different kind of sensibility. M. A. Nare rightly says, '*Hymns in Darkness* is a milestone in the development of Ezekiel as a poet and as an artist.' (152)

Ezekiel in 'Background Casually' has made his commitments. The poem explains the conflicting impulses in the mind of the poet. Speaking of him William Walsh observes:

One is aware of a double impulse in the poet, which on the one hand keeps him at a distance from his environment as he clutches his private history and aspiration and which on the other, by means of free and painful act of will, reconciles him to his environment (.4).

The poet says 'I have made my commitment now./This is one : to stay where I am.....' (181)and reiterates in 'Island' 'I cannot leave the island/ I was born here and belong.'(182)'Background Casually' and 'Island' confirm the poet's commitment.

In the poems like, 'The Railway Clerk','The Truth about the Floods', 'Ganga', 'How the English Lesson Ended', 'Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T. S.', 'Guru', 'Entertainment' and 'Rural Suite', an attempt has been made to recreate Indian characters in their own situation. Ezekiel captures the living speech of the Indians in 'Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T. S.'

Friends,
Our dear sister
is departing for foreign
in two three days,
and
we are meeting today
to wish her bon voyage (190)

Similar characteristics are present in the monologue of the 'The Railway Clerk'.

It isn't my fault.
I do what I'm told
but still I am blamed.
My wife is always asking for more money.
Money, money, where to get money?
My job is such, no one is giving me bribe..... (184)

'The Truth about the Floods' based on the report by U. K. Dixit in The Indian Express, Bombay, 25 September, 1967 brings out suffering and hunger of Indian masses and the indifference of government officials in providing relief to the masses. The poems 'Ganga' and 'On the Bellasis Road' show how prostitution grows in every street and even on the pavement. 'Ganga' is a portrait of a maidservant. The woman is suspected of prostitution and yet is not dismissed. The poem 'Guru' throws light on so called saints. 'If saints are like this/ what hope is there then for us?' (192)

The society portraiture in 'How English Lesson Ended' is remarkable achievement of the poet. Ezekiel presents the act of mutual deception in 'The Couple' - 'a woman to fear, not to love/ yet he made love to her' (183)

To love her was impossible,
to abandon her unthinkable,
He had to make love to her (184)

In the 'Tone Poem', 'Poster Poems', 'Passion Poems', 'The Egoist's Prayer' and 'Hymns in Darkness', Ezekiel presents experiments. 'Tone Poem' comes to near to the Japanese haiku. Similarly in 'Poster Poems', Ezekiel shows his experiment in thematic and structural pattern. In the poem entitled 'The Neutral' the poet writes:

I signed the manifesto
I paid the subscription.
I worked on the committee.
I attended the party
It made no difference. (210)

Ezekiel uses words about love and sex freely in 'Passion Poems'. The poem entitled 'The Sanskrit Poets'-

How freely they mention

breasts and buttocks

They are my poetic ancestors

why am I so inhibited? (214)

In 'The Egoist Prayer', Ezekiel even treats God with irony.

Let me be, O Lord,

the Camel of the Higher Income Group

who passes smoothly through

the eye of the needle (213)

In his *Hymns in Darkness* Ezekiel comes out with a truly major vision. The 'Hymns', says Amga, start in disharming humility and end in the corrosive sense of acceptance of the paradoxes in life and death, of pleasure and pain. The whole series of the poems are written in the manner of Christian acceptance of the central paradoxes of life. (48) Ezekiel writes 'The darkness has its secrets / which light does not know.' (223) Ezekiel comes to see God in all forms and all forms in God. Prof. K. R. S. Iyengar accepts Ezekiel as a 'major poetic talent'. Writing about this volume he observes :

As for the *Hymns in Darkness*, they no doubt evoke darkness in same measure, but are they 'hymns'? This 16- piece sequence has a haunting Waywardness of movement and taunting urgency of expression, but the dark is never light enough, and the dark is not darkness either only the wizardry of words. (712)

Ezekiel is the first poet to express modern Indian sensibility in Indian English poetry. His greatest contribution lies in modernizing poetry, in giving it themes and techniques in consonance with the spirit of the age. Modern Indian English poetry could not have been what is today without Nissim Ezekiel.

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