

# Theme of Alienation and ‘Introspection’ in Nissim Ezekiel’s Poetry: A brief Note

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**Abstract:** This is an attempt to project Nissim Ezekiel as one of the major poets in Indian English literature in the current literary scenario, who is the one gifted with the power of influencing the theory and practice of several younger poets in addition to his own pioneering creative contribution to Indian poetry in English. It examines rather significantly how Ezekiel stands for simplicity, clarity, coherence, lucidity in art and literature and his poetic skill in treatment of various themes like loneliness, alienation and introspection, by bringing home the point that his poetry, acclaimed for its quality and vivacity, renders the contemporary themes of alienation, spiritual emptiness, isolation and fragmentation with humor, compassion and irony.

**Keywords:** literary scenario, theory, practice, creative contribution, art, literature, alienation, introspection, compassion irony.

Nissim Ezekiel, one of the major poets in Indian English literature, has expressed valuable ideas on literature and life in his letters, critical writings, poetic compositions and also interviews. He was in the vanguard of Indian poets writing in English. Much feted and acclaimed during his life time, Ezekiel was born on 6th Dec, 1924 in Bombay to Jewish (Bene-Israel) parents, who were deeply involved in education. He had his schooling at Antonio D’Souza High School and then studied at Wilson College, Bombay and later at Birbeck College, London (1948-52). These were the watershed years in his life when “philosophy, poverty and poetry” shared his basement room in London. The confluence of such experiences left a deep imprint on his poetry. Besides writing poetry, Ezekiel worked as a school and college teacher, copy writer, literary and art critic, playwright and director. He edited The Indian P.E.N, Quest, Imprint and Poetry India. As editor and critic he influenced the theory and practice of several younger poets in addition to his own pioneering creative contribution to Indian poetry in English.

Recipient of the Padma Shri (1988) and the Sahitya Akademi Award (1983), Ezekiel published eight volumes of poetry in his lifetime. They are 1 A Time to Change (1952), 2 Sixty Poems (1953) 3 The Third (1958) 4 The unfinished Man (1960) 5 The Exact Name (1965) 6 Hymns in Darkness (1967) 7 Latter-Day Psalms (1982) and 8 Collected Poems (1989). Ezekiel is said to have inherited from his father love for proverbs and homespun wisdom which runs deep in his poetry. Not only was his father the principal of several colleges but his mother also was the principal of a school started and run by herself for over thirty years and that is why teaching passed evidently into his blood. Having taught at school, at college and at university, Ezekiel is primarily a teacher both in life and poetry. Gieve Patel rightly observes:

“when he conducts programmes on art appreciation for Bombay television, he teaches. When he sits in his industry office at the Indian P. E. N as its most active office bearer, reading quantities of other peoples poems and giving his comments on them- thereby earning lifelong friends and enemies- he is teaching again. When he writes his poetry, he teaches, this time largely himself. In all these contexts, the pedagogic bone is relieved, even subverted, by self-directed irony, subdued passion and simple direct concern for what’s at hand” (PXVII).

Ezekiel stands for simplicity, clarity, coherence, lucidity and harmony in art and literature. As opposed to the confusion and obscurity of mystical poetry, he prefers a poetry of “human expression”. Man, the living centre in the universe, is also the centre in poetry. In the words of Satish Kumar, “he boldly discounts “spiritual illumination” and “religious ecstasy” in comparison to human expression. His poetry, acclaimed for its quality and vivacity, renders “the contemporary themes of alienation, spiritual emptiness, isolation and fragmentation with humour, compassion and irony”. (Batra 1). His poetry is distinguished by his conscious craftsmanship, his philosophical and introspective mode. According to M.K. Naik, a major shaping factor in Ezekiel’s poetry is that he belonged to a Bene-Israel family which migrated to India generations ago. Thus, “substantially was acutely aware of this alienation by the fact that he had spent most of his life in highly westernized circles in cosmopolitan Bombay. His autobiographical poem, “background, casually” given an emphatic expression, through in a satirical vein, to his social and cultural alienation from the country to which he does not belong but which he has adopted as his own. He tells us that he had attended a Roman Catholic school where he found himself,

**“A mugging Jew among the wolves  
they told me I had killed the Christ”.**

He informs us that a muslim sportsman had boxed his ears as a consequence of which he had grown up in terror of strongly built boys. The Hindu boys, he says, tormented him in their way; and one day he was compelled to produce a knife to threaten the boys who were persecuting him. This sense of alienation, begun at school, clung to Ezekiel throughout his life despite his best efforts to come to terms with his country and its people. “The alienation theme is thus central to Ezekiel’s work and colours his entire poetic universe”, says Naik.

Sense of alienation is more or less a modern phenomenon. It is associated with a diaspora or the migrants from one country to another. These migrants, being aliens, suffer a sense of otherness, of rootlessness, a bicultural predicament. Ezekiel, a Jew with foreign ancestry, settled in India, has felt afflicted with this sense of alienation. So a prominent note of alienation runs throughout Ezekiel’s poetry. In background, casually, he talks about his foreign origin:

**“My ancestors, among the castes, were aliens crushing seed for bread”.**

He tells us how, in childhood itself, he had to suffer persecution at the hands of the natives. He received no appreciation for his academic brilliance. Rather, he was dubbed as “a mugging Jew”. “A Muslim sportsman boxed my ears”, he complains and adds:

**“I grew in terror of the strong  
but under nourished Hindu lads.  
----- one noisy day I used a knife”.**

Such is alienation that the poet suffered in his boyhood, and this sense of alienation sank deep into his sub-conscious mind influencing his poetic creations. Being a persecuted alien, it was natural for Ezekiel to develop a sort of arrogance towards the natives. This attitude of alienation finds a frequent expression in his poetry. In ‘Background’ casually he calls India a backward place and declares that “the Indian landscape sears my eyes”. He makes fun of the Indians way of speaking English, known as Pidgin English or Babu English. In poems like ‘Goodbye party for Miss. Pushpa T. S’, ‘The Patriot’, ‘A railway clerk’, he parodies thus Indian English. He highlights in particular the Indian habit of using present progressive tense in place of the Simple Present Tense-like “you are all knowing, friends”, “Miss Pushpa is coming from very high family”, “I am standing for peace and non-violence”. “I am simply not understanding” and so on. This ridicule of Indians is evidently a reflection of the poet’s sense of alienation. Ezekiel’s alienation gets reflected in his aversion to the mad rush of urban life, particularly of Bombay. In the words of Linda Hess, “the poet is fully alive to ugliness, dirt, squalor and wickedness of a city like Bombay. (P 133). In his ‘A Morning Walk’, Ezekiel calls Bombay as ‘a living hell’ and calls it even ‘a barbaric city,

sick with slums”, with “a million purgatorial lanes”. Feeling sick and alienated in the mad metropolitan life, the poet withdraws within himself, tries to establish communion with self and with god. In the poems like ‘island’ and ‘A Small Summit’, the poet reveals to be “my own guest” in “my own one-room lunatic asylum”. In ‘Island’, he states:

**“I cannot leave the island  
I was born here and belong”.**

Thus, in the midst of alienation, in the feeling of ‘not belonging’, Ezekiel craves to ‘belong’ to be a part indeed is humanity around. This longing to belong indeed is a reaction, a reflex response of his alienation. Ezekiel’s alienation from the Indian ethos also appears in his depiction of conditions in contemporary society like the charlatans who pose as god men and dupe and fleece their superstitions, blind followers, He asks:

**“If saints are like this  
What hope is there then for us”**

When he says, “My backward place is where I am”, he feels too much alienated as “a good native”. In this way, the feeling of alienation has been motivating force behind his poetry giving vent to “the feeling of introspection”. It has been said of Ezekiel as “He treated life as a journey where poetry would be the chief source of discovering and organizing one’s life” (Karnani 14). The autobiographical element in Ezekiel’s poetry is very strong and so there are strong links between his life and his verse. Vasant A. Shahana rightly holds: “there is a very connection between his life and his poetry” (P 254). The poet calls himself ‘a poet rascal clown’, a frightened child who would neither sleep nor eat.... lean and then, rather ‘a boy of manager bone’. On Friday nights, during prayers at home, he was made aware of his own wickedness, but nothing could make him better and nobler. He had no religious zeal at all. While he was pursuing higher studies in London, he found “philosophy, poverty, poetry” as his three companions who shared his basement room” (CP 39). He had a hard and cheerless life in London. At last he found the bitter truth that he was a failure and decided to return India. As he was too poor to pay his fare, he worked as silor on an English cargo-ship carrying French guns to Indo-China:

**“In everything, a better thought  
So in an English Cargo-ship  
Talking French guns and mortars hells  
To Indo-China, scrubbed the decks  
And learned to laugh again at home” (CP 180)**

Going by “Jewish wedding in Bombay”, his marriage was conducted according to traditional Jewish rites. In “Jewish Wedding in Bombay” (CP 234), he notes:

“I remember the breaking of that glass and congregation clapping which signified that we were will and truly married according to Mosaic Law” (CP 234)

His married life does not seem to have been a bed of roses. “Marital failure is as much the theme of the poet as his other failures experienced from time to time” (Rehman 22).

Like Keats, Ezekiel believed that poetry should come as naturally as leaves to a tree and poets like women should labour to be beautiful. In the first stanza of “poet, love, bird, watcher”, Ezekiel strikes a parallel between the poet, the lover and the bird watcher. All the three-the poet, the lover and the bird watcher have one thing in common. They watch ‘the movement’ and ‘wait patiently’:

**“The best poets wait for words  
The hound is not an exercise of will  
But patient love relaxing are hills  
To note the movement of a timid wing” (CP 135).**

The bird watcher has to wait patiently, the movement of the fluttering wings of the bird, the lover has to observe patiently the calm and dignified movement of the beloved, and the poet has to wait for the right words spontaneously come to him:

**“The Poet finds his moral proved  
Who never spoke before his spirit moved”**

‘Scotto Voice’ deals with the speaker’s failure on three fronts as a human being, as a lover and as poet. Life is only partly lived, love is partly going to sleep and a poem....

**“Lines of poetry like broken limbs  
scattered by a God who cannot make a man” (CP 52)**

Ezekiel has no original or systematic philosophy to offer. However, he is essentially a poet and at the conscious level, a poet who has been writing consistently for more than four decades on a wide variety of themes can hardly escape creating a corpus which projects its own individual outlook on life. The world of Ezekiel’s poetry is through art influenced by a broad sympathy towards the human race in general and for the poor, the depressed, the oppressed and the suffering particular. In a nutshell, it may be said that Ezekiel’s poetry is essentially the creation of a minority psyche. It is the product of observation too balanced to be otherwise. The thematic variety in his poetry is impressive. His poetic corpus is the single most dynamic influence on contemporary Indian poetry in English which is intrinsic to it. He is as good an instigator as a poet in others is as significant as his own contribution to poetry. In short, Ezekiel shares with his younger contemporaries a common belief in professionalism-seeing the writing of poetry not as a hobby or a past time but vocation essential to the poet’s life, a craft that demands the total dedication of the practitioner. Ezekiel’s commitment to India and to Bombay which is chosen home is total. Even if he feels the sense of alienation, he richly cherishes the feeling of introspection on all things and matters felt and experienced.

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