

## Conceptualizing Indianness in Nissim Ezekiel's Poetry

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### Abstract

*Nissim Ezekiel was born and brought up in Mumbai though he belongs to immigrant Jewish family. He has observed and experienced Indian life very closely and is considered to be the father of Post independence Indian verse in English. The Indianness in Ezekiel's poetry is nothing but a perpetual quest for identity and commitment and this Indianness lies in his commitment to India and in his earnest and sincere desire to bring about some improvement in the conditions of life through his poetry which reflects his desire to depict the depressing, degrading and disgusting conditions of life in India. Ezekiel presents the picture of alienation, torture and the prevailing feeling of religious and communal discrimination in Indian society that he had to face in his childhood. Nissim Ezekiel is essentially a great India poet writing in English without losing his national identity. He affirms that he is very much an Indian and his roots lie deep in India. He has satirised the evil practices, superstitions and ignorance of Indian people in a very numerous way.*

**Key Words:-** Indianness; Sensibility; Desire; Commitment; Perpetual; Jewish; Autobiographical; Independence; Adoption; Realism.

Nissim Ezekiel is one of the foremost Indian poets writing in English and has attracted considerable critical attention from the scholars both in India and abroad. Ezekiel belongs to a immigrant Jewish family although he himself was born in Mumbai in 1924 and brought up there. He got his education in Mumbai and made India his home. Besides, some trips to various foreign countries, he has lived, worked and earned his livelihood in Mumbai. As a man and as a poet, he has observed and experienced much of Indian Life very closely. He is rightly considered to be the father of post-independence Indian verse in English. He was a prolific poet, play wright, critic, broadcaster and

social commentator. But as a poet in Indian English writing, Ezekiel's contribution is outstanding.

The Indianness in Nissim Ezekiel's poetry is nothing but a perpetual quest for Identity and commitment. Caught in the vortex of a soulless World of eroding individuality and purposefulness, he gives vent to his dilemma in poetic terms. Indianness lies in his commitment to this country and in his earnest and sincere desire to bring about some improvement in the conditions of life through his poetry. His poetry reflects his desire to depict the depressing, degrading and disgusting conditions of life in India. When we study W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot, we talk about the reflection of Indian sensibility in Indian English poetry, the first name that comes to our mind is that of Nissim Ezekiel. He has not only been a good poet himself, but also a cause of good poetry in others. Nissim Ezekiel received the Sahitya academy cultural Award in 1983 and the Padma-Shri, India's highest civilian honour in 1988.

Nissim Ezekiel is a very Indian poet writing in English. His commitment to India and to Mumbai which is his chosen home, is clearly visible in his poem Background Casually. He is entirely Indian in his sensibility. He has not only tried to describe Indian culture but also has made good use of 'Babu Angrezi' or Indian English. It is a common Indian mistake to use the present continuous tense in place of the simple present. Ezekiel exploits this natural trait throughout this poem and in 'Goodby Party For Miss Pushpa'. Here is an illustration from 'Very Indian Poem in Indian English'.

*I am not standing for peace and Non-Violence.  
Why World is fighting, fighting  
Why all people of World  
Are not following Mahatma Gandhi,  
I am simply not understanding.*

The speaker believes in the glory of being Ancient Indian and deplors the fact that the new generation is going after fashion and foreign things. He is also quite hopeful that everything in India is coming slowly – ‘Regeneration, Remuneration, Contraception’. The third stanza exults in the national policy of prohibition. It discusses the common Indian attitude towards drinking that the speaker prefers a glass of lassi to a glass of wine. In the fourth stanza, he expresses his sadness and dissatisfaction over improper behaviour of the neighboring countries.

*Pakistan behaving like this*

*China behaving like this*

*It is making me very sad, I am telling you.*

Chetan Karnani says, “*He is a firm believer in National Integration and Ram Rajya. It is to the credit of Ezekiel that in one poem, he has reflected not only what many Indians think but also the way they think in English.*”

Ezekiel’s indianness is depicted in his description of flood in Bihar. Though the subject is occasional, the treatment is universal in its evocation of the pangs of human suffering. In the initial lines of the poem ‘The Truth About The Floods’, the poet creates the atmosphere of the flood-affected areas:

*For a visitor*

*to the flood-affected areas-  
of Balasore, Mayurbhang and cuttack  
in North Bihar,*

*It is a Job to get at the truth.*

*Meet any official,*

*he will claim his district*

*sub-division or block*

*is the “worst hit”*

*and pass on a hand-out*

*with statistics of a relief work.*

In this way, he creates the authentic atmosphere of paddy fields with knee-deep water, and how all the houses had collapsed. But there is apathy and indifference of the Government officials. The villagers would not talk to the reporter because they mistook him to be a Government official. There is suspicion and distrust. Ironically, the relief work is organized by the students who came with their transistors and Hindi film songs. In the following

lines, Ezekiel is able to evoke a grim picture of Indian poverty:

*The villagers ran to them.*

*They slapped their bellies*

*and Whined:*

*I have not eaten for three days.*

*My husband has been washed away*

*My parents have abandoned me*

*My son is dying*

*I can not find my daughter*

The family bonding is clearly reflected in this poem. Even in the starving state and the hour of crisis, the mother is concerned about her children. But with all this poverty, there are only excuses and evasions. The entire blame is placed on Nature. It is the characteristic of Indian fatalism to put the fault on nature. Ezekiel’s Indian sensibility is also revealed by a poem like Entertainment which describes a monkey-show, a common sight in Indian bazars and also bring out the poverty of the master of the show as well as the unwillingness of those to pay whom he entertains:

*The monkey-show is on-*

*Patient girl on haunches*

*holds the strings,*

*a baby in her arms.*

*Two red monkeys*

*in red and Purple pantaloons*

*Prepare to dance.*

*Crowd collects,*

*Naked to the waist,*

*the Master of ceremonies*

*drums frenzy, cracks whip,*

.....

*Some, in shame, part*

*With the smallest coin they have.*

*The show moves on.*

It is the characteristic of Indian fatalism that the entire fault is placed on Nature and yet the poor reporter is asked to report the truth.

The poem captures the familiar scene in most Indian cities. The monkey showman in this poem represents a poor rural entertainer who sustains life in utter hardship. He moves from one place to another in search of money and entirely depends on the favour

of the public. The crowd thickens as the show climaxes but melts away when the time for the payment comes.

As a realistic poet, Ezekiel shows his desire to see better conditions of life in this country. His poems show his love for the country of his adoption. Ezekiel's poetry contains various aspects of Indianness. The thoughts and feelings are supported by the surrounding atmosphere and characters in the poems which are purely Indian and they follow the Indian ways of life as in the poem 'Night of the scorpion' in which the portrait of an Indian mother is ever touching.

In 'Night of the Scorpion' Ezekiel narrates the incident of an Indian village woman stung by a scorpion in the rainy night. The speaker's mother was stung by a scorpion one night. Through the beautiful portrayal of the superstitions and motherly sympathy of particular Indian village, the poet portrays the credulous nature of the rural people. After stinging her, the scorpion had swiftly moved away from her and gone out into the rain, though it was because of the rain that it had come into the house. Then the peasants in the neighbourhood, on learning about a woman having been stung by a scorpion, express their sympathy. They say:

*"May he sit still, they said  
May the sins of your previous birth  
be burned away tonight, they said.  
May the poison purify your flesh  
of desire and your spirit of ambition".*

And after when it loses it's stung after twenty hours, mother's response is most touching, she says:

*"Thank God the scorpion picked on me  
and spared my children".*

This is how an Indian mother feels concerned about the welfare and safety of her children. 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". 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.

In another poem 'Edinburgh Interlude-lightly' Ezekiel depicts the situation when the daughter-in-law has just come from her honey-moon. The following lines describe the typical Indian situation, where mother-in-law says:

*"Don't worry, dear,  
I need no help in the kitchen.  
Leave it to me, please".*

The girl does not help her in the kitchen. After this, father-in-law says to daughter-in-law:

*"You must try to understand  
your Mother-in-law.  
She's a very kind woman, you know.  
There aren't many who do  
all the work in the kitchen".  
Then the son replies to the bride,  
"If you quarrel with my mother,  
you quarrel with me".*

The poet beautifully uses an Indian context and the poem deals with the traditional rivalry of the daughter-in-law and mother-in-law.

Ezekiel is of opinion that a writer should be a man of convictions, upholding human values. He should be "a man speaking to men." This is more beautifully revealed in 'The Railway Clerk'. Nissim Ezekiel vividly describes the extensive poverty and ugliness of India, especially in big cities. In 'The Railway Clerk' Ezekiel reveals the pathetic condition of the a poor railway clerk who represents the wretchedness of the middle class people. The railway clerk says:

*"It isn't my fault  
I do what I'm told  
but still I am blamed.  
This year,  
my leave application was twice refused".*

Even though he carries out the orders, yet he is criticized. His grievance reached its climax when his leave application was twice rejected in the course of the year.

*"My wife is always asking for more money.*

*Money, Money where to get Money? ”,*

Corruption is one of the major problems in India. The clerk says that there is no prospect of his getting any promotion as he is not a graduate.

*“I am living far off in Borivali,  
My children are neglecting studies,  
How long this can go on?”*

Thus, the railway clerk symbolizes poverty of India. The clerk represents the pathetic condition of many Indian youth, who are employed but not satisfied with their jobs. The clerk's wife always demands more money to meet the household expenses but he does not understand how to get this additional money because his duty is such that no one offers him bribes. In a way poet wants to throw light on the 'corruption' in Government offices. Ezekiel's poems are marked by this sense of realism. Nissim opposed the idealism and romanticism of the earlier group of Indian writers in English, and tried to look at any typical Indian situation with an Indian attitude, with a novel and dynamic Indian insight. He cleverly manipulated Indian English to bring out the Indian world view. In his autobiographical poem 'Background Casually', the poet speaks about his school days :

*“ I went to Roman Catholic School  
A mugging Jew among the wolves  
They told me I had killed the Christ  
That year I won the scripture prize  
A Muslim sportsman boxed my ears  
I grew in terror of the strong  
But undernourished Hindu lads  
Their prepositions always wrong  
Repelled me by passivity  
One noisy day I used a knife ”.*

In these lines we get the picture of alienation, discrimination and torture that Ezekiel had to face in his childhood. Ezekiel here indicates the prevailing feeling of religious and communal discrimination in Indian society. He feels alienated among his classmates. He again feels alienated among the Hindus and Muslims as he belongs to a minority community.

The feeling of alienation among the strangers haunts him. Among them 'alienation' and

'belongingness' are the most striking issues in the entire bulk of his poetry. Unlike Naipaul, Ezekiel always felt a sense of belonging to India though by birth he was an outsider by race. Even though he had to face bitter realities of alienation and discrimination from his own compatriots, India always was his motherland to which he was much attached. Even in his writings from London, India never seemed to him just a land of his ancestors as Naipaul always felt. Naipaul used India in his writings not to glorify her but to delineate her weaknesses, failings and thus portray her dark side. Though belonging to Jewish community, Ezekiel was primarily an Indian. What Ezekiel did was to satirise the evil practices, superstitions and ignorance of the Indian people in a humorous way as Pope and Dryden did in their age, and as R. K. Narayan, his friend, did in his novels.

Nissim Ezekiel occupies a unique position among Indo-Anglian poets of post-Independence era. His first book of poems is titled Time to Change and this is quite suggestive of Nissim Ezekiel's approach. P. Lal wrote,

*"After the death of Sri Aurobindo, Nissim Ezekiel is the first major voice that represents, more or less, the change of an era" .*

A horde 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. Ezekiel, "brought a sense of discipline, self-criticism and mastery to Indian English poetry."

He was the first Indian poet to have such a professional attitude and became the pioneer of "New Poetry" by his greater variety and depth than any other poet of the Post-independence period. Like Eliot, Ezekiel too is a religious humanist. As for Eliot and most moderns like him, for Ezekiel too the religious element in literature reveals the writer's moral concerns. In one poem Ezekiel wrote :

*“Cast off, scattered for a  
Thousand years, where shall  
We live in peace with our  
Neighbours”.*

Ezekiel deliberately deconstructs the imposed identity of Jews and their culture. He underlines the heterogeneity of local identity and strongly censures the native chauvinism with its inherent imperialistic designs. He loves the city despite its ugliness and wickedness. Ezekiel feels India and its problems in his nerves provided a voice to his rootedness in India. 'Enterprise' is an allegory of the pilgrimage theme with a suggestion of futility. The journey from the city to the hinterland is a metaphor for contrived change from frustration to fulfillment".

Ezekiel rejects dejection because poetry is central to his life. He sees life as a quest for wholeness, for intellectual and spiritual satisfaction, for maturity. His poems show his desire to be away from distraction and obsessions of worldly life; but it is grounded in the physical and social reality. Because his commitment was a quest, and his Indianness a search for identity, the major concern in his poem is how to live happily, calmly, and ethically as an integrated human being despite having to face so many personal difficulties and depressing moments. The door was open and he could not leave. This feeling of agony and anguish expressed in his poem 'The Room' reveals the essence of his poetry. It made him outstanding among all the earlier Indian English poets.

Nissim Ezekiel is essentially Indian in his sensibility. He is a great Indian poet writing in English, without losing his national identity. He affirms that he is very much an Indian and that his roots lie deep in India. He himself says, "I am not a Hindu and my background makes me a natural outsider : circumstances and decisions relate me to India. In other countries I am a foreigner. In India, I am an Indian." Truly Ezekiel has not inherited the great classical tradition of Indian, of Vedas and upanishadas, but to the "extent he has availed himself of the composite culture of India to which he belongs, he must be said to be an important poet not merely in Indian context, but also in a consideration of those that are writing poetry anywhere in English." Finally like a typical Indian poet with a universal vision, he sincerely prays for doing human good.

*"Whatever the enigma*

*The Passion of the blood*

*Grand me the metaphor*

*To make human good*

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