

## ***Nissim Ezekiel : A Single Force in Contemporary Poetry in English.***

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### **Introduction:**

One of the greatest, and the single force in contemporary Indian poetry in English, Nissim Ezekiel was a poet who was equally the most involved as well as the most uninvolved in the experience of life. A poet of mystical experience and spiritual inclination, he is eager to taste every thrill – physical, mental and spiritual. Born in December 1924, in Mumbai of Jewish [Bene-Irrael] parents, who were devoted to education, Ezekiel inherited a dual culture, both Indian and Jewish. His father, a rationalist sceptic and of a scientific temperament, was a professor and principal of several colleges in Mumbai and a member of the Liberal Jewish Synagogue. His mother, a Maharashtrian Jew was the principal of a school started by herself. Ezekiel was educated first in an English Medium school in Mumbai and then at Wilson college till his graduation. He did his M.A. in English at the University of Bombay in 1947, with a distinguished academic record. Ezekiel proceeded to England in 1948 and spent three and half years in pursuits varying from Theatre, Cinema and Art to Psychology and Modern Indian Culture. He studied philosophy in Birbeck College under C.E.M. Joad and other luminaries. This added to his earlier reading of mysticism in several religions and he begun to express, through his poetry, the feelings it kindled within him.

Ezekiel's poetry needs to be studied with the parameters of mysticism and existentialism; between the poet's belief and skepticism. In his quest for self the poet encounters the ultimate reality. He arrived at truths which are eternally valid, he experienced the Divine in the inner and outer world and is critical and skeptical of his experiences. In the lines quoted above, Nissim Ezekiel pointed with wry humour a self portrait of a scientific soul inducted into tension between the spirit and the flesh, between the yearning for foreign claims and the final instinctive return home. The events of Ezekiel's life seem to be designed exclusively for the needs of his imagination. His involvement in literary activities began in 1942, when Ezekiel published his poems for social welfare.

Poetry, Poverty and Philosophy were his companions in London. He studied Philosophy and wrote Poetry. It is there that he published his first book of verse, A Time to Change, in 1952. The same year he returned to India. While in London his work was also published in The Spectator and London Magazine. On return from abroad, he joined The Illustrated Weekly of India for two years, then worked for an advertising company for five years, then another year as a factory manager, and thereafter in journalism and broadcasting before joining Mithibai College in 1961. In 1972, he joined Bombay University as a Reader in American Literature and later became a Professor of English till his retirement in 1985. He won the Central Sahitya Academy Award for his book of verse, Latter-Day Psalms, in 1983 and Padmashri was conferred on him by the Government of India in 1988.

Ezekiel traveled extensively on invitation from several countries and delivered lectures on a variety of literary themes including a course of lectures on "Indian Writing in English" at the University of Leeds and Chicago. In 1974 he was an invitee of the US Government

under the International Visitors Programme, a cultural award visitor to Australia in 1978 and the Writer in Residence in Singapore [December 1988 to February 1989].

Spanning a period of more than forty years, Ezekiel's poetical works cover a wide spectrum of experience and knowledge; a blend of religion, philosophy, mysticism and sensuality. Ezekiel's poetry began by echoing Yeats, Eliot and Auden. Right from the beginning, city [i.e. Bombay] has become an integral part of his poetry. The desire to come to terms with the reality of life by overcoming alienation became the central motif in his poetry.

### **Review of Literature:**

In Ezekiel's poetry, contraries exist side by side. There is an emotional plunge into life and a desire for detachment from it, a sensuous perception of the physical world: "a craving for prayer and a temptation for irony: a passion for this world and a hankering after the world beyond."<sup>i</sup> The attitude is mystical as the poet seeks harmony and balance between the physical, the mental and the spiritual; the body and soul, the mind and the spirit. His religious stance is clearly stated in a poem when he prays:

If I could Pray, the gist of my  
Demanding would be simply this  
Quietude. The ordered mind.  
Erasure of the inner lie.

[Prayer, CP – 54]

In an interview with the "Journal of Literature and Aesthetics", Ezekiel has stated: "I can't help thinking that I am religious in a way that any ordinary religious person will not consider religious at all. If I am among the orthodox members of my community, their first response to anything I say or do would be 'he is not one of us'. If I join the opposite group which has its own beliefs they will say 'My God he belongs there'. Then if I go to one or another set of believers, if I move in the direction of the occult or the skeptics the sceptic would say "you are not really a sceptic."<sup>ii</sup>

When Ezekiel moves towards the spiritual he is not unconcerned about the body which he considered equally sacred. Ezekiel believes that in mystical consciousness, the life of the sense attains a profound meaning and significance along with the spiritual expression which is divine.

As a poet, Ezekiel constantly attempts to explore and define his identity as some one who feels that he is an outsider in the society to which he belongs, though rooted firmly in Indian soil. This makes for a poetry of ironic detachment laced with non-satiric humour.<sup>iii</sup>

Ezekiel was isolated by his cross-cultural inheritance and was conscious of his minority status in a Hindu dominated society. He expressed this feeling in his critical essay, "Naipaul's India and Mine".

Ezekiel writes: "I am not a Hindu; 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".<sup>iv</sup>

Although Ezekiel feels cut-off from India's spiritual past, yet, he was drawn to different aspects of the Hindu religion and mythology. In several poems he has shown the effect of this religious tradition in his thinking and believes that the Indian element in his poetry is the effect of environment, his readings, his contact with other Indians and his upbringing in Indian surroundings. This sense of "outsiderness" has greatly modified his review of V.S. Naipaul's An Area of Darkness. His commitment and dedication to the place of his birth is expressed when he states: 'India is simply my environment. A man can do some thing for and in his environment by being fully what he is and not by withdrawing from it.'<sup>v</sup>

The above statement indicates Ezekiel's acceptance of the Indian sense as final. This idea is also recorded in his poem 'Background, Casually' from Hymns in Darkness: I have made my commitment now

This is one: to say stay where I am  
As some remote and background place  
My background place is where I am

[Collected poems. C.P. – 181]

Through an involvement in the immediate, Ezekiel gains an insight into universal and the self, transcending all material concerns. This according to James Wieland "draws religion, philosophy and poetry together to make life a spiritual adventure."<sup>vi</sup> It is this total experience that Ezekiel refers to when he says in 'Poetry';

A poem is an episode, Completed  
In an hour or two, but poetry  
Is something more. It is the why,  
the how, the that, the flow  
from which a poem comes ...

[Collected Poems P.13]

According to James Wieland, Poetry provides Ezekiel with a form which can "accommodate the ever changing relationship between the poet and the reality, he perceives, between the man and the universe and man and God. It incorporates various forces in the pattern of his awareness into harmony. There is an underlying logic in the sequence of his poetry which often takes the form of a Journey; a Journey through outer and inner world."<sup>vii</sup>

In general, Nissim Ezekiel seems to be more enthusiastic about helping women than men. In a biography of Ezekiel R. Raj Rao call him a ladies' man.<sup>viii</sup> In 1988-1989, as an old man in his mid-sixties, Ezekiel spent some months in Singapore as a poet in residence at the National University of Singapore. He became a real hit among the students, specially the girl students, of a school where he conducted a poetry reading. They submitted a petition demanding the inclusion of more poetry in the syllabus. One of them was Lin Hsin who wrote a 'Poem' which contains the following lines:  
Professor Ezekiel

You are one of the many few  
To whom I owe my gratitude  
You have a heart to heal  
May be, you never knew

.....

Professor Ezekiel

Your words  
In my heart are retained  
Your lines

In my mind they refrain (SIC)<sup>ix</sup>

Ezekiel did not have a stable and satisfactory relationship with his wife. His extra-marital interests and the couple's mutual, failure to understand each other contributed to their failed marriage. The marriage finally ended in separation. Had he led a more normal married life he would have been compelled to spend more time with his family and less on his literary and other pursuits. It is doubtful whether he would have become the Nissim Ezekiel as he was Alexander Pope would probably never have become the bitter and brilliant satirist he became, had he not been born a Catholic in the late seventeenth century England. In a some what comparable manner, it can be said that it is doubtful whether Ezekiel would have become the poet as he is, had he not been positioned in a rather unique social, religious and cultural slot of life by his birth into a

Bene-Israel family in India. William Faulkner has said that in order to know what it is like to be a southerner one has to be a Southerner.<sup>x</sup> Similarly, it is difficult for a member of a religion or linguistic majority to fully comprehend the peculiar functioning of the minority psyche. Our constitution says that India is a secular nation where minorities are provided with special protection. But neither constitutional safeguards nor even the appropriate majority attitudes can fully erase the sense of alienation that is innate to the minority psyche. In India this sense of alienation is perhaps heightened by the presence of a strongly religious core at the center of life.

Ezekiel's family background, which was highly academic, seems to have exerted considerable influence on Ezekiel, himself an academic and his work. The didactic element in Ezekiel, both man and poet, cannot be identified in a sharper way than has been identified by Gieve Patel: "He has taught at school, at college at the university. When he conducts programmes on appreciation for Bombay television, he teaches. When he sits in his dusty office at the P.E.N. as its most active office bearer, reading quantities of other people's poems and giving his comments on them there by earning life long friends and enemies, he is teaching again. When he writes his poetry, he teaches, this time largely himself."<sup>xi</sup>

It is interesting and perhaps also intriguing, that many of the leading poets of today have specialized in English as an academic discipline. They include Shiv K. Kumar, P. Lal, A.K. Ramanujan, R. Parthasarthy, Keki N. Daruwalla, Dom Moraes, G.S. Sharat Chandra, Eunice de Souza, Adil Jussawalla, Gauri Deshpande, Salcem Peeradina, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra and sanatan Rodrigues, or have been teachers of English. Kumar, Ramanujan, Daruwalla, De Souza and Deshpande are children of teachers. Great scholars need not always be great teachers in fact, frequently they are not but in order to be a great teacher, one has to be a great scholar and Ezekiel was surely one. But he lacked the infinite patience, the rigorous discipline and the capacity for systematic work that are essential components of scholarship of the highest order. He never took his doctoral degree. His intelligence was too much that of a creative person, operating on the principles of the inventor's paralogy rather than those of expert's homology. He was extremely well read in the areas of his specialization like American literature and Anglo-American criticism up to T.S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis. But his total range is somewhat limited.

At the age of eighteen Ezekiel became a Royalist. Ezekiel became a member of the Radical Democratic Party which Roy had founded and flung himself into the party's trade union activities, thus coming into close touch with a reality which his middle class family background had until then prevented him from contacting. That there is very little openly Royalist in Ezekiel's poetry is undeniable; but equally undeniable is the presence of subtle traces of Royalist influence; a strong sense of social justice, a deep regard for individual freedom, a questioning approach towards traditional beliefs, and a sincere concern for the deprived and the oppressed are integral to the out look of Ezekiel's work, Ezekiel's Royalist days are alluded to in 'Case study' where the protagonist stakes "On politics a fatal pledge" (CP 125) and his London sojourn finds adumbration at the close of the first section and at the opening of the second section of 'Back ground, Casually'.

Ezekiel's retirement in 1984 from the Department of English of the University of Bombay resulted in no slackening of the pace of his

life. If anything, it only quickened the tempo. Reading, writing, editing, lecturing, travelling he never was able to find enough time for all that he wanted to do. But after Collected Poems (1952-1988), no book of verse came out. In the summer of 1994, rather worried about not having brought out a collection for more than half a decade, Ezekiel attempted to put together a new book, consisting of poems from the 'Edinburgh Interlude' and the 'Singapore Sequence' and a few other pieces. He hoped to persuade OUP to publish it but the plan fell through and Collected Poems (1952-1988) remains his last book of verse.

Ezekiel's neglect of his person and his immediate surroundings, charming to begin with, became alarming as the eighties came to an end. He banned even his closest friends from visiting. He lived in his unkept flat in the company of pigeons, cats, cockroaches, rats, mosquitoes and bugs. He was frequently found to be in need of a wash. He never ate enough and under nourishment was one of the causes of his collapse at a meeting of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee [AJJDC] in 1998. Another, stronger reason was that Ezekiel had fallen prey to Alzheimer's disease. Though the formal medical pronouncement came only in 1998, after he had to be hospitalized when he collapsed at the AJJDC meeting, it appeared that the disease had placed its tentacles and had tightened its hold over Ezekiel.

If there is one thing common to the successive stages in Ezekiel's life, it is his dedication to the muse, which is almost Miltonic in its absoluteness. He started writing poems, finding a very respected readership and audience in his teachers and classmates. Since then his existence has been one centered around his poetry. Practically every activity he engaged in has some thing to do with his work as a poet. On the other hand he has stubbornly refused to do any thing that is not good for the poet in him or robs him of the time that would otherwise be spent in reading, writing or in discussion. His famous neglect of his wife and children stems from this attitude. He has an aptitude for philosophy, but is keenly aware that, "Philosophy suits a part of the poet's mind but not the whole, and abstruse research, when it steals from his nature all the natural man, cannot destroy him as a poet".<sup>xii</sup> He is extremely wary of its fatal attractions. Ezekiel's dedication towards his vocation of writing poems is exemplary.<sup>xiii</sup> Nissim Ezekiel passed away in 2004.

## References:

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12. Nissim Ezekiel, "Poetry and Philosophy" Selected Prose [Delhi: Oxford UP, 1992] 47.
13. Nissim Ezekiel, Personal Interview, 6 Nov. 1999. I am not sure whether it could be called an "interview", I visited him in his hospital room and spent more than an hour with him. Much of what he said was incoherent. [A. Raghu].