



Social Reality and the Cosmopolitan Culture in *A Time to Change*, *Sixty Poems* and *The Third Of Nissim Ezekiel: A Study*

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Abstract:

Spanning a period of more than thirty years, Ezekiel's poetical works cover a wide spectrum of experience and knowledge; a blend of religion, philosophy, mysticism and sensuality. Nissim Ezekiel has published seven collections of poems. Besides, this his poems have been published in several journals, periodicals, magazines and anthologies. His poetry is a land mark in Indian English poetry because he could bring into play a modern sensibility in confronting the confusion, bewilderment and disillusion of the times, he could transfer poetry from its bucolic habitat to an urban one, dump archaism and the monotonous unrhythmical schemes of the earlier poets and adopt a form which could adequately display the subtle modulations of pace and the strength and sinews of free verse. Ezekiel was the first Indian poet to express a modern Indian sensibility in a modern idiom.

I first read Nissim Ezekiel's poem 'Night of the Scorpion' while in college. I was deeply influenced with his thinking and his understanding about Indian Culture and society in spite of the fact that he had his roots outside India. His forefathers had migrated from Israel to India and made their permanent accommodation in Mumbai. Since his writings had made a great impact on me, I opted to work for my research on his creations. Nissim Ezekiel's name is synonymous with the modern Indian English poetry. He was the leader of the Indian English Poetic movement that started in the nineteen fifties and sixties and culminated in the flowering of Indian English Poetry in the mid-eighties. He was the first contemporary Indian Poet in English that I read.

Ezekiel's poetic career spans over four decades and he never looked back since, he published his first book of verse, *A Time to Change* in 1952. His poetry has attracted nationwide attention and is read throughout the length and breadth of the country among the academic circles. He also received a good deal of critical attention. I have thoroughly enjoyed his poetry. Nissim Ezekiel's poetry is informed by his criticism. His criticism is characterised by the smugness of Indian Culture as he found it, and his poetry and criticism both culminate into a great human document in his poetry. In spite of the critical works on his poetry; I feel a lot of things can still be said afresh about it. Hence, I have made a humble attempt to interpret this poetry, especially his focus on and illustration of Indian culture and society. He brought modernization to Indian English poetry and therefore his influence has been considerable.

To have a proper understanding of his art and craftsmanship and the evaluation of his poetic genius, it is essential that his poems are closely analysed. His first volume of poetry, *A Time to Change*, was published by the Fortune Press, London, in 1952, when Ezekiel was in his twenties and stayed in London. Poetry, love and marriage, the three major themes in Ezekiel's poetry, are properly dealt with in his very first volume. Ezekiel considers poetry in a way of life, a continuous flow. It is an integral part of life. In 'poetry', which is from *A Time to*

Change he opines that poetry produces more impression than a poem. It is elusive, it is something more. It is wedded to life:

A poem is an episode, completed
In an hour or two, but poetry
Is something more. It is the why
The how, the what, the flow
From which a poem comes,
In which the savage and the singular,
The gentle familiar,
Are all dissolved; the residue
In what you read, as a poem, the rest
Flows and is poetry. This should be so,
Precisely so.

[Poetry C.P. 13]

A common and often repeated theme in many of Ezekiel's poems is conjugal love. Conjugate life all with its love and quarrels between a couple is a theme which is dealt with indifferently and displayed in 'To a Certain Lady' How warm and meaningful is marital love is discussed in this poem. The poet discloses the strifes and quarrels frankly of his own conjugal life but still hopes that marital peace and harmony can be regained by a mode of love expanding to way of life. He wishes to attain peace, love and harmony in married life:

Always we must be lovers,
Man and wife at work upon the hard
Mass of material which is the world.
[To a Certain Lady, C.P. 30]

Teach us, love, above all things, fidelity to music,
Sharpen our responses to the colours of creation,
Lead us undecisively to what comes after a passion,
And, let us die, Love, as though we chose to, for a reason.
[To a Certain Lady, C.P. 30]

The contrary positions can bring to an agreement by Love, in art and poetry, this Ezekiel shows very skillfully in 'A Time to Change', and some other poems of this volume. The title poem *A Time to Change* itself, 'The Double Horror', 'On Meeting a Pedant', 'Something to Pursue', etc. 'An African Mask' reveals how the conflict and contrast of opposites can be resolved in harmony, which is the key point in art:

The Mask evokes a muffled noise
Of dialectic oppositions,
Which like it must slowly poise
Their various signs as good equations,
And in the passion of mind or heart
Acquire the equilibrium of art.
[On An African Mask. CP-6]

Even in this early collection Ezekiel shows a fine sense of structure, a logical gradual development of theme step by step, a logical progression from start to finish. 'A Time to Change', 'The Double Horror', 'Something to Pursue', 'To a Certain Lady' and 'God Revealed' are well-structured poems. Lucidity and simplicity characterize his style. The poet shows a preference for precise, epigrammatic expressions. 'Preferences', 'The Prophet' 'Reading' 'Declaration' and 'Encounter' are prose poems. *A Time to Change* is a poet's quest for spiritual wholeness. His first volume *A Time to Change* shows the symptoms of his becoming a great poet in the future. Though it does not contain any outstanding poem yet the general standard and thematic pattern is quite high. All the poems of this volume *A Time to Change*, are carefully crafted. There are no effusions. Ezekiel emerges as an eminent poet of city life in this volume.



Ezekiel's second volume of poetry which is known as Sixty Poems, was published in 1953. It is of uneven quality and the promise held out by A Time to Change has not been kept. Much that is trivial and prosaic has been included. The cause of its unevenness is that the poet has put together in Sixty Poems, his new poems of 1952-53 with two sets of earlier poems written during 1945-48 and 1950-51. The poems of this second volume show the influence of W.B. Yeats, Herbert, William Blake, William Carols and William Rilke. Notwithstanding the success of his earlier volume Ezekiel does not put his voice forcefully in this second volume of poetry. In this volume called Sixty Poems, Ezekiel displays an acute consciousness about profession as a poet in different poems. In 'Creation' Ezekiel points out that common objects and situations create poetry:

Pavement or pools cafes or corn.
All are focused in purer light, poems,
Waiting for transcription on the page.
[Creation, CP-79]

In the dancing minute or the spacious hour, the act of poetic creation is God-like:

Child of flesh and fancy,
Be equable, as the sages recommend,
And God-like make a universe
From chaos,
Of fire and air or earth and water.
[Creation, CP-70]

In, 'The Stuffed Owl' and 'The Company I Keep', the poet discloses and derides other poet's star like poems; poets who write without inspiration and craft. Some of the poems in this volume exhibit his interest in physical relationships, and a free and a frank discussion of it. 'Lord Song', 'Marriage Poem' and 'The Old Abyss' are remarkable for the uninhibited treatment of sex and the human anatomy.

In Sixty Poems, Nissim Ezekiel's deep attachment and concern for the humanity and his benevolence is evident in these poems he has focused his attention on the balance required in the human life. In 'A poem of Dedication' he says:

I want a human balance humanly
Acquired, Fruitful in the common hour.
A Poem of Dedication C.P. 40

Human relationship, which has been his main concern throughout his poetic career, finds a proper place in this volume. 'Situation' and 'A Short Story' deal with romantic love situations. These also show movements towards an enlarged field of perception. The Third is the third volume of Nissim Ezekiel's poetic creation, published in the year 1959. With the publication of his third volume of poetry, Nissim Ezekiel carried the reputation of having become a perfect poet and showed a greater maturity both in respect of content and technique, which marks a decided development in his poetic career. The poet seems to fully justify his reputation of being an urban poet who confers deep meanings of artistic excellence to his favourite themes like human relationships inhabitants of city, their living standard, their love life, city life etc. It is evident through this volume that Ezekiel got himself included among the other great poets who made their remarks of human relationships. Economically weaker sections of society, their poor condition, their dull and gloomy life sets in motion the poet's heart and he feels sympathy for them. 'Episode' is full of sympathy for poor beggars:

A beggar's whine approached, his eyes
Shone in the darkness, fixed on us;

To make him go we gave him half an anna.
But then another came,
And a third from a little distance

Watched us give the second half an anna.
He lurched towards us, dragged one foot,
And howled like a sick dog towards the moon.
[Episode, CP-99]

This volume too contains many poems in which Ezekiel has dealt with the physicality of man-woman relationship. The theme continuously finds a place among the several themes that Ezekiel has taken up for his study. Ezekiel added a new dimension, a new parameter to his poetry about love and sex because these subjects are spiritual too. In a poem, 'For Her' he states that love is permanent and not a temporary feeling of physical contentment:

I know that wood if burnt
Produces ash and smoke.
There is a law about this, explaining
How and where the burnt wood went.
With love it is not so.
Love breaks the incendiary Laws,
Blazing in a high wind
But staying good. The more you love
The less you burn away.
[For Her, CP-88]

'Aside', 'Rain', 'Tonight', 'Sonnet', 'Situation', 'For Loves Record', 'The Language of Lovers' are some of his fine Love poems in this volume. Ezekiel's third volume of poetry has an exceptional and extreme variety of different types of thematic patterns. Ezekiel expresses his faith in God and meditation in some of his lyrics like 'Prayer'. We also find psychological insights into human nature and behavior where Ezekiel displayed a masterly command over language and versification.

The Third was written between January 1954 to December 1958; and it was dedicated 'To Krishnanath', in the last poem of 'The Third', 'December 58', Ezekiel wrote:

I see the morning light, the door
Is opened on an unflawed page.
The night is now a distant shore
On which my love denied its cage.
[December 58, CP-112]

The Third shows a movement towards an enlarged field of perception.

References:

Gieve Patel: [Introduction to collected poems, Delhi: OUP 1989].
