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A STUDY ON NISSIM EZEKIEL'S THE INDIANNESS SELECT POEMS

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**Abstract:**

Indo-Anglian literature, irrespective of the genre; poetry, drama, fiction, or essays reflects social, political, cultural, religious, geographical and spiritual background. *Nissim Ezekiel is the father of modern Indian poetry.* Major themes of his poetry are based on typical Indianness. *The Unfinished Man (1960) and The Exact Name (1965).* Ezekielin incorporate the heat and dust, the sun and floods, the sense of poverty and deprivation beautifully into the texture of his verse. The images of Indian Landscape prevail all through his poetry.

**Key words:** social, political, cultural, religious, Indianness,

**Introduction**

Ezekiel was born in 1924 in Bombay of Jewish parents (Bene- Israel) both devoted to education. His parents influenced him very much. His father was the principal of several colleges in the latter part of his

life. He was rational, questioning and had an immaculate taste for proverbs and homespun wisdom, that runs deep in his poetry. His mother was the principal of a school started and run by herself for over thirty years. Ezekiel had taught at school, at college and at university. He was primarily a teacher both in life and poetry.

When Ezekiel was an undergraduate he came under the influence of M. N. Roy and was an active member of the Radical Democratic party until 1947. He took his Master's degree in English literature in 1947. He went to England in 1948 and studied Philosophy at Birbeck college under C. E. M. Joad. Ezekiel has been a man of varied interests. He has been manager of a well-known advertising firm in the fifties, manager of the Chemould, a pictureframe manufacturing company for a year. In 1952 he even worked as deck scrubber and coal-carrier on an English cargo ship to earn his passage home from England.

Ezekiel won lasting renown in literature. His profession as a teacher of English literature for a number of years at

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Bombay University shaped his literary personality. In 1964 he was a visiting professor at the University of Leeds. He edited Quest, Imprint and six issues of Poetry India. A renowned critic of art and literature, Ezekiel conducted a course in art appreciation of J. J. School of art and other institutions. He had also remained as Director, of Theatre Unit, Bombay. One of the front-rank poets in the Indian English tradition he had published six collections of his verse. O. U. P. had brought out in one volume published in 1989, collected poems of Ezekiel from 1952 to 1988. Besides writing poetry, Ezekiel had edited many books, including The Emerson Reader, A Martin Luther King Reader and Writing in India. He has also edited the Indian P. E. N. and had visited England and U. S. A. He had won distinguished honours for his poetry. Ezekiel is passed away on Jan. 12, 2004.

Ezekiel's poetry collection consists of A Time to Change (1952), Sixty Poems (1953), The Third (1959), The Unfinished Man (1960), The Exact Name (1965), Hymns in Darkness (1976) and Latter-Day Psalms. In all his poems he had left the impression of an urban poet, the poet of the great metropolis- Bombay, where he was born and where he had been living since his birth. Bombay haunts his imagination:

**A Morning Walk:** Barbaric city sick  
with slums,

Deprived of season,  
blessed with rains,  
Its hawkers, beggars,  
iron-lunged,  
Processions led by  
frantic drums  
A million purgatorial  
lanes,  
And child-like  
masses many-tongued,  
Whose wages are in  
words and crumbs.

Nissim Ezekiel, has expressed valuable ideas on literature and life in his letters, critical writings and interviews. It is essential to know his critical credo in order to evaluate his poetry in the right perspective. He looks at literature in relation to society. In all his writings Ezekiel stresses the centrality of man in the universe and prefers poetry of statement and purpose.

In American poetry of the sixties Ezekiel found "another kind of lyricism, an easy, controlled flow, not a surrealistic eruption, not a trance-like aesthetic dexterity but poetic reasonableness." "poetic reasonableness" is the soul of poetry. This poetry expresses "a milieu and its culture." (Das, 64)

Ezekiel praises the American poetic tradition  
"that can be traced back to Whitman. Its peculiar qualities belong to its time and

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place, a poetry of the utmost freedom, informality and freshness which expresses directly its own independent sensibility. No organized theory, no moral or social doctrine, no mask of reason or respectability, no imagist, symbolist or other technical imperative shapes the consciousness that secretes this verse.” (Das, 68)

It implies that literature of a very high order can only be created in an atmosphere of intellectual freedom. In an essay, entitled *Censorship and the Writer*, Ezekiel says that writers should enjoy absolute freedom acting as “witnesses to the truth within them.” The aim of literature is to “discover and expresses truth”, which is entirely a personal experience for the writer. The society that promotes literature should aim at “the development of human sensibility.” A writer should be a man of convictions, upholding human values.

As critic and poet, Ezekiel advocated cultural synthesis. In an interview he said:, The problems of Indian writers are strange, for they have to make a synthesis between the ancient and modern cultures. In Ezekiel’s own writing a noticeable synthesis happens between the Jewish and the Indian, the Western and the Eastern, the urban and the rural. This synthesis is nicely expressed in *Latter Day Psalms*:

The images are beautiful  
birds

And colourful fish; they fly,  
They swim into my Jewish  
consciousness.

God is a presence here  
And his people are real.  
I see their sins. I hear  
His anger.

The images of natural objects- hills, rivers, winds, skies, sun and rain are set in opposition to the images of the city. The images, derived from the world of nature the archetypal life symbols. In the words of K. D. Verma: “They project a pastoral vision of a fully refulgent and harmonious life, a pattern in which man enters into sacred communion with his cosmos including objects of nature as a metaphoric condition of his integrated humanity and of his desire to foster a community of being”. (49) Nature imagery is juxtaposed to the image of the barbaric city in “*Urban*”, “*Morning Walk*” and “*Morning Prayer*”.

Ezekiel’s early poetry is noticeable for the skilful use of conditional metres and stanza forms. He makes many experiments with prose rhythms and shows a fine sense of metrical ability in “*A Time to Change*”, his first anthology. The *Double Horror*, a carefully structured poem in his first volume, testifies to his skill for using rhyme, which is strong, supple and flowing. Starting as a bird’s eye view of corruption in the

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other world, the poem turns inwards and ends with the final knowledge of the give and take of corruption, mutually infective, between the individual and his environment.

“The Unfinished Man”, he makes effective use of rhyme. All the poems in this volume are written with remarkable rhythmical accuracy. Ezekiel successfully uses a different rhyme scheme in every poem with great success. Ezekiel says: “In rhythm I am at the following, the direct, the informal or conversational.” (48)

In his recent poetry Ezekiel has given up the traditional verse forms and the singing line. He has tended more and more to use free verse and has also written some prose poems. The “Night of the Scorpion” is a fine example of free verse. The poet deftly varies rhythm which helps him to achieve different effects. C. Paul Verghese remarks:

“Ezekiel’s use of free verse is not an escape from the restraints imposed by a fixed form. He is well versed in the handling of metrical verse. In his free verse we find a rhythm that suits the emotional mood of the poem; the poet seeks a stricter discipline and arrives at what according to Marjorie Boulton is the third kind of free verse- verse with a more colloquial style, suitable for the expression of difficult thought or sometimes of

cynicism, of the man of the world attitude.” (134)

Ezekiel is the first Indian poet consistently to show that craftsmanship is as important to a poem as its subject matter. What distinguishes him as a front- rank poet in Indian English poetry is “the exquisite; the rich, supple rhythm capable of subtle modulations; the wry ironic tone which can change, easily and naturally, into the impassioned; mastery over a variety of styles and modes; the poise and precision of language.” (Walsh, 67).

Nissim Ezekiel has been consciously Indian in his sensibility. He has not only tried to describe Indian culture but he has made good use of ‘Babu Angrezi’ or Indian English. He has performed half a dozen interesting experiments in this genre. ‘Very Indian Poem in Indian English’ tries to depict the characteristic Indian attitudes in Swadeshi Angrezi. It is a common Indian mistake to use the present continuous tense in place of the simple present. Ezekiel exploits this national trait throughout his poem and in ‘Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa.’ As an illustration, I quote the first stanza from the former poem:

I am standing for peace and non-voilence  
Why world is fighting fighting  
Why all people of world  
Are not following Mahatma Gandhi,  
I do simply not understand.  
Ancient Indian wisdom is 100% correct.

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I should say even 200% correct.  
But modern generation is neglecting-  
Too much going for fashion and foreign things.

Such a person naturally believes in the glory that was Ancient India and deplors the fact that the new generation is going after 'fashion and foreign things.'

The second stanza describes even more successfully the levity of Indian English:

Other day I am reading in newspaper  
(Everyday I'm reading Times of Indian  
To improve my English Language)  
How one goonda fellow  
Throw stone at Indirabehn.

This man is also quietly hopeful that everything in Indian is coming slowly- 'Regeneration, Remuneration, Contraception.' The third stanza exalts in the national policy of prohibition. It discusses the common Indian attitude towards drinking so that the speaker prefers a glass of wine.

In the fourth stanza, the speaker is sad that our neighborly countries do not behave properly:

Pakistan behaving like  
this  
China behaving like  
that

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

But this same person 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.

A similar strategy is adopted in 'Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa.' The poem is written in the form of a farewell speech because Miss Pushpa 'is departing for foreign.' Ezekiel tries to parody such speeches which are usually rambling. Even the logical connectives express a typical Indian thought processes in Indian English:

Miss pushpa is coming  
From very high family.  
Her father was renowned advocate  
In Bulsar or Surat,  
I am not remembering now which  
place.  
Surat ? Ah, yes,  
Once only I stayed in Surat  
With family members  
With family members  
Of my uncle's very old friend-  
his wife was cooking nicely...  
that was long time ago.

In a characteristically undisciplined Indian way, the speaker goes far away from his main subject without bothering about it. And as a characteristic Indian craze, he

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remembers much later that Miss pushpa is going to foreign country ‘to improve her prospect.’ This is a good dig at those Indian who suffer from xenophile.

**Some examples of the indianisms (or, incorrect Indian English) are given below**

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- Use of progressive tense in stative verbs as in, “He is loving you”, instead of, “He loves you.”
- Use of a preposition when it is not needed, as in, “Let us discuss about this”, instead of, “Let us discuss this.”
- Violating law of English word order as in,
- “Give me a fresh basket of eggs”, instead of, “Give me a basket of fresh eggs.”
- “My all friends are waiting”, instead of, “All my friends are waiting.”
- Incorrect answer to question content as in, “Didn’t you take Preethy to school?” “Yes, I didn’t”, instead of, “No, I didn’t.”
- Use of “good” when it is not needed as in, “What is your good name?” instead of, “What is your name?”
- Use of ‘this side’ and ‘that side’ instead of ‘here’ and ‘there’ as in, “Bring it this side.” “We went that side.”
- Pluralisation of names that are generally used in the singular

form; as, poetry, advice, furniture, language, scenery, information, etc.

➤ Example: 1. What information’s could he give?(incorrect)

2. What information could he give?(correct)

➤ Using “please” and “kindly” together as in,

➤ “Please kindly do it for me”, instead of, “Please do it for me”, Or, “Kindly do it for me.”

➤ .Using double conjunctions as in, “Though she is shot, still/but/yet she is beautiful”, instead of, “Though she is shot, she is beautiful.”

➤ Many Indian languages use double conjunction, but not in English.

➤ The use of “gentleman”, “cousin brother”, “cousin sister”, “maternal uncle”, etc., instead of the proper English usage of “man”, “cousin”, “uncle”, etc. as in, “He is a tall gentleman” Or, “He is my cousin brother.”

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