



ALIENATION AND RECONCILIATION IN THE POETRY OF NISSIM EZEKIEL

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ABSTRACT

Nissim Ezekiel's poetry is reflective of his background and the peculiar circumstances he finds himself in. A Bene-Israeli Jew by birth, he does not identify himself with all the cultural aspects that are ascribed the term Indian. He also feels alienated with the physical environment around him in the sense that he has hardly anything positive to say about it and describes his environment in unappealing terms. Still his conscious identification with the environment of the country and the city of Bombay he was born in resonates throughout his poetry. He reiterates again and again in his poetry that he has nowhere else to go and cannot leave the place of his birth. He accepts it as his own place. As such, alienation in his poetry accompanies with a feeling of belongingness.

Keywords: Alienation, reconciliation, Indian poetry in English, environment, identification.

INTRODUCTION

Though Indian poetry in English existed before independence, it was only after 1947 that it became acutely concerned with the social, economic and contemporary reality of India. Bruce King in *Modern Indian Poetry in English* (1987) comments:

Unlike the creative writing of Africa and the Caribbean modern Indian poetry in English has been neglected by most critics, foreign readers and intellectuals for it has no obvious direct relationship to cultural movements which led to National Independence. By 1947 the situation had changed and with it the concern of the new poets became their relationship to and alienation from the realities of their society. (1)

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Critics often found the use of English inadequate for expressing the multifaceted Indian reality. Indian writers writing poetry in English rose to the occasion and produced a plethora of literary masterpieces which served to Indianise English and made it a perfect vehicle for expressing the Indian situation. Kamala Das defends her use of English:

*The language I speak
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queerness
All mine, mine alone. It is half English half
Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest.
It is as human as I am human. (104)*

It was at this juncture that Nissim Ezekiel started to write. He dealt with certain aspects of Indian social behaviour in the English language, which resulted in a post-colonial cross-cultural oeuvre. Ezekiel's Bene-Israel lineage did not stop him from embracing India as his own country with all its shortcomings. Ezekiel's poetry thus remains Indian with a stark sense of alienation and reconciliation at the same time.

Michael Garman rightly puts it: "He brings to the established traditions of love, religion and the passing hour, the modern attitude of the need for a commitment, an existential plunge into life, and of old analytic disgust, becoming more ironical and detached as he develops" (106). It is not difficult to discern that "he treated life as a journey where poetry would be the chief source of discovering and organizing one's life" (Karnani, *JSAL* 14), and there is a "close connection between his life and his poetry" (Shahane, *JSAL* 254).

In the essay, "Naipaul's India and Mine", Ezekiel compares his own situation with that of V.S. Naipaul's who had a Hindu and Indian ancestry but distanced himself from India and did not identify himself with it. He on the other hand is Indian in spite of having a Jewish lineage: "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" (Ezekiel, "Naipaul's India and Mine" 25).

Ezekiel's poetry delineates the themes of identity, alienation, reconciliation and belonging. A gradual shift can be noticed in his poetry. Whereas his early poems dealt with loss and insecurity, his later poems seek to affiliate and identify with his society and culture. The apprehensions and insecurities of the poet give way to a more reassured and stable position of mind.

This alienation and subsequent reconciliation is also found in many other Indian poets writing in English. R. Parthasarathy while talking about Ezekiel, Daruwalla and Gieve Patel noted that "They write with irony and humour about the experience of living in India today. Their stance is critical as they explore and celebrate after the torturous labyrinths of solitude and disillusion, the sense of finally coming home, of coming to terms with India" (51).

It's true that Ezekiel has a Jewish background, a long tradition of his own ethnic culture but



still he identifies completely with India and feels that there cannot be any better choice for him. He is inseparable from India since it is his environment as he says, "India is simply my environment. A man can do something for and in his environment by being fully what he is, by not withdrawing from it. I have not withdrawn from India" ("Naipaul's India and Mine" *New Writing in India* 25).

Ezekiel identifies with India and Bombay in spite of his Bene-Israel Jewish ancestry. In 'The Egoist's Prayers,' for example, he says:

*Confiscate my passport, Lord
I don't want to go abroad.
Let me find my song
where I belong. (Collected Poems 213)*

Ezekiel's environment forces him to adjust with a cultural milieu which is starkly different from his own tradition. Ezekiel depicts the cosmopolitan city of Bombay as a metaphor to represent his alienation and differences.

In this process he has made good use of the Indian English. Chetan Karnani says, "Like these commonwealth poets 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" (*Nissim Ezekiel* 96).

However, Ezekiel is not completely identical with his contemporary Indian English poets in terms of his poetic sensibility. He does not revel in India's glorious past or its exoticism or mysticism. He belongs to India because it is his own by fate, by circumstances and by birth. In this sense, he is not interested in presenting to the West an image of India which they would like to see with their bias of orientalism but what he himself really feels. So he portrays an India which he can connect with.

His poetry is imbued with a sense of being a permanent expatriate in the Indian milieu and at the same time with his choice to remain here. This peculiar situation produces a tension between his awareness of his background and his poetic persona. His racial history and his urge to belong to India come into sharp contrast with each other, determining the contours of his poetic voice. He feels alienated from the Indian scene and looks down upon it. However, this feeling of alienation is tinged with the feeling to belong to it, with all its imperfections.

Sometimes it may seem that Ezekiel is imbued with the Indian cultural tradition and practices, however, he would like to remind us that, "I've never been a refugee/except of the spirit" (*Collected Poems* 209).

The tension between his inner self of being an expatriate and his Indian situation gives birth to his poetry. One may misconstrue his apparent criticism of the Indian social and cultural environment as sheer antagonism. But Ezekiel considers this critical attitude necessary for a search for belongingness. In an interview he emphasizes that a critical stance with a feeling of



alienation is quite desirable and productive for a poet like him:

Actually, I would like to see some alienation among Indo-English writers. However, undesirable from moral, social and other points of view, it has been aesthetically very productive provided it is genuine, you can't pretend, you can't play the game of alienation. If you are genuinely alienated [...] and feel you are hostile towards others and they are hostile to you, you hate their guts and they hate yours: this can produce great literature. (qtd. in Shahane JSAL 261).

M.K. Naik expounds on alienation in Ezekiel in these words:

The alienation theme is central to Ezekiel's work and colours his entire poetic universe. This explains his early fascination for Rilke, though he learnt his poetic craft from Eliot and Auden, who he frequently echoes in his early verse. ("Nissim Ezekiel and Alienation" 194)

Ezekiel's alienation from his social environment in which he grew up is described in his poem "Background Casually". The fact that he could not connect with others around him from different cultural backgrounds pervades his whole poetry. M. K. Naik rightly observes that "All issues/controversies have their roots here" (*A History of Indian English Literature* 36).

"Background Casually" was written for a Commonwealth Arts Festival to explain his return to India. In this poem Ezekiel remembers a bitter past about which he cannot be proud and so he can only describe it casually.

This poem has a circular structure in the sense that it starts when Ezekiel studies in a Roman Catholic school in the city of Bombay and finally comes to an end in the third section when Ezekiel returns home, his "backward place", after having spent four years in London. All the while he experiences various bitter incidents.

At school, students from other religions are intolerant with him since they are communalised and consider him different from themselves:

*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. (Collected Poems 179)*

His Christian, Hindu and Muslim schoolmates persecute him in every possible way. They humiliate him and make his life unbearable in the school. The poet tries to find sustenance in his ancestral Jewish faith while trying to understand Yoga and Zen of Indian culture. However, living in an unappealing culture finds voice when he says, "The more I searched the less I found" (179). The bullying on the basis of communal differences which he faces at school is compounded by the fact that he can neither fly a kite nor spin a top, which other children of his age are supposed to do. Ultimately, his patience gives way when he tells us that: "One noisy day I used a knife" (Collected Poems 179)

In spite of all such bitter memories, Ezekiel decides to stay in the place of his birth. Even though the Indian landscape sears his eyes, he makes his commitment to stay where he is:

*I have made my commitments now.
This is one to stay where I am. (Collected Poems 181)*

These lines reveal his compromise, his coming to terms with the place of his origin. He further asserts:

*As others choose to give themselves,
In some remote and backward place.
My backward place is where I am. (Collected Poems 181)*

Ezekiel's decision to stay in India does not seem to be a choice based on the consideration of a necessity to merge with its culture and civilization but a matter of destiny. He has nowhere else to go and has to return home, the place of his birth. This fatalistic compromise pervades his poetry along with the sharp sense of alienation. So there is no merger or complete identification with the environment but an ironically detached point of view from which he perceives the environment around him.

Ezekiel is aware of this impression of tension and conflict his poetry creates and explains his stand in his essay "Naipaul's India and Mine":

*Not being Hindu, I cannot identify myself with
India's
past as a comprehensive heritage or reject it as
if it were mine to reject. I can identify myself
only with modern India, a place with more
things in it than are dreamt of in Mr. Naipaul's
philosophy. I am neither proud nor ashamed of
being an Indian. I am neither proud nor
ashamed of being Westernized. History is behind
me. Contempt for background impresses me as*



*little as pride in background. Both are
distorting, tormented self regarding resolutions
of cultural conflict – create new, tormenting
problems. (204)*

This stance is also reflected in “Edinburgh Interlude” (1983) where Ezekiel declares:

*I have become
part of the scene
which I can neither love nor hate. (Collected Poems 289)*

Since the poet feels that he has no other place to go, he identifies himself with the Indian scene even though he remains detached from it at the same time. In “Island” he reiterates:

*I cannot leave the island,
I was born here and belong. (Collected Poems 182)*

Ezekiel's alienation in this sense harmonizes with the Indian society and he does not remain indifferent to it, even though he describes it with irony and not with sentimentalism.

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