



A STUDY IN THE POETRY OF NISSIM EZEKIEL

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ABSTRACT

The concrete and the abstract stand side by side in it. A proper union of both of them is essential for its completeness. "Speech and Silence" brings the inner and the outer worlds face to face. In the inner world no word is required, silence is more vocal there and it is a kind of 'whisper of eternity'. In the poem "The Recluse" love serves as the golden mean. Life is troubled. It has moments of peace but this peace is always threatened by troubles. In the poem "prayer" the poet passes through a state of confusion. Although he knows that prayer is good he is confused about the true nature of prayer. Sometimes it appears to be nothingness and at other moments it seems to be everything except nothingness. Ezekiel believes that the subconscious is as important as the conscious. A proper balance of the two is essential for the healthy existence of man. If one neglects his subconscious for long, it becomes dormant and of no use to him. In the poem "Sub-conscious" the poet turns to his subconscious for help after a great lapse of time. He finds a very discouraging reply. Life is a strange combination of freedom and bondage. Man appears to be free but everywhere he is in chains. Even when there is nobody to oppress him from outside, he is oppressed by his own self. Ezekiel has been called a poet of the city but his poems contain equally powerful pictures of the country life. He regards the urban civilization as oppressive and harmful for the human sensibilities. He is the poet of the city of Bombay but he never romanticizes the crowded urban scene which impairs the human feelings. The physical and the spiritual aspects combine to make man's life perfect. Ezekiel acknowledges the value of spirituality in life. The spark of love comes from above and enlightens man's soul.

KeyWords: Nissim Ezekiel, Indian English Poetry, Confessional Themes, Religion, Cultural Ethos.

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INTRODUCTION

Nissim Ezekiel (Dec. 16, 1924 - Jan. 09, 2004), the most prominent poet of the experimental phase of Indian English poetry, needs no introduction. He occupies a coveted place among the Indian English poets. His volumes of poems – A Time to Change (1952), Sixty Poems (1953), The Third (1958), The Unfinished Man (1960), The Exact Name (1965) and Humans in Darkness (1976) have established him as a poet of immortal fame. Nissim Ezekiel and A.K. Ramanujan, both are 'academic' in their quietly explorative, speculative and meditative, approach yet in both there is a wholly undogmatic religious strain, Ezekiel's Judaic, Ramanujan's Hindu.

Quest for identity is a major pre-occupation with Nissim Ezekiel. His quest is like a cyclic journey starting from within and returning there once again. He moves from his inner self to the outer realities and, finding no complete contentment there, goes back to his own self. In his poetry he is busy with resolving his inner discord. He makes his best efforts to come to terms with himself. He is pulled by the existential enigma on the one hand and by the poetic on the other. He appears as an outsider whose primary aim is to become an insider. "Very Indian poems in Indian English" deal with the Indian way of life and the Indian way of using language. "Guru" presents a saint who is a 'faithless friend'. He is proud and obstinate. He is so haughty that he does not recognize the favours done to him. Self-knowledge is an elusive thing in life, it is as mysterious as death. In the poem "Foresight" the poet regards death as no tragic phenomenon and self-knowledge as extremely elusive. In the poem "Speech and Silence" the poet describes speech as a measure asserting one's identity and silence as simplicity. He loves the world and life whole-heartedly. He does not want to be silent in the solitude of life. In the poem "Day" He says that he is young and he feels the freshness of the morning of creation. Ezekiel expresses his sense of confusion in several of his poems. In the poem "Second Theme and Variations" he says that he is puzzled by man. What he wants to convey is that the search for identity is a puzzling affair. In the poem "The Problem" the poet is seen making hard efforts to overcome the dumbness of the night. He wishes to be creative at all costs. In "Division" he underlines the truth that a proper union of 'heart' and 'intellect,' is capable of penetrating every reality of the world. In "Declaration" he appears having a strong wish to be absorbed in the crowd. He cannot lead a life with a void in his mind. In "Two Adolescents" he expresses the opinion that introspection is a difficult process. To remain in utopia is no miracle. When it comes to finding out the inner realities, only a few stand the test. He is aware of the true nature of prayer. To pray is good but one has to know the true nature of prayer. One must have faith. Indifference is not to be welcomed. Love of life is the essence of prayer. In "midmonsoon Madness" the poet listens to his own madness. He appears to be dissatisfied with the present scheme of things and wants to rearrange it according to his wish. Ezekiel's realism compels him to visualize reality at all costs. In the morning he sees the truth in the face of everything. This morning is nothing but the

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illuminated state of mind. In “Sonnet” he says that reality cannot be concealed by words. In the poem “Letter from Rangoon” he declares that he belongs to the East. He relishes the smell of the Buddhist city and feels the presence of God in the sound of the song and the temple bells. In the poem “Case Study” he boldly declares that his aim is to break the old patterns and establish his identity as a hero. Ezekiel appears as a true Indian in his famous poem “Night of the Scorpion”. A situation has been exploited to throw light on the various ways of thought prevailing in India. In “In India” He describes some Indian situations which are not pleasant in the full sense. He observes India in a detached way which often betrays his disgust for these situations. Simplicity is the integral part of his identity. It is above praise or blame. He wishes to be simple and the true mirror of life. He sees people, gods and ghosts without ceasing to be simple. He is the poet of light which is opposed to all darkness. He loves the word which conveys the truth. He aims at recognizing and resolving the existential as well as the poetic enigma. Ezekiel finds himself an actor in the drama of life. He wants to know life which never wants to be known. He is always in search of his ‘relevance’. He observes and analyses the facts of life. Art sometimes entrances his reason but he never ceases to be human. Ezekiel’s poetry is a kind of journey into the heart of man’s existence. He explores the existential as well as the poetic dimensions of life. His quest metamorphoses his life into a continuous flow of creativity. In “Happening” he laments the loss of innocence in man’s life. The language of man has lost the simplicity of dreams. He prefers fire to ashes. He wants to draw the best from life and to make the best use of that best. The joys of life have to be relished ‘while the sun shines’. In the poem “Tribute to the Upanishads he is busy with the quest for his self according to the teachings of the Upanishads. He is in search of the vision which can enable him to penetrate into the mystery of the world.

In “Hymns in Darkness” Ezekiel appears at the height of maturity. He describes the miserable state of the modern man who is tormented between the inner and the outer noise. Life appears to be a spontaneous flow to the poet. It appears as if he is floating on the surface of a river flowing towards the destined goal. He is reduced to a mere spectator of the drama of life. Ezekiel never runs after the remote things. He listens to the echoes of his poetry from the things which are familiar and near. He tries to establish his identity in his own setting. Every cup of tea is meaningful for him. Ezekiel rises to the level of a poet of cosmopolitan status. He begins with his personal concerns and reaches the universal ones crossing the ethnic , racial and geographical barriers. The poet feels as if the prophet within him inspires him to find out the place which is like his home. This place is nothing but his own true self or his true identity. Although he is afraid of death he is ready to face any challenge to reach the place. The poet’s quest for identity is an unending process. It is a kind of cyclic motion which goes on forever. It is a spontaneous process with little effort on the part of the poet. He starts from within and moves to the outer world. Finding no finality outside he turns to his inner world again. Thus, Ezekiel, is an untiring explorer of truth and here in lies his identity.



Ezekiel is a great philosopher and a poet with religious concerns. Even as a philosopher is approach is realistic. He recognizes the inadequacy of philosophy and science to explain all the mysteries. Poetry employs neither the language of philosophy nor that of science but the language of the senses. The philosophic tone is set very early in his poetry and it develops and flourishes through all his volumes till it becomes almost religious in the final one. The love of life and the sense of disillusionment with it stand side by side. Although Ezekiel is an original thinker and innovator, he carries upon him the impact of the Movement poets like Philip Larkin and Donald Davie. The influence of Dylan Thomas is also visible at places. He recognizes the innocence of man and the corrupting influence of the world. Man is born innocent but everywhere he is corrupted by the world. The poem "Poetry" is highly revealing so far as his philosophy of life and theory of poetry are concerned. His philosophy and his poetry are the outcome of his incessant questionings.

The philosophical tone of Ezekiel's second volume Sixty Poems is set in the very first poem. "A Poem of Dedication". He frankly declares that his aim is not merely to present the 'surface facts' but to go deep into the life of things divine or demoniac. Ezekiel carries with him an obvious impact of Rilke, Rimbaud and W.B. yeats. He combines the impact of these three with his own perceptive mind and turns out to be a philosopher with an original approach to life. Ezekiel recognizes the imperfect nature of life. Desires are never fulfilled in it. Life is like a fragment of a poem which conveys no palpable message. Even God is unable to make a complete man. Ezekiel's philosophy is far away from being a well-constructed system of ideas. It is that of a poet. A poet is never governed by strict laws. He is a man of no laws. In "Question" he wants to know the meaning of happiness. There are several ways to achieve happiness in life but the way of 'laughing love' is the best. In "Gallantry" he appears to be fed up with the excess of realism. He wishes to have the Keatsian negative capability. Thus, Ezekiel appears to be an enlightened sceptic. He rises above the level of an Indian Jew and becomes a seeker of truth at all costs. The poems of his volumes, The Exact Name are replete with philosophy. The very first poem "Philosophy" sets the tone. Although the poem appears to be about some philosophical concept, the fact is that it is about the nobility of poetry. Another poem "Poetry Reading" is about the poet and his task. The poet has a halo around his face. Images come out of his mouth and fall upon the floor like silver coins. In "After Reading a Prediction" he describes his ambition. This ambition is to be the healer. He does not want to be sick or indifferent. In "Theological" he prays to God to make him perfect. He is tired of being wrong. He is in search of the ultimate truth. Life is very confusing for him. Only God can remove the veil and make him see the ultimate reality. The ultimate truth is one but man's journey is eternal. He has to remember his past and move on to the future. Man has to learn the art of improving himself. Love is an integral part of his philosophy. It makes man's life a pleasant phase of existence. A brief life full of love is preferable to a long one without it. A person becomes aged only when he loses the power to love. "Healers" is another poem with philosophic core. The poet speaks of God's love and the ultimate aim of



man's life. The earthly things are of no great significance. Ezekiel's "Latter-Day Psalms" are reminiscent of the Biblical Psalms. It appears as if the Biblical Psalms have been presented in the contemporary context with a touch of striking realism. So far as the purpose of his own life is concerned, Ezekiel says that it is to heal himself and others. He has to attain the sacred wisdom and to know the ultimate reality of death. He is interested in the familiar and the near. He has to create poetry which is related to life and the sufferings of man.

Ezekiel is a great student of the human psychology. The exploration of the labyrinths of the human mind is a complex process in itself. Psychologists have studied it with reference to the conscious and the unconscious as well as id, ego and super-ego. He prefers the ugliest psychological realities to the most fascinating romantic flights. The inner reality is more important for him as it governs the human behavior from behind. Man is basically an animal who is the victim of selfishness and lust. The gratification of senses is his most desired aim. There is a devil inside man that cannot be overlooked. The Romantics underline the divinity of man and shirk from the presentation of his devilish inside. A realist takes a complete view of man's inner world and leaves nothing outside his view. Ezekiel's frankness and boldness in presenting the inner realities is unique and wonderful. As a love poet he stands out due to his psychological realism. He deals with marriage in a matter-of-fact way. It is a human institution which has its own ugly side. The romantic view of it is not appropriate as it is not a romantic thing. In the early phase of their married life the lovers regard themselves blessed and inseparable. But this blessed state is soon followed by that of differences. Ezekiel has earned a reputation as a poet of nakedness. In the broad sense he is the poet of naked realities. He holds the view that the erotic feelings are very powerful and no one is free from their overpowering influence. Nakedness is no ugly phenomenon. It has its own strange fascination. He prefers the naked soul and the naked body to those covered with false masks. Ezekiel fully realized that love is of various kinds ranging from the physical to the spiritual. It is not always genuine. It hides a lot of deception within itself in several cases. "The Couple" presents a man and a woman who are 'mutual deceivers' in love. "Virginal" presents a spinster who is outwardly complacent and seems reconciled to her condition but hides within herself the unconscious desire for marriage and motherhood. Ezekiel's poetic themes are varied and he examines all of them with the scientific eye of a psychologist and the poetic vision of a poet. So far as love is concerned he studied the pleasant and the unpleasant aspects of the married life as well as those of the extra-marital relations. His psychological interest in his themes endows his poetry with a special kind of therapeutic value. The poem "In India" exposes certain hypocritical Indian attitudes. The Indian women are prudish and men feel at home with foreign women. In the fourth section of the poem the reader is introduced to an English boss and his Indian assistant. Their lucid talk of art and literature gives way to the sexual act. Ezekiel explores the inside of a pedant's mind in the poem. "On Meeting a Pedant". He says that bookish knowledge makes the pedant's mind insensitive to the beauty of life. His mind is always stuffed with second hand information. Ezekiel's greatness as a



realist lies in his complete objectivity. He conceals himself and lets the things happen. He perceives them through his senses and records them in his poetry. This sharpness and objectivity is more clearly seen in his perception of psychological realities. In the poem “Enterprise” he describes the journey of life with the metaphor of a pilgrimage. The early enthusiasm of life is soon replaced by differences and troubles which leave man broken and bent. “The Great” deals with the greatness of the so-called great people. Outwardly great, they are full of paradoxes. They are egoistic and sensual. They are favoured by God but they play host to the devil. In “Advice” to a Painter he says that change is the way of the world. This change should appear in man’s thinking. This change makes progress possible. One should not be satisfied with the things as they are. Only progressive thinking ensures bright prospects. A person who is blind to the psychological realities is worse than a worm. He is incapable of being ‘himself’.

The poet came across a worm on a rainy day and found that it was full of vitality and endurance. The worm enjoyed a kind of freedom denied to man. In “Minority Poem” the poet converses with the ‘invisible guest’. In fact, he grapples with his own thoughts. Although he reaches no conclusion he continues to converse. In fact, conclusions are not so valuable as the continuity of thought. This continuity is essential for his existence as a poet. However, he is aware of the fact that excess of realism is sometimes harmful. On such occasions he reminds the reader of Keats’ concept of ‘negative capability’. He is never lured by mysticism. The fact remains that sometimes he wishes to do away with his sanity and to be a little romantic. Ezekiel is realistic and humanistic even in his prayers. He is not a blind worshipper of God. He worships the God who is benevolent towards the poor and the needy. Even in “Blessings” Ezekiel does not cease to be a realist. In section IV of the poem he advises, or rather blesses the reader to find happiness in his normal way of life. Ezekiel’s poetry presents realistic picture of life but it is not correct to say that it is overloaded with realism.

The clash of opposites creates in him a creative tension which results in fine poetry. In this respect he reminds the reader of the poets of the Victorian compromise. In Ezekiel’s case this clash is multidimensional. The most important clash is that of his Jewish origin and the Indian setting. The poet is in no mood to wish his roots away. At the same time the Indian setting is also indispensable for him. India is his home. In India he feels as if he were in heaven. At the same time he finds himself in hell in his indispensable setting. At a broader level he is caught between the existential dilemma and the poetic one. Life is a kind of pilgrimage for him which ends in futility. On the one hand it is a noble journey and on the other it suffers from aimlessness. For Ezekiel life is full of paradoxes.



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