



## AN AROMA OF INDIANNESS AND ORDINARY EVENTS IN THE POETRY OF NISSIM EZEKIEL

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### ABSTRACT

*After independence, a new period in Indo-English literature began. This period is characterised by what is known as contemporary Indian poetry in English or Modern Indo-Anglican poetry. Nissim Ezekiel is one of the renowned Indo-Anglican poets who stands next to Sir Aurobindo in the post-independence era and has a notable place in Indian English writings. He is a well-known poet, playwright, actor, editor, critic, journalist, and teacher all rolled into one. He was awarded a Sahitya Academy Award in 1983 and Padma Shri Award five years later in 1988 for his spectacular contribution in the field of Indian English poetry. Despite being from a Jewish background, Nissim Ezekiel is an Indian poet who writes in English. He has committed himself to Indian values, culture, people and language and Indianness has always been in his blood and writings. The usage of Indian idioms is a significant component of Indianness in Indian poetry. Indianness is a challenging task to define due to the diversity of Indian culture and languages. The Indian contemporary scene, modern urban life, Indian sensibility, human relationship, love and sex and search for identity are the major themes of his poetry. According to Adil Jussawalla, "Nissim Ezekiel is the first Indian poet consistently to show Indian readers that craftsmanship is as important to a poem as its subject matter." Nissim Ezekiel has experimented endlessly with form and content of his poetry. He has expertise in flawless craftsmanship which makes his poetry unique. The present paper concentrates on the selected poems of Nissim Ezekiel such as Background, Casually, Very Indian Poem in Indian English, Goodbye Party For Miss Pushpa T. S. and Night of the Scorpion to explore an aroma of Indianness and ordinary events in his poems.*

**Key Words:** Indianness, Indian sensibility, ordinary, culture, human relationship.

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## INTRODUCTION

Nissim Ezekiel is an extremely Indian poet writing in English and his Indianness is reflected throughout the most of his poems. It is crucial to understand what Ezekiel believes of his Indianness, before understanding the phenomenal themes mirrored in his poetry. Ezekiel explains that how deeply he rooted in India. He writes, "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". Although he faced humility to consider him as an outsider, his autobiographical poem *Background, Casually*, confirms his Indianness. The poem manifests in a very clear term his love and commitment for Indian soil where he "learned to laugh again at home."

However, Ezekiel is a uniquely Indian poet, though, not just because accurately captures the Indian culture, way of life, aspirations, and hopes, but also because he highlights the various mistakes which Indian commits in their use of English, emphasizing both the positive and ironic aspects of Indian way of speaking and writing English. Ezekiel has been consciously Indian in his sensibility as there is no such glorification of the Indian culture but he has made the good use of "Babu English" and Indian English. In his poem *Very Indian Poem in Indian English* he exploits the national traits of using the present continuous tense instead of simple present. Though he becomes the voice of Mahatma Gandhi's nonviolence, peace, and love, but he depicts it in Indian English. He says:

*"I am standing for peace and non-violence.  
Why world is fighting fighting  
Why all people of world  
Are not following Mahatma Gandhi,  
I am simply not understanding."*

He creates a genuine flavour of India which explores the fact of peace and non-violence.

His poetry makes clear reference to the passion and fascination that the most of Indians have with speaking English flawlessly. In his poems, he explores the connection between language and cultural identity. In order to illustrate the Indian mentality, Nissim Ezekiel uses irony on a variety of levels throughout the poem. The poet has already focused on the Indian use of "Babu English," i. e. the use of mistakes as "100%" correct, even "200%" correct but there is an exact replication of tone, idiom, and voice, as well as the use of colloquialism and expressions that are typically Indian that create humour as well as further stress the Indian flavour. Such as:



*“Other day I’m reading in newspaper  
(Every day I’m reading Times of India  
To improve my English language)  
How one goonda fellow  
Throw stone at Indirabehn.”*

He also discusses the normal Indian attitude toward drinking, which highlights the country’s prohibition on the practice of alcohol which leads the speaker to prefer a glass of “lassi” than a glass of wine.

*“You want one glass lassi?  
Very good for digestion.  
With little salt lovely drink,  
Better than wine.”*

Nissim Ezekiel successfully captures the typical Indian tendency of using “Babu English”. His poem, *Goodbye Party For Miss Pushpa T. S.*, gently satirizes Indian craze to go abroad and parodies the Indian habit of using unnecessary words. It is a unique Indian poem in its atmosphere relevant to such a fare-well parties arranged in India to wish the departing traveler. The poem presents a group of Indian men and ladies who gathered to wish Miss Pushpa a bon voyage because she is departing for foreign to improve her prospects.

*“Friends,  
our dear sister  
is departing for foreign  
in two three days,  
and  
we are meeting today  
to wish her bon voyage.”*

Chetan Karnani rightly says, “No other poet has successfully exploited the nuances of Indian English as Ezekiel has done.” The poem is typical social satire in which the poet has revealed ironically the affectations and hypocrisy as well as a wrong use of English Indian fashionable young men and ladies. Miss Pushpa is a very popular lady with “men also and ladies also” and everyone one knows that that-

*“Miss Pushpa is smiling and smiling  
even for no reason but simply because  
she is feeling.”*



The poet prominently uses the linguistic oddities to create wit and humour. The sentence structure and syntactical peculiarities reveal thought process of the Indians.

*“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  
of my uncle's very old friend-  
his wife was cooking nicely...  
that was long time ago.”*

He is fundamentally an Indian poet in the sense that his imagery is drawn from the common Indian situations, scenes and sights and Indian birds and animals inhabits the world of his poetry. So far as the Indian sensibility is concerned, Nissim Ezekiel's sharp realism stands out in comparison to Sarojini Naidu's poems.

*Night of the Scorpion*, a famous poem by Nissim Ezekiel, is a great illustration of Indian sensibility. It depicts, the telling details and conflicting incidents, situations that are typically ordinary and common. R. Parthasarthy rightly says, “*Night of the Scorpion* evokes superstitious practices we haven't still outgrown. It enacts an impressive ritual in which the mother's reaction, towards the end, to her own sufferings ironically cancels out earlier responses, both primitive and sophisticated. The relationship between the domestic tragedy and the surrounding community is unobtrusively established. The poem also demonstrates the effective use of parallelism.” The poet recalls the traumatic night in his mother's life when she was stung by a scorpion. He integrates domestic tragedy with concern of the neighboring community, as they believe in the efficacy of prayer which is surely to paralyze the harm caused by the diabolic tail-

*“Parting with his poison - flash  
of diabolic tail in the dark room ...  
The peasants came like swarms of flies  
and buzzed the name of God a hundred times  
to paralyse the Evil One.”*



The poet draws a comparison between their superstitious, customs and the scientific, rationalist, and sceptic techniques put into practice by the husband, who uses powder, herbs, hybrids, and even a little paraffin on the little toe.

*“My father, sceptic, rationalist,  
trying every curse and blessing,  
powder, mixture, herb and hybrid.  
He even poured a little paraffin  
upon the bitten toe and put a match to it.  
I watched the flame feeding on my mother.  
I watched the holy man perform his rites to tame the poison with an  
incantation.”*

Last but not least, a mother’s loving response throbs with motherly love and is warmer than other human relations- both primitive and sophisticated.

*“My mother only said  
Thank God the scorpion picked on me  
And spared my children.”*

The concluding lines are exquisite and really depict a typical Indian mother. Despite the fact that Nissim Ezekiel’s poems are straight, introspective, and analytical, the final remark clearly shows Indianness in a sentimental way by bringing forth the true taste of India.

Nissim Ezekiel’s poems impart an aroma of Indianness and the poems dealing with typical day-to-day situations are not exclusive. They are interrelated or there is a shift in the stress on either of the themes. The ordinariness of the most of the events emphatically reflect warmth of human relations that are Indian in sense and spirit. The poems on Indian senses highlight the significance of ordinary and common events. Ezekiel is a master craftsman. He possesses a sharp sense of humour. He did this to criticize life’s oddities and follies. Thus, Ezekiel is a versatile poet who has prepared grand path for the new poets. He has made a valuable contribution to Indo- Anglican poetry.

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