



INDIANNES IN THE POETRY OF NISSIM EZEKIEL

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INTRODUCTION

Nissim Ezekiel is one of the greatest poets of Indo-Anglian literature which grew during the last century. Some of the writers, who could with felicity use English as a medium of expression in their creative writings, created a kind of awareness about the Indian social problems. Indo-Anglian literature contributed its share in the Indian consciousness. The term Indian consciousness means the awareness that India historically has her cultural identity. By Indianness, we mean a subject that suits the Indian sensibility and most part of the Indo-Anglian literature is concerned with one or the other aspect of Indian-sensibility. The works of Nissim Ezekiel are not an exception to it. His works bring a typical incense of Indian tradition, culture and day-to-day life.

“Indianness” is a term which in itself is quite controversial. It is the sum total of the cultural patterns of India and the deep-seated ideas and ideals whether political, personal, economic or spiritual. These ideas not only affect the Indian mind but the same are also prevalent in the various social relationships like man-woman, man-god etc. These ideals and ideologies play their respective role in all types of social scenarios. Nonetheless, one can say that a deep study of verses of Ezekiel provides its readers a true picture of and an insight in the Indian society and its various aspects.

Ezekiel’s poetry seems to be a comment on the Indian social scenario where he tries to present “what”, “how” and “why” of the various aspects of Indian society. He not only tries to highlight the social facts and problems which Indians face because of their poverty, superstitions, squalor etc. but also expresses his deep admiration for the Indian spiritual values. But the admiration for the Indian spiritual values does not mean that he is not aware of the degradation or perversion of the social, moral and spiritual values in the Indian society. He is equally attentive to them as they lead the society to the way of spiritual hypocrisy.



As far as Ezekiel is concerned, the concept of “Indianness” is quite controversial because of his foreign origin. He has accepted the fact in his poetry that being a “natural foreigner”, he himself felt alienated from the Hindu culture but his desire “to turn the situation” to the positive made him committed and dedicated to Indian society and culture. That’s why, in “Background, Casually” he says:

I have made my commitments now.

This is one: to stay where I am,

As others choose to give themselves

In some remote and backward place.

My backward place is where I am.¹

Ezekiel’s India can be highly individual; at times it can also be subjective to the point of being quirky. However, his own gift for telling detail and reference emerges from his outstanding understanding of the society. What is the most amusing fact of his observation is that his observation does not involve the rejection of the aspects of Indian society and life. He sometimes adopts critical language for India. He criticizes her because he loves her. He is ironic not only about India, but of himself too. He states his position honestly and without being rhetoric,

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.²

Ezekiel’s poem “Entertainment” is one of the best examples of the perfection in his art of observation of the Indian society. He seems to be the master in penetrating the selfish aspect of the gathered crowd which gets dispersed by the time of its “anticipated payment” to the street show, they have recently enjoyed. On the other hand, he penetrates the hardships of the life of the performers, who do not have even a single line on their faces but ironically, the monkey is sad for its performance has remained unpaid:

Anticipating time for payment,

the crowd dissolves.

Some, in shame, part



With the smallest coin they have.

The show moves on.³

The poem “The Truth about the Floods” is a satirical comment on the inefficiency of our administrative system, where Ezekiel himself becomes the persona of the whole episode. The following lines highlight the irony of the situation, where the “Rakshak” (saviour) himself has turned into a “Bhakshak” (destroyer):

but the villagers would not tell me anything
until I convinced them I wasn't a government official.⁴

Then, there are poems like “The Visitor”, which is a comment on the orthodoxy and blind faith where the calls of a crow are thought to be the sign of the arrival of some guests. The poem seems to be the disease (i.e. the disease of corruption) and the cure of the disease in itself. Ezekiel is successful in depicting meaninglessness of such beliefs.

Another poem of Ezekiel, “How the English Lesson Ended” is the example of such poems in which he has raised some social issues. In the poem, Ezekiel shows the condition of female child in Muslim families, where at the school going and playing stage, they are subjected to get married and become housewives. “Child-marriage” which is one of the oldest Indian social traditions and issues, Ezekiel seems to highlight in this poem.

Even the language of Ezekiel's poems contains a large amount of “Indian” English. The colloquial language and the frequent use of present tense features the use of “Indian English” by the native Indians. The two are the very prominent features of Indianness in Ezekiel's poetry. His poems like “Very Indian Poems in Indian English”, “The Patriot”, “The Professor” and many other such poems work as a subtle comment on English and the way it is used for communication in Indian society. Chetan Karnani says, “No other poet has successfully exploited the nuances of Indian English as Ezekiel has done.”⁵ He is successful in depicting the typically “Indian thinking” in “Indian English”. For example, his poem “Good Bye Party to Miss Pushpa T.S” is composed in the form of a farewell speech by an “Indian” orator to Miss Pushpa. She “is departing for foreign”. The Indian tendency to use the present continuous tense instead of simple present and the word to word translation of Hindi phrases are mocked at:

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.⁶

His poem "The Patriot", in which Ezekiel expresses his deep concern for the contemporary problems that India faces and again the use of "Indian English" shows Ezekiel's grip on the working of the Indian mind:

Pakistan behaving like this,
China behaving like that,
It is making me very sad, I am telling you.⁷

And the use of typically Hindi words like "Rama Rajya", "Lassi", "Aashram", "Guru", "Chapati", "Paan" further add the Indian flavour to the English language.

Ezekiel's deep admiration for Indian spiritual values and also his concern for the perversion of such values and spiritual degradation are highlighted in some of his poems. In his poem "Song of Desolation", he seems to accept the Hindu theology which says "Sansar sab mithya" while confessing that materialism is next to nothing. It can't get you "peace" and "comfort" of mind. If there is anything that can comfort our minds, it is religion:

Come, religion, comfort me,
You lifeless moralists prescribe your laws,
And make me see
My secret flaws.⁸

His poems like "Tribute to Upanishdas", "Hymns in Darkness", "Counsel", "Process", "Theological" etc. are the proof of Ezekiel's knowledge regarding Hindu scriptures like



“Gita”, “Upanishads” and “Vedas”. Many a time, while going through the poems one feels as if Ezekiel is translating the preaching of Lord Krishna.

If there are some poems which reflect his identification with India and his religious thinking, he has also composed some poems which lead to the picturisation of the perversion of such values and ideals.

In “Morning Prayer” he says:

God grant me certainty
In kinship with the sky,
Air, earth, fire, sea
And the flesh inward eye.⁹

In the poem ‘Guru’ while commenting on the present day’s religious contractors, he asks:

If saints are like this,
What hope is there then for us.¹⁰

In “Egoist Prayers”, the poet shows how in the present scenario, the prayers have been reduced to the level of a mere profitable deal:

Do not choose me, O Lord,
to carry out thy purposes.
I am quite worthy, of course,
But I have my own purposes,
You have plenty of volunteers
to choose from, Lord.
Why pick on me, the selfish one?¹¹

Therefore, Nissim Ezekiel is a poet having the Indian poetry, both in form and content. We can tally our inference with the remarks of P.P. Mehta:

As a poet, he is aware of his cultural milieu, and native problems. His sharp sensibility enables him to grapple with the situation around him; without nostalgically recalling his stay in England or drawing of a foreign land. He gives careful thought to his ideas, medium of expression and



form of works and phrases; and does not attempt to depict what is gaudy and inane and mere adolescent. In him the reflective and philosophical strain are predominant.¹²

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