



Indian Sensibility and milieu: A Relook at Nissim Ezekiel's later poetry

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Abstract- Nissim Ezekiel, an Indian English poet, is preoccupied with his alien background. Ezekiel has been considered the poet whose poetic works are chiefly concerned with 'alienation'. But despite his Jewish consciousness, Ezekiel is always earnest of and passionate about his involvement with and commitment to Indian sensibility. He is drawn to Indian social fabric to the extent of confessing 'My backward place is where I am'. The theme of 'alienation' recurs in his poems. But one cannot limit him to the tag as a poet with alien leanings. Ezekiel's primary concern is with man and his mind. Ezekiel's poems truly reveal Ezekiel's essential persona always in search of life with its varied aspects, in harmony with his heart and mind. Ezekiel's later poetry marks his growing consciousness of an identity that goes beyond his genetic root. Indian sensibility and milieu find a true expression in his later poetry. The paper in question attempts to trace the manner and ways how Ezekiel's body of poetry of the later stage of his poetic career gradually upholds Indian ethos and values.

Keywords: sensibility, milieu, root, belonging, alienation, consciousness, identification.

I. INTRODUCTION

Nissim Ezekiel(1924-2004) is a leading Indian English language poet. He laid the foundation of the modernist tradition of English poetry in India. He caught the imagination of the psyche of a modernist poet. His poetry is always the poetry of an Indian individual who is aware of contemporary Indian sensibility and phenomena. He is one of those leading figures who have transformed Indian English poetry of romanticism and mysticism, devoid of the smell of soil and blind to human struggle into that of contemporaneity and self-criticism guided by discipline and experimentation.

A Jew in an Indian setting, Ezekiel's persona feels at times alienated. An alien consciousness often determines the shape of his mind. A minority in religious perspectives, Ezekiel finds himself pitted against an odd social setting that comprises of other religious majorities. So an 'alien instinct', not surprisingly, works in his psyche. At the same time, born and brought up in the then Bombay (now Mumbai), a native instinct also tends to grow in him. So there is every possibility of a dilemma to be at work between two identities -- of alienation and of belonging. Naturally a clash between two contrary forces sets in his persona. His later poems especially from his sixth poetic volume entitled *Hymns in Darkness* and his final volume entitled *Latter-Day Psalm* exhibit the true colour of Indian sensibility and milieu. A matured poetic persona of Ezekiel in his later poetic volumes visualizes what India is all about. Ezekiel's poetry conspicuously gives vent to his sensibility vis-à-vis Indian panorama: "The predominant feature that strikes the discerning reader of Ezekiel's poetry in his highly private sensibility operating in the context of significant social and ethical changes in post-independent India" (Kurup 5).

The poem, 'Hymns in Darkness' (1976) exhibits Ezekiel the poet in a different light. His reflective self comes out. He sometimes turns to be meditative and religious as well. The poet in Ezekiel explores and discovers newer facets of his persona. His self becomes aged, far experienced and more than matured. He sometimes seems to be inarticulate because of his meditative nature. However, his vision of life turns to be grounded on reflective percepts in the poem "Subject of Change":

"That I was on the move, foresaw
The fury of my inner law"

His reflective mood is more pronounced when he perceives evil in the quieter aspects of Nature:

"The people walk, and eat. The waves
Rise and Fall like nightmare graves
That cannot hold their dead. The sky
Is smaller than this open eye."

His reflective outlook often peeps into his being and examines its evolution. So his poetic persona has to go to his root. "Background, casually" recounts how his being has undergone its evolution:

"A poet-rascal-clown was born,
The frightened child who would not eat
Or sleep, a boy of meagre bone."

The poetic persona begins to narrate his story in the third person. He regards himself a trinity of poet, rascal and clown. In the second stanza onwards the poetic persona speaks about his personal myth in the first person. His eventful schooling finds an important place in his narration. He 'went to Roman Catholic School'. His Jewish descent brought for him the religious harassment by his schoolmates with other religious backgrounds:

"They told me I had killed the Christ,
That year I won the scripture prize,
A Muslim sportsman boxed my ears."

His alien root, in the midst of his struggle in life, often haunted him and had sowed the seed of conflict in him between his alien self and his native self since then:

"The song of my experience sung
I knew that all was yet to sing
My ancestors, among the castes,
Were aliens crushing seed for bread."

This conflict had its one source in the trend of thought undercurrent in him after his return to Indian landscape from England. His alien root was intensified when he visioned that he had to be pitted against Hindus in India, his birth place and 'home':

"Had I observed, except my own
Exasperation? All Hindus are
Like that, my father used to say."

However, India is his birth place; he has all his obligations towards his 'home-land'. It is his sense of identification with Indian soil that despite its incongruities he thinks himself 'a part of it':

"The Indian landscape sears my eyes.
I have become a part of it."

Ezekiel's identification with Indian soil comes almost full circle when he lay bare his commitments for the country:

"I have made my commitments now.
This is one: to stay where I am,
As others choose to give themselves
In some revote and backward place.
My backward place in where I am."

He makes the city, the country his 'home'. It may be a 'backward place'. But it is his oneness with the backward place that makes him sing of it: 'My backward place is where I am.' The poem, "Background, Casually" serves a testimony to Ezekiel's triumph over his alien leanings and to his oneness with Indian sensibility at last. Digish Mehta rightly points out: "This is again where the persona of the poem touches the core of the spiritual difficulty he faces. The Indian who finds himself displaced after a stay abroad has an alternative: he can return to his Indian identity" (Paniker139)

'Island' is another poem that speaks volume of Ezekiel's growing sense of identification with India, with Bombay especially, the city he was born and brought up. The poetic persona refers Bombay to

an island and then goes on to recount how despite its incongruities the 'island' catches his psyche. He tends to keep himself in tune with it:

"Unsuitable for song as well as sense
the island flowers into slums
and skyscrapers, reflecting
precisely the growth of my mind."

Two contrasting images are sketched in the poem --'slums' and 'skyscrapers' -- befitting an Indian metropolis. The island is unsuitable for 'song as well as sense'. Slums and skyscrapers are meant for the habitations for both the poor and the rich. That two contrast aspects of life are visible in the island reflects the growth of the poet's mind because the poet's growth is a sort of outcome of clash and conflict between his alien root and his native leanings. But the force of 'native' seems to edge out the 'alien' in him as his spirit speaks up:

"I am here to find my way it"

Cast in the urban background of the island, Ezekiel's persona at times cries for help as his self cannot adjust to the prevailing world of 'distorted' and 'ambiguous' ways and aspects:

"I hear distorted echoes
of my own ambiguous voice
and of dragons claiming to be human."

But the island with its bright and tempting breezes flowing across soothes his obscure genetic identity and makes the platform of native consciousness for him 'separating past from future'. Now he holds commitments for the island - for Bombay, or, for that matter, India at large:

"I cannot leave the island
I was born here and belong."

He turns to 'a good native' He feels an intimate attachment with the island. His daily activities conform to the way of life in the island. The growth of his mind thus is placed in the fitness of things, It accepts both 'calm and clamour' and approves whatever comes to its way:

"Even now a host of miracles
hurries me to daily business,
minding the ways of the island
as a good native should,
taking calm and clamour in my stride."

Once settled down, Ezekiel's persona now begins to wander along India's social landscape and observes things how they are and finds out all their vices and virtues. The oneness of his soul with the landscape around urges for his exploration into the milieu and brings out all its aspects of Heaven and Hell -- poverty, squalid, vanity, frustration, corruption, sympathy, love and so on. Ezekiel's poetic persona pens the portrait-gallery of social landscape with the ink of imagery, irony, reality and impartiality. The poem 'The Railway Clerk' offers us the view of a clerk's miserable condition:

"This year, my leave application
was twice refused.
Every day there is so much work
and I don't get overtime."

His wife urges for more money. But his 'job' cannot oblige her. While 'other clerks' can opt for a 'bribe':

"My job is such, no one is giving bribe,
while other clerks are in fortunate position,
and no promotion even because I am not graduate."

So 'bribe' plays a vital role in the society for making money. Corruption is very much handy in this regard. Still education has its own value and determines one's 'promotion' ; this is one satisfactory aspect that comes out. However, the authority is indifferent ; even the 'fan' for him is 'not repaired for two or three months'. The poetic self of Ezekiel is objective, detached but very much attached to varied aspects of life.

The poem "The truth about the Floods" exposes favouritism among the officials even in the critical hour of time. The victims of the flood-hit area have thereby no faith on any government official:

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

The government loses its reliability to the poor, flood-hit people and excites their anger:

"The boatman wouldn't ferry me across
till I told him I wasn't a government official"

'Goodbye party for Miss Pushpa T.S.' is a testimony of Ezekiel's awareness of all vanity and pretension and affectation among the so-called sophisticated and civilized society prevalent in India. As the title of the poem indicates, a farewell speech has been arranged for one Miss Pushpa T.S. who is bound for a foreign trip for the future prospects. The speaker wishes her good luck. He is untiring in his all praise for her:

"Miss Pushpa is coming
from very high family
Her father was renowned advocate
in Bulsar or Surat
I am not remembering now which place."

Ezekiel parodies the typical Indian way of speaking English. Indians use present perfect continuous tense frequently:

"Pushpa Miss is never saying no.
Whatever I or anybody is asking
she is always saying yes"

"Guru' is another poem where Ezekiel unmasks the religious hypocrisy and pretension of fake saints or 'sadhus'. They grow up and drop their follies like old clothes or creeds. Ezekiel brings to light their nature unknown to common, simple and religious minded people. Fake saints exploit the devotion and reverence and faith rendered to them by God-loving people. Ezekiel the poet has this to say in the concluding couplet:

"If saints are like this
What hope is there then for us?"

Ezekiel's persona keeps on observing with his subtle eyes the moral degradation undercurrent in human society prevailing in Indian landscape. In "Entertainment" the monkey-show exhibits the class distinction prevailing in the social surrounding:

"The circle thickens as the plot thickens,
children laugh, the untouchable women
smooth their hair, A coolie
grins at me, his white teeth
gleam in the sunlight."

The human world is blind to the world of animals. Animals are exploited and used for the mercenary purpose without any concern about their well-beings:

'Only the monkeys are sad'

People enjoy the show and gratify themselves with the entertainment; but when it comes to paying, they disperse away:

“Anticipating time for payment
the crowd dissolves.”

Ezekiel thus draws the picture of hypocrisy and pretension active in human beings in an ironical tone. Ezekiel's persona undertakes the journey through Indian social landscape and comes across its variety. The poetic persona finds violation and inhumanity during the journey through Indian socio-political landscape. 'Poem of Separation' brings to light, nevertheless love being its main theme, the occasional glimpses of terrorists' violent act and its outcome:

“When the bombs burst in Kashmir
My life had burst
and merged in yours.”

Of course, the speaker of the poem continues to make love despite the war's drastic consequences that may come down to anybody anytime. But the thing is that the war goes on, and the poetic persona senses realistically the anxiety and unquiet atmosphere prevailing around, no matter what the speaker sounds like:

“The war did not matter
Though we tried to care.”

It is difficult to know the real nature of human beings. They can hide themselves in the mask of honesty and simplicity. Ezekiel, through sheer ingenuity, exposes them to the world unmasking their cunning and pretending motifs. Ezekiel seeks his identity and finds it out to a greater degree; but he often seems to lose it when he becomes reflective. He wants to go deep into the heart of his being; otherwise, he thinks himself a failure:

“I shrink to the nothingness
within the seed.”

(Tribute to the Upanishads)

The poetic persona, in his struggle for an identity, never becomes sure of his position or of his being; he is still wavering; he is still in a dilemma; he still cannot recognise himself to the extreme. He still cannot locate himself in any complete aspect nor in any concrete state of mind. Unsure of his motif, the identity seeker in Ezekiel finds it harder to continue his unending struggle and search, and has this to say in a form of prayer:

“Kick me around
a bit more, O Lord.”
(The Egoist's Prayers)

The unsatisfied persona, tired of the long journey of life, resigns to a cessation, a rest. The persona seems to reconcile with the lot and the existing state of his being:

“Confiscate my passport, Lord
I don't want to go abroad.”

The poetic persona of Ezekiel having identified himself with the existing Indian sensibility now turns to the call to his passion for Indian rich cultural heritage. He has much reverence for the Sanskrit poets:

“They are my poetic ancestors.
Why am I so inhibited? “
(Passion Poems)

He has also gathered much knowledge of Indian myth and, thereby, got attached to its consciousness:

“Krishna's tricks
are not for him
nor Radha's wiles
for her

They have a different truth
Within a kingdom of their own.”

It is his passion that stimulates him to go through Indian past history and tradition, culture and myth. It is a marked indication for Ezekiel’s step towards his overwhelming identification with India of both its past and present sensibilities. Such occasions come when the reflective mood active in Ezekiel’s person breaks up all his assimilation with things they appear to be and they actually are. The truths he comes across and perceives at times fall heavily upon his mental spectrum. The title poem of the volume “Hymns in Darkness’ hints at the dilemma and clash, supposed to be all over, reappearing in the mindset:

“All his truths are outside him
and mock his activity.”

However, ‘The sense of reality’ the persona apprehends makes all differences and gives solutions to the puzzled mind, though on a temporal basis. The poetic self of Ezekiel continues to make a harmony and keep pace with the identity- seeker in Ezekiel. The poetic persona, through sheer poetic beauty, brings out all doubts and beliefs on seemingly a never ending path the identity seeker has undertaken.

Latter-Day Psalms, Ezekiel’s final volume published in 1982, bears testimony to Ezekiel’s continuous journey of life for an established identity taking the aid of reflective, philosophical and religious percepts and concepts. What the self of Ezekiel seeks as traced in “Hymns in Darkness’ still continues to be sought after. The social setting has much to do with Ezekiel’s search for an overwhelming identity. Ezekiel is pained to see the unplanned city where people are materialistic and tend to be unwell and ill which the fake saints or the healers take advantages of:

“The unplanned city has a death-wish:
Everybody is in the business, buying cures,
so the healers come, in droves.”

(Healers)

The fake saints or the pseudo-healers with the help of their soothing and pleasing words, they themselves do not follow, tend to move the feeble-minded people as if they will be healed and cured of ills by the so-called healers’:

“Know your mantra, meditate.
release your kundalini,”

The pretension and hypocrisy of the fake saints are exposed by the poetic persona though people concerned will continue to keep up with the tradition of having faith on such pseudo-healers. Pretension and affectation reign in every modern society. Simplicity and Honesty are no longer in the context. Ezekiel’s persona discovers that what it appears to be is not always real. In ‘Jewish Wedding in Bombay’ the make-up and the mask do the talking for the mother and the bird:

“Her mother shed a tear or two but wasn’t really
crying. It was the thing to do, as she did it,
enjoying every moment.”

The poem is flooded with irony and humour underlying in every description of Jewish rituals and ceremonies in which the poetic persona has no faith because he is ‘modern’ and his modern outlook does not conform to the traditional and ritual norms and customs.

Ezekiel’s keen observation and his sense of belonging are coupled together in “from very Indian Poems in Indian English”. He can dive deep into the soul of Indian consciousness. In the process, he displays how a devoted Indian can communicate his feelings for the country in Indian English and how he feels proud of Indian rich heritage of wisdom and culture:

“Why all people of world
Are not following Mahatma Gandhi,
I am simply not understanding
Ancient Indian Wisdom is 100% correct.”

(The Patriot)

Ezekiel's persona gradually identifies himself with Indian sensibilities. He is much conscious and aware of Indian socio-political problems internal as well as external and feels proud of the unity which is supposed to ensure the country of 'Ram Rajya' -- of prosperity and of bliss:

"I tolerate you,

One day Ram Rajya is surely coming."

All the three very Indian poems, namely 'The Patriot', 'The Professor' and 'Irani Restaurant Instructions' exhibit truly Indian manners and life style, especially of an urban setting. Bruce King maintains, "The unwillingness of 'The patriot' and 'The professor' to acknowledge reality, the way they think in readymade, comforting, slipshod ideas, slogans and phrases, might be contrasted with Ezekiel's own awareness of Indian social reality" (King102). "The Professor" reflects the mindset of an Indian fellow:

"By God's grace, all my children
Are well settled in life.
One is Sales Manager,
One is Bank Manager,
Both have cars."

Ezekiel, though not a feminist, possesses the rare knack of perceiving the psychology and attitude of an Indian wife, thanks to his observational power:

"I come home in the evening
and my wife shouts at me
Did you post that letter?
Did you make the telephone call?"
(From *Songs for Nandu Bhende*)

The quarrel in the domestic life is also beautifully handled by the artist in Ezekiel:

"Shout at me, woman!
Pull me up for this and that.
You're right and I'm wrong."

Ezekiel also possesses the knack of perceiving the psyche of Indians in puzzled situations. They readily try to jump, if possible, into all the roads to the one and same destination in one time out of all their beliefs and faiths!

"Time is ripe for Sai Baba.
Time is ripe for Muktananda.
Let father go to Rajneesh Ashram.
Let mother go to Gita classes."

Ezekiel's awareness of all Indian sensibilities is rooted from his search for an Indian identity. His search extends to even a theological dimension where the atheist in him yields to the theistic self growing strong in him. That he begins to perceive God's existence in the later hours of his life is manifest in the title poem of the volume 'Latter-Day Psalms':

"The images are beautiful birds
and colourful fish : they fly
they swim in my Jewish consciousness."

Ezekiel comes up, especially in his later poetry, as a poet keeping abreast of Indian social cosmos. No doubt, at times he appears to be an urban poet who is much concerned with the city life. He can catch the imagination of an urban individual. He approves Bombay as his 'home' It is no denying the fact that the poetic persona of Ezekiel is always conscious of his Jewish descent. He appears to feel alienated when he finds himself cast in a social setting where his Jewish background has no trace. Indian setting is heavy on

him. He cannot retreat to his original root. He becomes a part of Indian landscape despite its incongruities. It is all in fairness to quote: "Ezekiel is the first major Indian poet who portrays effectively the poverty, the squalor, the anguish and the irony of Indian existence. His vivid and ironical vignettes have a moral and intellectual impact on the mind of the readers. Irony, compassion, human concern and urge for better and happier existence characterise his poems on the Indian scene" (Kumar 172). Ezekiel's body of later poetry thus demonstrates Indian sensibility with all its varied and diversified aspects in a conspicuous manner.

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