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## Contemporary Social Reality in the Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel

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### Abstract:

Nissim Ezekiel, one of the most notable poets in the Indian English tradition, has published six collection of verse. His poems have appeared in several journals and he is well represented in many anthologies. He is the most versatile poet in the country. He experiments endlessly with form and craft. The urban theme dominates Ezekiel's poetry. He is a poet of the city Bombay. He does not hesitate to describe the dirt and squalor of the city life. The city reduces human personality to zero. The recurring note in Ezekiel's poetry is the hurt that urban civilization inflicts on modern man. The major themes of his poetry are " Love, personal integration, the Indian contemporary scene, modern urban life and spiritual values.

Key words: Tradition, form, craft, Urban life, squalor

Nissim Ezekiel ,the most famous Indian Writer in English was born in Bombay in 1924. He is a Jew by birth. He went to London and studied at Birbeck college. He was made a visiting professor in the University of Leeds in 1964.The University of Bombay appointed him Reader in American Literature in 1972 and later the Head of the Department of English. He went to Australia as a Cultural Award Visitor. He also worked as correspondent for various journals like The Illustrated Weekly in India, The Quest and Poetry in India. A renowned critic of Arts and literature, Ezekiel conducted a course in art appreciation of J J School of Art and other Institutions. He has also remained Director, Theatre Unit Bombay. One of the front-rank poets in the Indian English tradition he has published six collections of his verse. O.U.P has brought out in one volume published in 1989, collected poems of Ezekiel from 1952 to 1988. Besides writing poetry, Ezekiel has edited many books and remained active throughout his life. He Passed away on Jan.12,2004 and is survived by three children, a son and two daughters.

Ezekiel's poetry collection consists of A Time to Change (1952), Sixty Poems (1953), The Third (1959), The Unfinished Man (1960), The Exact Name (1965), Hymns in Darkness (1976) and Latter Day Psalms. In all his poems he leaves the impression of an urban poet, the poet of the great metropolis-Bombay, where he was born and where he has been living since his birth. Bombay haunts his imagination:

Barbaric City sick with slums,  
 Deprived of seasons, blessed with rains,  
 Its hawkers, beggars, iron-lunged,  
 Processions led by frantic drums  
 A million purgatorial lanes,  
 And child-like masses many tongued,  
 Whose wages are in words and crumbs.

Nissim Ezekiel, one of the major poets in Indian English literature, has expressed valuable ideas on literature and life in his letters, critical reviews and interviews. He looks at literature in relation to society. In all his writings Ezekiel stresses the centrality of man in the universe and prefers poetry of statement and purpose. In American poetry of the sixties Ezekiel found "another kind of lyricism, an easy, controlled flow, not a surrealist eruption, not a trance-like aesthetic dexterity but poetic reasonableness<sup>1</sup>. " Poetic reasonableness" is the soul of poetry. This poetry expresses "a milieu and its culture."<sup>2</sup> Social reality is the recurrent theme of his poetry and appreciated by the critics.

As critic and poet, Ezekiel advocates cultural synthesis. In Ezekiel's own writings a noticeable synthesis happens between the Jewish and the Indian., the Western and the Eastern, the Urban and the rural. This synthesis is nicely expressed in Latter Day Psalms:

The images are beautiful birds  
 And colorful fish: they fly,  
 They swim into my Jewish consciousness.  
 God is a presence here  
 And his people are real.  
 I see their sins. I hear  
 His anger.

Literature not only strengthens cultural contacts but it also promotes the understanding of humanity and its future. He says that a poet should be "authentically a creator and not a cultural inheritor."<sup>3</sup> A poet, divorced from his milieu and cultural ethos, cannot create genuine poetry. He carefully avoids "the sophistication of the rootless" and "the parochialism of the native"<sup>4</sup>. In his poetry, he writes :

I have made my commitment 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 is where I am.

Ezekiel recognizes the primal stuff of which poetry and mysticism are made. However, he is opposed to the mystical poetry of Sri Aurobindo on account of the “Asiatic vague immensities” of the mystic and the confusion between art and ideology. Even in Aurobindo’s magnum Opus ,*Savitri* Ezekiel finds embarrassingly bad dated in language, emotionally inflated to the point of grotesqueness and confused in ideas .Ezekiel in his reviews of *The Future, Poetry*, discards Sri Aurobindo’s peculiarly vapid and windy idiom and the farfetched coinages which he coined to express he transcendental realism.

As opposed the confusion and obscurity of mystical poetry, Ezekiel prefers a poetry of “ Human expression” Man, the living centre in the Universe, is also centre in poetry. He boldly discounts “spiritual illumination and religious ecstasy in comparison o human expression .However in his later writings Ezekiel makes It abundantly clear that religious experience and human expression are not after all incompatible. Greatness of lies in is humanizing power. In Morning prayer, Ezekiel prays:

Whatever he enigma

The passion of the blood

Gran me the metaphor

To make it human good.

Ezekiel’s stands for simplicity, clarity, coherence, lucidity and harmony in art and literature. He is opposed to incoherence and confused thinking and expression. He is averse to obscurity in poetry. There is no justification for obscurity in poetry. The complexity of modern life can be beautifully expressed in a simple form. Ezekiel prefers simplicity of thought and language in modern poetry. In rhythm he would aim at using “ the natural, he flowing, the direct and the informal or conversational idiom.” Ezekiel’s simplicity is evident in *Poster Poems* . Each prayer, emanating from the recesses of his inmost being, finds expression in simple direction, for example:

Customer

In the shop of the world,

Tourist from another planet,

Citizen of past and future,

Deceiving with appearances,

Passing as a human being.

Ezekiel denounces poetry as propaganda and he also suspects the bonafides of “ versified knowledge.” Knowledge in poetry is implicit and inseparable. He emphatically says: “ A poem empty of knowledge is a poem that merely skims the surface of life.”<sup>5</sup> Although Ezekiel undertakes propaganda and ideology in poetry; he recognizes the importance of ideas. He remarks, “ ideas are necessary in poetry but a mere formula will not do. The poet has to relate ideas to the materials of his individual poems so that they are not dissipated in mere statement but give meaning to those materials.”<sup>6</sup>

Real poetry reveals reality of a higher kind. Ezekiel says: “ through poetry we experience a reality that is surely greater than the poetry. But then only great poetry can point to a reality greater than itself.”<sup>7</sup>

In Hymns in Darkness Ezekiel writes:

Belief will not save you,

Nor unbelief

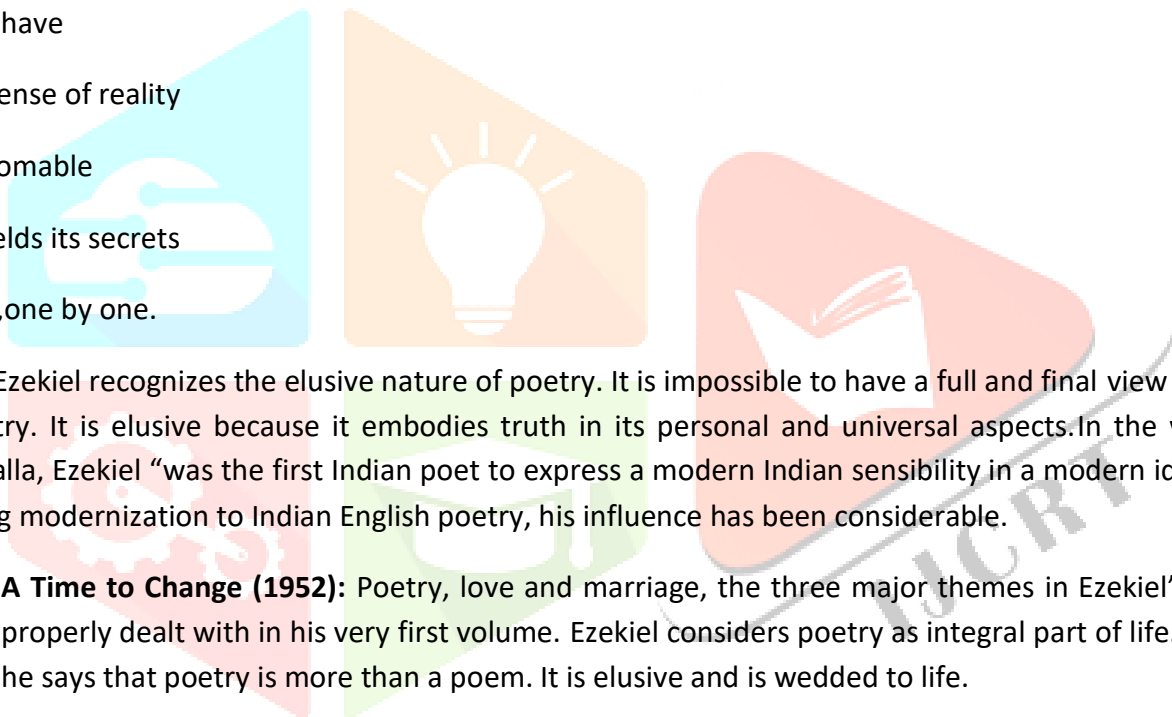
All you have

Is the sense of reality

Unfathomable

As it yields its secrets

Slowly ,one by one.



Ezekiel recognizes the elusive nature of poetry. It is impossible to have a full and final view of the nature of poetry. It is elusive because it embodies truth in its personal and universal aspects. In the words of K.N Daruwalla, Ezekiel “was the first Indian poet to express a modern Indian sensibility in a modern idiom.” Due to bringing modernization to Indian English poetry, his influence has been considerable.

1. **A Time to Change (1952):** Poetry, love and marriage, the three major themes in Ezekiel’s poetry, are properly dealt with in his very first volume. Ezekiel considers poetry as integral part of life. In “ Poetry “ he says that poetry is more than a poem. It is elusive and is wedded to life.

A poem is an episode, completed

In an hour or two, but poetry

Is something more. It is the why

The how, the what, the flow

From which a person comes...

A Time to change shows Ezekiel’s skill for reconciling the opposites. The title poem, “ A Time to Change”, “ The Double Horror”” On Meeting a Pedant”, “ Something to Pursue” etc. show how the opposites can be reconciled in art and poetry. Ezekiel’s persistent endeavor to harmonize religious and secular elements finds a conspicuous place in his poetry. The poet seeks to combine the opposite of love and sex, poetry and prayer.

Of poetry and prayer  
 It will be life itself  
 Singing to the air, Unity established  
 In the open air.

A Time to Change reveals Ezekiel as a great poet of the future. It does not contain any outstanding poems but the general standards are quite high. There are no weak effusions, and the poems are all carefully crafted. Ezekiel emerges as an eminent poet of city life in this volume.

## 2. Sixty Poems (1953)

It is of uneven quality and the promise held out by A Time to Change has not been kept. Much that is trivial and prosaic has been included. The poems in this volume show the influence of W.B. Yeats, Herbert, William Blake, William Carlos Williams, Rilke. Ezekiel has not yet asserted his individual voice. The poet shows awareness of his own vocation as a poet in many poems. In "Creation" Ezekiel points out that common objects and situations create poetry:

Pavements are pools cafes or corn,  
 All are focused in a purer light, poems  
 Waiting for transcription on the page  
 In the dancing minute or the spacious hour.

Some of the poems in this volume exhibit his interest in sex, and free and frank discussion of it. In "Two nights of Love", the poet writes:

After a night of love I dreamt of love,  
 The threshing thighs, the singing breasts  
 Exhausted by the act, desiring it again  
 Within freedom old as earth  
 And fresh as God's name, through all  
 The centuries of darkened loveliness.

## 3. The Third (1959): "The Third" marks a decided development in Ezekiel's poetic career and shows greater maturity both in respect of content and technique. He is a mature and thoughtful urban poet who imparts depth of meaning and artistic excellence to his favorite themes—human relationship, love, sex and city life. The poem "Episode" is full of sympathy for the poor beggars :

A beggar's whine approached, his eyes  
 Shone in the darkness, fixed on us;

To make him go me gave him half an anna.  
 But then another came,  
 And third from a little distance  
 Watched us give the second half an anna.

In this collection Ezekiel has included some very interesting poems on birds, insects and animals. From his minute observation of the behavior of lower creatures he derives many truths which are applicable to the human situation. "Insect Love", "Cur", "Sparrows" and "Aside" are his fine lyrics in this category.

Ezekiel's craftsmanship attains maturity. As a proof of his maturity he deftly uses the singing line and appropriate words always fall in the proper place. It is the harmonious combination of sound and senses that produces the poetry of the biggest order.

### 3.The Unfinished Man (1960)

It contains only ten brilliantly and beautifully written poems. Paying a glowing tribute Ezekiel's poetic genius Adil Jussawalla remarks that " *The Unfinished Man* is the most perfect book of poems written by an Indian English....at his most honest and lyrical best". The title of *The Unfinished Man* comes from W.B.Yeats famous poems, " A Dialogue of Self and Soul", and the stanza from which the little- phrase is taken is given as the epigraph for the book. Some of the very best poems on the urban theme are found in this slender volume. In depicting the sordidness, ugliness, inhumanity, loneliness and frustration of urban life Ezekiel is matchless. Bombay is a symbol of urban life. The poet expresses the drabness and misery in the widest commonality spread through vivid, beautiful, apt and suggestive symbols and images. "Urban",and " Morning Walk" objectively express the unhappy experiences the poet personally felt in Bombay. In " Urban" the poet bewails how he lost contact with nature in Bombay:

At dawn he never sees the skies  
 Which, silently, are born again.  
 Nor feels the shadows of the night  
 Receive their fingers as his eyes.  
 He welcomes neither sun nor rain,  
 His landscape has no depth or height.

A man is damned in that domestic game. " Enterprise" is a symbolic statement of the efforts, failures and frustrations of human life on earth. In these poems Ezekiel cultivates impersonality, objectivity and detachment. He skillfully universalizes the personal. To achieve impersonality he uses certain devices—the use of a person, and the use of the third person to describe that person is one of them. This device has been effectively used in " Urban" and " A Morning Walk". The use of the first person "I" in " Case Study" and " Love Sonnet" imparts immediacy of purpose.

4. **The Exact Name (1965)** : The title of this volume of twenty poems is derived from Juan Ramon's following lines :

Intelligence give me

The exact name of things.

In *The Exact Name* Ezekiel shows unsurpassable ability of making poetry out of the ordinary and the common place. He has attained his authentic voice, and this gives new strength to his poetry. He substantially succeeds to elevate the commonplace to the poetic. In "The Visitor", "The Virginal" and "A Woman observed" are remarkable for the exposition of the human situation in poetical terms. Ezekiel possesses the rare gift of idealizing and universalizing the commonplace by the restrained and skilful treatment.

You were not made to live like this, although

Your face suggests that you are reconciled

Its gentle sadness as it slowly grew

And crushed your liveliness, oppressed me too

The universe is much too small to hold

Your longing for a lover and a child.

"Night of the Scorpion", one of Ezekiel's finest lyrics in a deeply moving poem that has often been anthologized and written about. The poet shows rare human interest in it. In "Philosophy", "Poetry Reading" and "Poetry, Lover, Bird Watcher" Ezekiel expounds his views on poetry. He ultimately exalts poetry over philosophy and logic. Poetry glorifies the ordinary:

The mundane language of senses sing

Its own interpretations. Common things

Become, by virtue of their commonness

An argument against the nakedness

That dies of cold to find the truth it brings.

In "Poet, Lover, and Birdwatcher" the poet shows through a clever association of ideas that good poetry is a process of long waiting like loving and bird-catching.

In poems written after "The Exact Name" he has given up the use of traditional verse forms and used free verse. He seems to lose artistic control and discipline. He has tended to be prolix and diffuse. Ezekiel's latter poetry shows new interest and themes. There is a distinct place for religious, Philosophical and spiritual themes. Ezekiel has been a kind of law giver to the young poets writing in the Indian English tradition. He has taught them to avoid sentimentality, looseness of structure and abstract sublimities which all seem to be peculiarly Indian traits. He is the first Indian to show Indian readers that craftsmanship is as important to a poem as its subject matter. Simplicity and directness

of expression are his preoccupation. He avoids the use of obsolete, archaic and grandiloquent words, and creates fine poetic effect by blending sense and sound in poetry. He imparts a new meaning and suggestive significance to common, everyday words.

William Walsh accords a high place to Ezekiel's poetry which is "fastidious poetry, at once controlled and spontaneous". K.R.S.Iyengar remarks: "There is a tautness and austerity in Ezekiel's best verse, and although the thorn of irony pricks now and then, the total effect is cathartic." <sup>8</sup> Ezekiel is a modern poetic craftsman. The austerity of his art, the simplicity and conversational ease of his language, the economy and exactness in the use of words, the condensation of his style, the impressiveness of his imagery, the sharpness of his wit and irony, the contemporaneity of his subject— matters: all these render him a modern poet of great poetic merit and significance.

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