



Alone In The Crowd: Jewish Identity And Alienation In Nissim Ezekiel

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Abstract

Every writer while writing gets inspiration from their own life and surroundings. Nissim Ezekiel, born in a Parsi religion in an Israeli family residing in Bombay, is much revered for his writing in English. His background of being a Jew, which is a minority group in India, is reflected in many of his poems. The alienation he faced in his life from all the spheres right from childhood became the central theme of most of his poems. One of his semi-autobiographical work poems, 'Background Casually' speaks in volume the alienation, marginalisation, experiences faced by a Jewish minority in India. The paper explores how his identity became a crucial factor in the alienness, alienation and otherness throughout his life in context of his poem 'Background Casually'. The paper will also explore how alone he was & felt amidst the busy bustling town of Bombay.

Keywords: Background, Minority, Alienation, Otherness, Identity

Nissim Ezekiel was born in a Bene Israel Jewish family in present-day Mumbai. His fragmented childhood, traumatic experiences of being a follower of Judaism and belonging to a minority group made him feel alienated at a very young age. It exposed him to feelings of cultural and religious marginalisation from his childhood. These tensions are reflected in his poetry. While he expresses a sense of belongingness for India, he also critiques its social and cultural shortcomings. Being 'Alone in the Crowd' is actually a metaphor to his lonely life and experiences that makes him feel like the "other." Despite the crowd, despite the busy bustling life of Bombay, he becomes alone within the circumstances. It's a metaphor for the minority experience he encounters.

In an interview Ezekiel discussed the phenomenon of alienation at some length some years ago. When asked the question — "How would you react to the change that most Indian writers in English are alienated?" Ezekiel replied, "Actually I would like to see some alienation among Indian English writers. However, undesirable from social, moral and other points of view, it has been aesthetically very productive, provided it's genuine. You cannot pretend you cannot play the game of alienation....feel you're hostile towards others and they are hostile to you. You hate their gate & they hate yours. This can produce great literature. This genuine alienation is really absent." Asked to define alienation he answered: "For an Indian, English writer to be alienated, he must have contempt for his audience and a similar failure on his past pointlessness in trying to communicate. I know no such Indian writer, isolated like a Camus or trying to communicate Dostoevsky character, what they really mean is that these writers use an alien language." The encounter, confrontation or tension between his desire to assimilate despite the distinctiveness is reflected in majority of his poems. M.K. Naik in his book, 'A History of Indian English literature' (1995), mentions while talking about Ezekiel's alienation, "A refugee

of spirit” in search of his ‘dim identity’ which in different mood appears to him to be either a ‘one man lunatic asylum’ or ‘a small deserted holy place’. (164)

Edward Said's concept of "otherness" refers to the creation of a dominant "Us" and a subordinate 'other', often the non-European cultures, as a means for the West to justify their imperialistic & colonial interests. Stuart Hall challenged the idea of a single, essential cultural identity, arguing instead that identity is a continuous process of 'becoming', not a fixed state of 'being'. The concept of 'hybrid' migrant as problematised by Bhaba and Rushdie is reflected by Ezekiel's conceptualization of home and identity in his poetry. Ezekiel's sense of alienation or loneliness is portrayed by A.K. Raghu. He, in his book, The poetry of Nissim Ezekiel comments aptly 'whether or not this generalization is correct, the author of the statement has always been alone' (148). Ezekiel vehemently substantiates his identity crisis in his essay 'Naipaul's India and Mine', "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" (99).

Throughout the poem 'Background Casually', he gives instances of his loneliness, alienation attributed to his Jewish identity of being a minority. Historically, there has been a conflict of Judaism with Christianity because they believed Jesus killed the Christ. He mentions:

The frightened child who would not eat

Or sleep, a boy of meager bone

He never learned to fly a kite.

His borrowed top refused to spin. (2-5)

The alienation, victimization, ostracization by the society made him a frightened child who would ever fear to eat or sleep. Kite flying was not something he learned because of absence of company of others. Out of such nervousness in his heart, the top too did not spin.

I grew in terror of the strong

But undernourished Hindu lads

Their prepositions always wrong

Repelled me by passivity (11-14)

He mentions of growing up in the terror of majority where people irrespective of religion tortured him in every possible way. Even after knowing that they are wrong, passivity was his choice keeping in view his minority status. Nissim Ezekiel has himself declared that his Jewish identity made him a natural outsider in India. He confesses,

'At home on Friday nights the prayers.

were said. My morals had declined

I heard of Yoga and of zen." (16-18)

The ostracising experiences throughout his childhood made him to suffer from identity crisis and terrorized him. Nissim Ezekiel's identity crisis which led to alienation finds expression in the second segment of the poem too. The internal chaos is expressed in the lines... 'How to feel at home, was the point' (36). The change due to marriage, changing jobs brought changes only in the outer conditions but the internal trauma, conflicts with self, emotional starvation, identity crisis- all remained unchanged. He says, "My ancestors, among the castes, Were aliens crushing seed for bread" (48-49). Despite the 'inner and outer storms' (65), he adapts and identifies himself as an Indian. He says he has become a part of the Indian landscape with the passage of time. Although he faces the inner turmoil due to the unhomely environment of the society he grew up, Indian landscape searing his eyes, he still becomes an unavoidable part of it. Despite bearing a label of a Jew minority,

Ezekiel expresses a sense of belongingness to India. Interpretations can be made that he tends to negotiate in quest for an identity. He says,

I have made my commitments now
This is one: to stay where I am (71-72)

The realisation comes in him that although his native place is backward, he has to stay in it.

The poem 'Background Casually' is a microcosm of Ezekiel's lifelong negotiation with his identity as an Indian poet but also as a Jewish outsider. The inherited identity of a Jewish minority which led to alienation, ostracization and non-acceptance by the society and his chosen belongingness to India is beautifully expressed in the paper. Through a balance irony, nostalgic self reminiscences, he transforms his personal experiences into a exposing the complexities of selfhood in the society. He extends boundaries of cultural representation in English poetry. The experience of 'being alone in the crowd' is not merely an expression of personal quest for identity but modern individual's quest for a coherence in a fragmented hybrid world. He uses his penmanship for articulating minority identity crisis and alienation in Indian context.

Citations:

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