



Poetic Influence of Nissim Ezekiel's Poetry: A Review

Dr. Narayan Dutt Pandey

Abstract

"Nissim Ezekiel has not only made a name for himself as a poet but has also contributed significantly to make Indo English poetry a force to reckon with. The imagination of Nissim Ezekiel enables him also to draw upon his accumulated treasure of his observations of life, experiences, meditations, thoughts and ideas. He has been a Pioneer in creating modern Indian English poetry and justifying his position among his contemporaries. Most of his themes are interwoven into one Central theme of quest, how to live cheerfully, peacefully and morally as an integrated human being. Ezekiel had traversed a long distance from my time to change to the collected poems, as he has matured in his vision. Ezekiel's contribution to Indian English poetry is indispensable. His sense of being an outsider does not wither him, but works in his poetry as a positive stance. Therefore, among contemporary poets writing in English, he stands out as a compelling presence that cannot remain unacknowledged. Cultural anguish and anxiety which form a large number of Ezekiel's poems finally yield to a usual sense of acceptance and affirmation suggesting that the poet has cast off his initial prejudices and apprehensions".

Nissim Ezekiel was not only a poet but also a philosopher, naturalist, promoter and publisher of poetic compositions. He was born in 1924 in a bay in Israel in a bane jew family and brought up in pre-independent Bombay. He is one of the major poets in the modern post world war II phase of Indian poetry in English. Rajeev taranath describes "it is significant that Ezekiel is among the older poets of the present Indo-English generation". He has the kind of attainment which makes him one of the most sensual Indo-English poets.

Nissim Ezekiel started writing poetry at the age of twelve. He was initiated to this task by love of literature in preference to other subjects and an urge to create it. Later "enjoyment of literary aspects, will to work out a personal view of life, nature and the world" lent intensity and a sense of purpose of his poetic activity. Ezekiel took the challenge seriously and as a line from his poetry explains, ' he travelled, so he found his roots'. He would not approve of any half measure search for identity. With a relentless candour read denounces all poetasters seducers of experience, self-worshippers and publishers, broadcasters of small weather woes because there is no greater curse than a minor talent in the verse Ring Bull Ring.

After 1965 Ezekiel's poetry took a U-turn, while retaining some of the old themes like love, sex, self and alienation; he then went in each of 'pastures a new'. The desire to recreate characters in their situation governs the choice of taking on new themes. As Ezekiel tries to identify himself with modern India, he chooses some typical Indian situation to highlight commonplace things to elicit the reader's total participation I believe, 'Night of the Scorpion', establishes a link between his early poetry and later poetry, as Ezekiel mix poems on typical Indian themes and situation. Being tired of 'irony and paradox' he writes poetry out of his own experience and encounters with people at different places and Times. Normally he does not invent a situation but describes an event as he gets it. In 'poster prayers III' he writes:

I have to sing

The song of my experience.

In course of an interview given to Gentleman, Ezekiel states:

"To start with, my own inspiration is and always was' my inner life and writing is, for me, a way of coping with tension between my inner life and the outer life. Looking back, this from the earliest days seems to be the main source of my writing. Every other source is somehow related to it, even the experience of other people. My poems are often introspective and therefore, express self-criticism and self- doubt. I also write about my relationships with other people: Love, Sex the individual and Society etc".

As Ezekiel himself States his poetry emanates from life. India's poetry which he hints at in 'In India'(The Exact Name). You can see its full expression in a series of sixty poems which is akele rote in the the seventies and eighties. A child beggar near restaurant a leper beggar near the railway station a woman beggar elsewhere and innumerable beggars, hutment dwellers and pavement sleepers in Bombay. At catch the eye of the poet and he describes them in cool detached and objective matter of fact tone. Beggars are cold in their approach and hardly they acknowledge the alms given to them. There is one such example

I lifted up my eyes

Near the railway station

And saw a leper standing

Against a poster-ridden wall.

Nissim Ezekiel has made a tangible contribution to the philosophical poetry produced by Indo English poets. Indeed, English has shown certain profundity in his nature; and this profundity has found an expression in several poems composed by him. The poetic self of Ezekiel has experienced two divergent pulls- the existential Enigma on the one hand and the poetic Enigma on the other. He has the sensibility of a modern poet whose self confronts the fallen world and stands in an ironic contrast to the ideal world. He shows that the culture of the city and the repressive social codes in the modern world inhibit a man's individuality and his freedom to grow. This culture spreads perversion in all walks of life. Thus marriage has become more of a bondage in which a man and women lose their freedom and their identities, with the result that "a man is damaged in that domestic game". He therefore stresses the need of commitment, sincerity and integrity as essential conditions for the completeness of a poet; and without such completeness there can be no association of sensibilities so that a poet's imagination would remain fragmented. Ezekiel has illustrated this view in the poem entitled Enterprise. In this poem the pilgrim's face a paradox which is due to their want of commitment, sincerity and integrity. Towards the end of their journey, the pilgrims discover to their dismay that their destination is as unacceptable to them as the city from which they have tried to run away. In the last line of the poem, Ezekiel points out with conviction that the grace of fulfillment consists in the identification of the self with the objective world. If such an identification is achieved then art, philosophy, religion and reality

would all appear to be a unified concept. The poem entitled Philosophy and A time to change also shows Ezekiel's philosophical bent of mind, although the former poem shows a distinct tilt towards poetry as compared to philosophy.

Ezekiel is a poet of the mind, He shows a marked tendency to probe the human mind, and his poems reveal not only the conscious but also the subconscious thoughts and conflicts of human beings and more particularly his own thoughts and conflicts. Indeed, his primary concern is with men and man's mind. His striving to become a "finished" man compels him to self analysis and introspection. The poem entitled case study is one of his several attempts at an exploration of his own mind. Here he portrays his own personality and his mind, though he appears here in disguise, making it seem that he is portraying somebody else. Self exploration is also very much in evidence in the poem entitled London. Here the protagonist is searching and probing the innermost recesses of himself. His personal quest goes on relentlessly. Island is another of Ezekiel's poems where we find the same search for the self leading to a resigned acceptance of his environment. Indeed, Ezekiel may be described as an endless explorer of the labyrinths of the mind. K. R. Srinivas Iyengar rightly remarks, "In his first two volumes, persons and places, memories and situations, literary echoes and moments of vision, all inspired Ezekiel to poetic utterance". He was painfully and poignantly aware of the flash it's insistent urges its stark ecstasies, its disturbing

filiations with the mind. In his later poetry, however, there is revealed a more careful craftsmanship, a more marked restraint and a colder, a conscious intellectuality, then in the first two volumes. There is a gain in quality and integrity, and he is able to achieve conversational directness and ease without losing himself in discursiveness. Obscurity and mere angularity are avoided, and beauty and bareness of statement often go together. The discipline of rhyme and regular stanza form is not shirked, except where special effects are intended, as for example in 'Memo for a Venture':

Not power nor success
not popularity but principle,
a point of view, a passion
like Alexander's
and something of the saint,
from these come plentitude
and prodigality
in gestures of greatness,

Finally, we must take into account what a critic Vilas Sarang has said about Ezekiel. According to Sarang " Ezekiel has tried a variety of poetic modes in his latest poems which include poster poems, poster prayers, hymns, Psalms, songs, Sanskrit inspired passion poems and so on". And this critic then adds that, in poetry. Ezekiel's dream of becoming captain of the ship may not have been realised but that he has certainly been an able seaman on the ocean of poetry.

As a critic R. Parthasarathi pointed out that Ezekiel's poetry is both the instrument and the outcome of his attempt to come to terms with himself. Ezekiel was faced with the problems of a choice between the outer word and his own inner world; and he then proceeded to strive to bring about a harmony between these two worlds by stating his problem in his poems. In the other words, he has treated poetry as a means of resolving the conflicts and the tensions which he was experiencing. Poetry seemed to him to serve as a means of achieving a catharsis and thus of attaining mental harmony and peace.

As a critic Linda Hess points out that Ezekiel is a poet of the city, a poet of the body, and an endless explorer of the labyrinths of the mind and he is constantly striving to define himself and to find through all 'the myth and maze' a way to honesty and love. Ezekiel believes that as long as the city man lacks a perception of the imaginative reality, he is bound to remain incomplete or unfinished, and he would continue to suffer from 'the pain of his fragmented view'. In the poem entitled A morning walk, we witness exactly such a person. The existence of such a man is without light and The barbarik City sick with slums cannot prove to be a source of grace to him. By bringing the protagonists of his poems close to an awareness of their situation, Ezekiel suggests the possibility of redemption for himself as well as for others who live in the city. From this point of view, Ezekiel's art is highly therapeutic. As a result of this aesthetic therapy he finds several of his poetic characters on the threshold of a new awakening; and this is a mental state in which self analysis plays a major role. In the poem entitled Marriage, Ezekiel depicts the failure of his own conjugal life and in the poem entitled Event his personal experiences lead him to a disgust with the sexual love of a woman in whose presence he cannot define himself.

Nissim Ezekiel is the only Indian English Poet who is at home with both free verse and rigours of metrical verse. He gives as much importance to them as to the form of poetry. He believes that in Poetry 'how to say' is no less valuable than 'what to say'. He knows like W.B Yeats that poets like women must, 'labour to be beautiful'. In his well known poem. 'Poet, Lover and Birdwatcher' Ezekiel rightly says, "the best poet waits for words". He takes seriously the Yeatsian dictum that poetry is essentially a method of organizing oneself through words. Most of his poems show the skill of subtle evocation in a new context. In this chapter, I will try to show how Ezekiel handles the form in his poetry and what is his method of writing poetry

Before I analyse the technique in Ezekiel's poetry, I would like to put on record the observation of some important critics on the technical aspect of his poetry. Adil Jussawalla is one of the pioneering critics on Ezekiel's poetry to say that "Ezekiel is perhaps the first Indian poet consistently to show Indian readers that craftsmanship is as important to a poem as its subject-matter". To David Me Cutchoin, Ezekiel "belongs with Thom Gunn R.S. Thomas, Elizabeth Jennings, Anthony Thwaite and others like them. He has their cautions, discriminating style, precise and analytical with its conscious rejection of the heroic and passionate as also the sentimental and Cozy. The technique is immaculate: themes are carefully varied yet regular

rhythms. Lines that run over with a poised deliberateness, are there But behind the casual assurances one senses the clenched fist, the wounded tenderness William Walsh too, has a word of praise for Ezekiel's technique when he says, "Ezekiel's poetry more than of any other of these writers (Indian English Poets) seems to be generated from within and to have within it a natural capacity for development It is intellectually complex, mobile in phrasing fastidious indecision: and austere in acceptance". Ezekiel's style moves with time Rajeev Taranath took note of this and remarked about his verse published after 1956 in the following words. His more recent style, open and passionately introspective, is a definite sign that in Ezekiel we see a poet in whom creativity is not part from the changing pressures and priorities of living M.K Naik makes a perceptive comment on Ezekiel's technique when he says "Ezekiel's poetry reveals technical skill of a high order. Except in his Work where his choice of an open form sometimes makes for looseness. he has always written verse which is extremely tightly constructed. His mastery of the Colloquial idiom is matched by a sure command of rhythm and rhyme. A happy use of cool understatement (e g A certain happiness would be to die) and a lapidary have made him one of the quotable poets of his generation (e. g. Home is where We have to gather grace). Though hardly a poet with the shatteringly original image, he employs the extended metaphor effectively in poems like "Enterprise".

Nissim Ezekiel's poetry evokes the Indian scene, recreates Indian reality and reflects Indian sensibility, and therefore is easily distinguished from poetry written in English elsewhere in the World. It would not be out of place to mention here that his well-known poem 'Night of the scorpion' was written for a poetry reading session in London and it went well with the audience there. Ezekiel has shown the way how to write poetry in live language that is. Indian English in our situation that is itself is a great achievement.

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