

Alienation and search for identity in Ezekiel

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ABSTRACT

The article captioned 'Alienation and Search for Identity in Ezekiel' purports to explore some of the poems of Nissim Ezekiel in which he deals with Indian culture, belief in national integration and his hope for the advent of a new era of happiness and prosperity. He basically focuses on the grim realities of human life and sufferings of Indian people. In various poems he dwells upon the Indian poverty, religions, cultures, East-West tension and cultural conflict. He also depicts postcolonial aspects in his poems. He faithfully delineates his quest for identity in rural India. Alienation and search for identity constitute the core of his poetic oeuvre. Apart from this he successfully depicts image of pagan woman and beauty of nature in most of his poems. Further, ontological, biographical and exegetical methods have been adopted.

Nissim Ezekiel, acknowledged on all hands as a fundamental figure in postcolonial India's literary scene, especially Indian writing in English, belonged to the Indian Jewish community called the Bene Israel. The family he came of migrated to India generations ago. He considered himself a modern but not avant garde. As he introduced modernity in Indian English poetry, he is looked upon as a trend setter. But there is no denying the fact that he has indited poems, making deft use of both traditional verse forms and verse libre or free verse. His poetic oeuvre bears the unmistakable impress of the techniques adopted by Pound, Eliot, Yeats, Rilke, MacNeice, Spender Auden and modern American poets. Nevertheless, the thematic multiplicity of his poetry speaks volumes of his wide ranging interest and his acute awareness of the milieu he found himself in. The central themes of his poetry are love, human relationship, inhumanity and squalor of the metropolis, alienation and identity crisis, religious beliefs and communal disharmony of the Indian society, personal integration, spiritual values. To be precise, his poetry dealing with multifarious subjects registers a development from the predominantly external world of 'flesh and bone' to 'myths of light'. There is a further deepening of the heart's mysteries to a profound and fruitful knowledge, beyond meaning and understanding. In craft and language also, there is a shift from lucidity, creativeness and satisfying sensuality to restrained directness, and perfect diction, His later poetry evidences the creative involvement of men's intellect with language: it seeks expressional essence.

Ezekiel's poetry, like Yeats's is a battle ground for the clash of opposites. There is a juxtaposition of contraries in his poems, and the poet's persistent endeavour to harmonies and resolve them is too express to evade the reader's attention. The two polarities in his poetry are life as pilgrimage, an enterprise-involving a movement away from home where in he is implicated by communal ties. Allied to this is the East-West tension which results in the poets experiencing a sense of loneliness in the metropolis of Mumbai where he had his upbringing. Consequent upon the conflict experienced inwardly, the poet frantically searches for roots, for he sincerely believes that the discovery of his roots will enable him to secure mental stability and rid him of the sense of alienation.

Sanguine of his success in the discovery of roots, his poetry, though superficially filled with sorrows and problems, has an undercurrent of optimism, and this undercurrent manifests itself in his Indian sensibility or consciousness of Indian nationality. His commitment to India, and to Mumbai which is his chosen home is total as is shown in his autobiographical lyrics such as '*Background, Casually*'. His description of Indian culture and his adroit use of 'Babu Angrezi' or Indian English in '*Good bye Party for Miss Pushpa*' bear testimony to this. He glories in the antiquity of India, exults in the national policy of prohibition. His belief in national integration and his hope for the advent of an era of happiness and prosperity find expression in some of his poems. That Ezekiel is Indian to the core can be ascertained from the way he has given an account of a flood in Bihar. Though the subject is occasional, the treatment is universal in its evocation of the pangs of human suffering. His ability to evoke a grim picture of Indian poverty is unquestionable. Ezekiel's essentially Indian sensibility is also revealed in the poem '*Entertainment*' which describes a monkey-show, a common sight in Indian bazaars and brings out the poverty of the masters of the show as well as the reluctance of those for whom the entertainment is intended. The poem also brings out the varieties of religions and cultures that characterise the Indian social milieu. It also vivifies the low status of Indian women 'who sit about and do not drink'. Women here are the passive victims of male lust. East-West tensions- the antimony or conflict of two cultures is exposed by the episode in which the English boss tries to seduce his Indian secretary. The dirtiness of Indian hotels and restaurants and the infected food served there are highlighted in '*Irani Restaurant*'. The poet also creates an authentic flavour of India by his use of Pidgin English or Babu English as it is called. He deliberately uses common Hindi words such as 'guru', 'ashram', 'burka', 'chapati', 'pan', 'mantra' and many other vernacular words to create an illusion of real life as it is lived in India.

It was because of his nativity in the Bene-Israel family he felt alienated from the cultural heritage of India. His well known poem '*Background, Casually*' exemplifies cultural and social alienation. The following lines occurring in the poem just mentioned bare it out: "*my ancestors, among the casts, / were*

aliens crushing seed or bread", when he was a school boy, he felt alienated among his classmates. He went to a Roman Catholic school: "A nugging Jew among the wolves / They told me I had killed the Christ". He was an alien among both Muslims and Hindus. Ezekiel once said, 'my background makes me a natural outsider: circumstances and decisions relate me to India'. At the same time the poet's alienation from his own minority religious ethos also appears to have begun quite early, as his confession in the following lines would indicate: At home on Friday night the prayer were said. My morals had declined. I heard of yoga and of Zen. Would I, perhaps, be Rabb Saint. The more I searched the less I found.

During his sojourn in England the feeling of alienation also haunted him: How to feel at home, was the point. The poet could not live with despair for long he resigned himself to existential reality and made an effort to identify himself with India: 'My backward place is where I am'. Ezekiel fully realises that it is beyond his capacity to remain aloof from his environment. He says: 'A man can do something for and in his environment by being fully what he is, by not withdrawing from it' - 'I am not withdrawn from India'. He meticulously avoids the 'sophistications of the rootless' at one extreme and the 'parochialism of the native'. Ezekiel, thus, suggest a synthesis of cultural polarities which can capacitate a culturally alienated person to ward off the haunting feeling of alienation and help him to find out his real identity.

As a poet Ezekiel tries to explore his identity in a rural India, where he finds reality in 'the eyes of supple innocence'. In some of his finest poems like '*In the Country Cottage*', '*Poverty Poem*', '*Night of the Scorpion*', and '*In India*', Ezekiel makes an attempt to strike roots in the reality which is the meaningful centre of Indian life. He also explores his self in contemporary Indian realities. His love for India is clear, firm and unsceptical. He writes: 'I Love India, I expect nothing in return, because critical sceptical love does not beg love'. For Ezekiel India is not merely the crowds of the noisy city but the innocent, peace-loving masses. '*In City Song*' he finds positive identification with the city. Having climbed to a friend's terrace, he looks down at the view and has feeling of belonging, of 'settling in' after a long wandering reveals the poets sense of complete identification with the place of his birth. Ezekiel's search for roots 'has not been an egoistic literary preoccupation as in the case of many other Indian English poets'. Aware of narrow 'cultural pitfalls' Ezekiel strains every nerve to trace roots as a social being, basically, and as one who relates to a definite geographical and cultural tradition. In his opinion rootlessness is a matter that bothers not merely a poet lifted from his moorings and transplanted elsewhere, but anyone who has failed to cultivate a sense of belonging.

The theme of alienation and search for identity is successfully conveyed by means of images which do not serve the purpose of embellishment but are functional in nature. Furthermore his images are mostly recurrent and they acquire symbolic overtones. The images having symbolic overtones enable the poet to make the abstract concrete and hasten comprehensibility. For instance, in his poem '*Enterprise*' the journey refer to is a metaphor for the journey of life and is symbolic of the voyage in to once inner self, the voyage of self

exploration. 'Home' symbolises the place where one lives, as also ones inner self. In '*Night of the Scorpion*', flash of the diabolic tale in the dark room is symbolic of the evil that pervades the world and against which all created things have to wage an ever-continuing struggle which one can win only by dint of an integrated approach. The woman, the city, and nature are the ever-recurring images in Ezekiel's poetry, and by repetition they acquire symbolic overtones. They are the key images but these are usually woven a number of associative images, and in this way we get a cluster of images which enlarge the expressive range and figure of the language.

The recurrence of the image of the pagan woman who is a great beast of sex merits, consideration for the simple reason that she is symbolic of libido, earthly corruption and defilement. The poet dwells upon the various organs of the female body which is considered by him a miracle of creation. The organs of female body namely breast and thighs, flesh and hair, belly and torso, liver, eyes etc are all attractive and repulsive at one and the same time. The image of the pagan woman is closely connected with the image of the metropolis which has become a necropolis primarily because both are symbolic of defilement and corruption. An urban poet, Ezekiel's concentration is on the squalor of a city like Mumbai where he was born and brought up. The Urban images discernible in his poems like a Morning walk and Island are reminiscent of those we find in Eliot's '*Preludes*'. In addition to the images already mentioned, Ezekiel's proficiency in the art of delineating nature and the objects related to it rivets. However it is to be noted that Ezekiel is neither an imagist nor a symbolist. The images which come to our notice in his poems are strictly functional mainly because through them he gives expression to his fleeting moods.

To sum up Ezekiel was basically an explorative poet with a strain of religious philosophy flowing through his verse. He cultivated a direct and often conversational tone to communicate his moods and thoughts in his poetry. Brought up in a mildly orthodox Jewish home which gradually became liberal, he brings to the established tradition of love, religions and the passing hour, the modern attitude of the need for commitment, an existential plunge into life, and uphold analytic disgust becoming more detached and more ironical as he develops. He doesn't believe in the negation of sensual pleasures; on the contrary he has a strong feeling of belonging to the world. His poems testify to his awareness of his commitment to both the world and the flesh. He attaches a great deal of importance to the worldliness of the world, its independence. Some critics are of the view that despite the repeated occurrence of such words as 'God' and 'Prayer' Ezekiel's approach to life is not religious. His attitude is that of philosophical humanism. In his later poetry which is in the nature of meditative self-exploration, we find a marked orientation towards spiritual themes and an acceptance of the reality of non-rational phenomenon. A study of '*The Hymns in Darkness*' and '*Poster Poems*' reveals that he doesn't consider himself an alien or an outsider but exercises his will to claim God's love even though he knows that it will not come to him. That Ezekiel's outlook is humanistic and he takes delight in self-exploration to assert his Indianness does not escape our notice as we make a critical assessment of his poetic corpus.

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