

## Socio-cultural awareness in the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel

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Received: 03.06.2017

Accepted: 15.06.2017

### ABSTRACT

*Poet, dramatist, editor, art-critic, Nissim Ezekiel was born on 14 December 1924 in Mumbai. His father, Moses Ezekiel, was a professor of Botany at Wilson College, and his mother was Principal of her own school. The Ezekiels belonged to Mumbai's Jewish community, known as the 'Bene Israel.' In 1947 Ezekiel took his MA in English Literature from Mumbai University. Then he studied philosophy at Birbeck College, London. He married Daisy Jacob in 1952 and the same year his first collection of poems titled A Time to Change was published by Fortune Press (London). Returning home Ezekiel joined The Illustrated Weekly of India as an assistant editor in 1953 and stayed there for two years. He published his second book of verse Sixty Poems the same year. He also worked as a broadcaster on arts and literature for All India Radio. Prof. Ezekiel was the head of the Department of English in Mithibai College, Mumbai from 1961 to 1972. He rendered his service as visiting professor at University of Leeds (1964) and University of Chicago (1967). Ezekiel's poetic collections include : Time to Change (1952), Sixty Poems (1953), The Third (1959), The Unfinished Man (1960), The Exact Name (1965), Snakeskin and Other Poems (1974), Hymns in Darkness (1976), Latter-Day Psalms (1982), and Collected Poems 1952-88 (1989).*

*Among the honours Ezekiel received are: the Sahitya Akademi award in 1983 and the Padma Shri in 1988. He was Professor of English at University of Mumbai during the 1990s. He acted as the Secretary of the Indian branch of the PEN. After a prolonged battle with Alzheimer's disease, Nissim Ezekiel died in Mumbai, on 9 January 2004. His name was always honoured as a man and a writer of social and cultural awareness.*

### THE PERSPECTIVE

Ezekiel considers 'social awareness' as one of the basic requirements of a good poet. A keen observer of contemporary social reality, Ezekiel describes the slums of Bombay, which he has known since his childhood days. The description of the slums of India in 'A Morning Walk' is a realistic one. It is a stark representation of the squalidness of India, which Ezekiel mirrors microcosmically in the city of Bombay. Bombay has given him a sense of place, as aptly described by Shirish Chindhade by quoting the poet himself: "The sense of self-absorption has given way, among many other things, to a sense of place. The urban theme emerges in his song. From The Unfinished Man onwards unmistakable traces of the development of the intimate relationship with his own city are found in great frequency. It is the city of the poet's 'birth and re-birth' that has moved to a prominent place in the poet's consciousness. It is the city of Bombay. Asked, 'Has living in the city like Bombay... affected your poetry?' Ezekiel answers as follows: "I feel I am a Bombay city poet, can't imagine living long anywhere else. I lived in London for three and half years, 1948-52, but never thought of myself as a Londoner except that the Movement was alive then and I had a live contact with it. I am oppressed and sustained by Bombay."<sup>1</sup> Ezekiel is not always in the mood of making the caricature of city characters. The poem 'Yashwant Jagtap' personifies patience, silent suffering and fatalism, the three characteristics of the poverty-smitten Indians. It draws the portrait of a Bombay coolie staying in a dilapidated shanty with water dripping down all

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over through the sieve-like roof during the heavy Bombay monsoon- a crowded hut, no privacy, no ease, no cleanliness, no security. Yashwant Jagtap pushes a handcart at the age of sixty, just to earn a meager rupee after a hard day's back breaking labor. What is remarkably impressive about the poor fellow is that all these rigors of work and inhuman inconveniences in life have not embittered him, for a true-blue Indian, he is reconciled to his lot, and so are we.

The last line widens the frame of references to include every poor Indian with whom the country is overcrowded. Perhaps that's why the poet writes 'From Edinburgh Interlude':

Perhaps it is not the mangoes  
That my eyes and tongue long for,  
But Bombay as the fruit  
On which I've lived,  
Winning and losing  
My little life. <sup>2</sup>

'Night of the Scorpion' is regarded as one of the poems from rural background. According to M. K. Naik, "Night of the Scorpion" is generally taken to be an ironic presentation of the contrast between popular superstition and skeptical rationalism."<sup>3</sup> The poet successfully catches the belief system of various people in this poem. Very few Indian writers of English are successful in conveying indigenous speech rhythm, tone, colloquial nuances in English especially in the speech of peasants and petty merchants which figure in their works. The sentence structure deftly reflects the Indian experience and ethos:

With every movement that the scorpion made  
His poison moved in mother's blood, they said.  
May he sit still they said.  
May the sins of your previous birth  
Be burned away tonight, they said.  
May your suffering decrease?  
The misfortunes of your next birth, they said.  
May the sum of evil  
Balanced in this unreal world  
Against the sum of good  
Become diminished by your pain. <sup>4</sup>

M. K. Naik finds out four distinct treatments to the poem in terms of the attitudes expressed: "Four distinct attitudes to these allied problems are sharply differentiated in the poem ('Night of the Scorpion') the first is traditional, popular Indian (Hindu-Buddhist) view of it, which is a curious mixture of metaphysics, faith and superstition. Diametrically opposed to this view is that represented by the father, "skeptic, and rationalist?" For him a scorpion bite is just a case for the employment of experimental medicine, "powder, mixture, herb and hybrid". He even pours a little paraffin on the bitten toe and puts a match on it."<sup>5</sup>

The poet also creates an authentic flavor of India by his use of Indian English, Pidgin English or Babu English as it is often called. This is clearly seen in poems like 'Very Indian

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Poems in Indian English' and 'Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T. S.' where the syntactical peculiarities of Indian English- particularly the use of present continuous tense for simple present- is indicative of the thought processes of Indians.

According to Shakuntala Bharvani, "in these poems Ezekiel has moulded the language so as to bring out the true sound and texture of the language as it is used by Indians."<sup>6</sup>

In his more recent verse Ezekiel has tried to create an Indian flavor by the use of common Hindi words. Guru, Ashram, Burkha, Chapatti, pan, mantra are a few of Indian words the poet has used to create an illusion of real life as it is lived in India. He reflects the Indian way of life both through the use of vernacular words and imagery drawn from the common scenes and sights of India. A vast panorama of Indian humanity is presented. His poetry is a vast gallery of portraits representative of the various Indian professions and ways of life; we meet the railway clerk, house maid, professor, guru, office worker, society girl in his poems.

The language of Indian writing in English is the natural product of interaction between English and native language and native cultures. The Indianness of indo – Anglican literature lies in the typically Indian slant, habits, beliefs, manners, the distinct Indian flavor of the subject matter and setting on the one hand, and the words, phrases, idioms, proverbs, images and metaphors, rhythm, tone, modes of address, terms of endearment and terms of relationship on the other. According to Shaila Mahan, "when a writer in Indian English faces difficulty in conveying certain concepts in an alien medium and also when he wishes to convey the peculiar Indian flavor he feels impelled to borrow words and expressions from his mother tongue. Various writers employ various devices to capture Indianness in their works. The use of 'guru', 'siapa', 'sarkar', 'karma', by Mulk Raj Anand, 'maharaja' and 'Puriyanaga' by Raja Rao, 'Babu', 'deo', 'haseen', 'banyan' by Khushwant Singh, 'mantra', 'kundalini', 'guru', 'Shakti' by Ezekiel are illustrative instances which add to the exoticism of these works. The subtle nuances, reverberations and cultural associations of these words could not have been captured and conveyed through translation and explanation.

## CONCLUSION

Conclusively Ezekiel's 'Very Indian Poems in Indian English' are a good document to look into the Indian ethos of the poet. They are simply not for the purpose of creating humor through caricature of Indian people and Indian scenes. In a reply to a query that he was "making fun of the Indian English speaker in these poems", Ezekiel mentioned that he was just catching the 'idiom' of the people.

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