

Nissim Ezekiel's Quest for Poetic Idiom

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Nissim Ezekiel (1924-2004), a Bene-Israelite settled in India was educated in Mumbai and London. He took up teaching and retired as 'Professor of English' at the University of Bombay. A major-minor Indian English poet of the post-independence era, Ezekiel's *A Time to Change* (1952) heralded the modern, realistic and critical poetry of intellectualism. His poetry is chiefly introspective and self-analytical and he expresses modern concerns in contemporary voice and manner. Death, loneliness, alienation, the Indian scene, love, sex, urban life and spiritual values are some of the themes of his poetry. His poems are remarkable and are appreciated for their irony and intellectualism and they are noted for the absence of images.

Some of the qualities which go to make Ezekiel a vitally meaningful poet include his mastery over a variety of styles, poetic modes, his exquisite craftsmanship resulting in the poise and precision of language, rich supply of rhythm capable of subtle modulation and wry irony which come in handy at crucial junctures. Ezekiel's various achievements make him one of the most mature and 'consistently meaningful poets' in Indian writing in English.

Language is one of the subtlest and also the most dynamic of the means by which a poet's vision is rendered comprehensible and permanent. It is through language that a poet colours a piece of external reality effectively distilling thereby a new emotional attitude. Ezekiel's total dedication to poetry, which he tried to maintain against heavy odds, is commendable. His unqualified dedication to the craft of poetry and his essential honesty as revealed in his poems are the two most important factors which characterize his activity as a poet. His poetry has been regarded as a pilgrimage.

A conscious and careful poet, Ezekiel has devoted a considerable part of his energy to make his creative resources subservient to his writing of poetry. The selection and use of words, which are in fact the building blocks of poetry, is of crucial importance for a poet. A few Indian poets in English have shown the ability to organize experience into words as completely as Ezekiel. He seems to believe with W.B. Yeats that poets, like women, 'must labour to be beautiful'. In his excellent poem "Poet Lover Birdwatcher", he himself maintains that "the best poets wait for words" like an ornithologist sitting in silence by the flowing river or like a lover waiting for his beloved till she no longer waits but subsides to surrendering. Inder Nath Kher remarks:

"Nissim Ezekiel's poetry may be viewed as a metaphoric journey into the heart of existence, into the roots of one's self or being which embodies the mythic as well as existential dimensions of life."¹

Ezekiel evinces a rare eye for a right expression. He remains unsurpassed in his use of precise words and phrases. The frequent use of a colloquial idiom imparts to his poems a fine combination of clarity of expression and cogency of argument. In his efforts to seek poetry in the ordinary and the common

place, Ezekiel has written poems with Audensque ease. He is nevertheless always eager to celebrate the ordinariness of movements and his characteristic mode remains simple, colloquial poetry of statement.

Most of the words used by the poet are monosyllabic. Sometimes he also uses compound words such as many tongued, day dream, rabbisaint. He uses more nouns than verbs. Nouns are barely modified by elements other than adjectives. When he does use adjective, however they are highly functional. In 'Philosophy' for example, the adjective 'cold' in the phrase 'cold lucidity' conveys all the dryness which we generally associate with intellect and reasoning. The phrase is also evocative and richly suggestive, for it brings to mind Keats' well known line: "Do not all charms fly/ at the touch of cold philosophy" Ezekiel has used nouns to modify other nouns, as is evident from following expressions desert patch, basement room, Hindu lads, scorpion shadow, Muslim sportsman, English cargo-ship.

Most of the verbs used by the poet are transitive verbs. His sincere efforts to bring harmony between his inner life and the outer world have resulted in certain significant linguistic priorities and stylistic preferences. According to him, poetry is not a gift to be adored but a craft to be studied assiduously.

In "The Visitor" a popular belief regarding the cawing of the crow and the possibility that a visitor would come has been exploited for poetic purpose. The patristic wisdom of lines like - 'what cannot be explained, do not explain' in fullblood candour are lovable aspects of Ezekiel's poetry. Ezekiel's best poems have an undiminished pictorial quality. There are obvious affinities to the visual arts. The poet can effectively turn the abstract into concrete.

English has undergone radical changes at the hands of Ezekiel, in his poems like "Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S." The poem has been included in *The New Oxford Book of English Light Verse*, edited by Kingsley Amis because of the laughter it evokes. It is one of those few poems in which Ezekiel has deliberately used and parodied Indian English of the common people. Through linguistic manipulation the poet is able to hit hard at social affections and pretensions of the middle class. It parodies the idiolectal features of English spoken by some people in India, especially the use of present progressive tense for the simple present and other typical Indianisms.

It would be interesting to see how Ezekiel is able to create the peculiar flavor of Indian English. For most poets like Ezekiel, English has been the only choice available to them because of their education and other antecedents. Ezekiel himself remarks,

"Contemporary poets of India generally write in English, when they have gone through English medium school. I write in English for this reason, I cannot write in any other language, a natural writer in any other language"².

A natural outsider, like him has had no other option. In his poems Ezekiel has tried to give vent to Indian cultural and social ethos. His 'Very Indian Poems' have aimed at depicting characteristics of Indian attitude "Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S." takes a crack at Indians who suffer from xenophilia and are ever eager to go to a foreign country to improve their prospects'. Written in the form of a farewell speech, the poem reflects rambling and highly patterned Indian way of speech.

The poem has been included in the volume *Hymns and Darkness*, is a hilarious parody and a biting satire. The poem is almost like a dramatic monologue exposing the narrator more than the subject of the poem. It is conceived as a speech made by a person at a farewell party. Besides unveiling the

hypocritical personality of the speaker, it also makes fun of his English. The use of unrhymed diction, a colloquial tone and the speaking voice are essential for the nature of the poem.

Ezekiel has also made use of certain typical verbal phrases which are not found in British or American English, like 'cooking nicely'. In "Background" casually he talks of the 'under nourished Hindu lads their prepositions always wrong'. The most recurrent syntactic feature in Ezekiel's 'Very Indian Poems' is -ing form which is used in all contexts and for all tenses. The speaker is preoccupied with his concern for the vital present progressive tense. Clichés and Platitudes are littered in these poems. In his 'Very Indian Poems' he has succeeded in creating the authentic impression of people and places and in giving the peculiar flavor of the language as used by English loving and status conscious Indians belonging to the middle class Indian society. With his expressive words, mobile phrasing, highly original imagery and successful exploitation of the resources of his medium Ezekiel has established himself as one of the most important Indian poets in English.

The very fact that he was a Jew by parentage, an urbanite by birth and a teacher by profession, he as a poet displays a highly private sensibility in relation to the significant social and ethical change in post-Independence India. In his poems, Ezekiel projects an image of split personality oscillating between 'boundless worse' and 'boundless better' given to write in an age which witnessed poignant conflicts of tradition and modernism, Ezekiel's reaction to the Indian dilemma is that of an emotionally puzzled man. He finds himself neither in tune with himself nor with his surroundings.

In his poetry, on one hand, he makes an attempt at self-discovery by diving deep into his own psyche and on the other, he is in quest of integration as well. He experiences a sense of alienation issuing forth from his over-consciousness of his Jewishness and his mother tongue, i.e. English. This double impulse splits his personality, creates tension between the 'poetic-self' and the context and imports a kind of inhibition to his poetry. The way he dramatizes the tension between the urban and the primal reconcile the contradictions with the help of an aesthetic strategy, sets forth his consciousness of the gap between himself and his environments, his "un-Indian root". The gentle and subtle irony that he employs in his poems belies fierce arrogance towards the natives.

"Many of his poems derive their effectiveness from the poet's puzzled emotional reactions to the modern Indian dilemma which he feels to be poignant conflicts of tradition and modernism, the city and the village: a somewhat obvious theme, but treated by Ezekiel an intensively personal exploration³."

Ezekiel's poetry has simplicity in language and diction. He uses words of common and everyday vocabulary. He lays stress on the use of contemporary idiom. Sometimes he uses imagery but images are not decorative but completely functional.

REFERENCES

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