

Quest for Self-Realisation in Nissim Ezekiel's Poetry

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Abstract

Indian English Poetry is the oldest form of Indian English Literature. Indian poets writing in English have succeeded to nativize and indianize. English in order to reveal typical Indian situations. Henry Louis vivion Derozio is considered the first poet in the lineage of Indian English poetry followed by Sri Aurobindo, Sarojini Naidu, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Toru Dutt among others. Among the contemporary Indian English Poets, Nar Deo Sharma occupies important place because of his literary achievements.

Nissim Ezekiel is considered to be a pioneering figure in Modern Indian English Poetry. His first book, A Time to Change was published in 1952. The significant poets of the post-Derozio and Pre-Ezekiel times are Toru Dutt, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Sarojini Naidu and Rabindranath Tagore. Some of the notable poets of Ezebiel's time are A.K. Ramanujan, R. Parthasarathy, Gieve Patel, Jayant Mahapatra, Dom Moraes, Kamala Das, Keki N. Daruwalla, Arvind Krishna, Mehrotra, Shiv K. Kumar, Arun Kolatkas and Dillip Chitre.

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Introduction

Indian poetry and Indian literature in general, has a long history dating back to Vedic times. They were written in various Indian languages such as Vedic Sanskrit, Classical Sanskrit, Hindi, Oriya, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Bengali and Urdu. Poetry in foreign languages such as Persian and English also has a strong influence on Indian poetry. The poetry reflects diverse spiritual traditions within India. In particular, many Indian poets have been inspired by mystical experiences. Poetry is the oldest form of literature and has a rich written and oral tradition.

It is generally believed that Indian poetry in English, having passed the phase of imitation and national self-consciousness has attained maturity through independence and individuality. This self-consciousness and awareness has played an important role in the writing of modern Indian poetry in English. Nissim Ezekiel, a widely known contemporary poet of India has strived hard to adhere to the principle of self-awareness in his famous book *Collected Poems* 1952-88. Commenting about the quest for self in Ezekiel's poetry, Gieve Patel observes in the introduction : in Ezekiel's poetry. Gieve Patel observes in the Introduction :-

When he writes his poetry he teaches,
This time largely himself. In all these
Contexts the pedagogic tone is relieved,
even subverted by self-directed irony,
saddened passion, and simple, direct concern
for what's at hand."¹

In spite of this, one has reasons to believe that Ezekiel's quest for self-realisation has become the underlying theme of his poetry and can be perceived in the several poems included in the significant volume *Collected Poems* 1952-1988. Though poems specially included in his *Collected Poems*, first *A Time to Change* (1952) has a clear concern with spirituality and self realization and *Hymns in Darkness* (1976) and *Latter Day-Psalms* (1982) are also the best example of this theme. The marvelous poems such as "The Egoist's Prayers", or "Hymns in Darkness" from *Hymns in Darkness* are ironic exposes of the self-deceptions of modern day seeker and their concern is not directly with the mystical experience. The poem "Latter Day Psalms" based on the poet's reading from the psalms, is also concerned partly with the poet's experience of self-realisation.

However, Ezekiel's first volume of verse included in *Collected Poems* 1952-88, *A Time of Change* most directly addresses the poet's quest for self-realisation but it is uncertain whether the poet ultimately attains his goal or not. Unlike the other mystics who are fully realized one's impression of Ezekiel is of a serious, though wavering commitment, which is yet not fully realized. But his quest for self-realisation is seen most obviously in the poem "Something to Pursue." What he seeks is nothing but high endeavour:

"With intensities
of feeling and of thought,
That I may see myself
No longer unresolved
But definite as morning,

Moving to fruition
When the season comes.”?

He is a ‘man aspiring to the Good, which may be God’ and the answer to his quest lies somewhere in the unique poem “Prayer and Poetry, Poetry and Prayer.” Here the poet is trying to attain a way of life through poetry emerging from the heart and something more beyond this:-

“A man may follow it
Through works or poetry,
From works to poetry
Or from poetry to something else.” (C.P., P. 14)

The poet pursues passionately nothing but ‘this lucid utterance, of unambiguous speech’ and the ‘limpid style of life, whose texture is poetry. Ezekiel like Dom Moraes is not accepting God as it is but contemplating about Him, and as he points out in “*A Time of Change*” the title poem that “practicing a singing and a talking voice. Is all the creed a man of God requires” or as he aspires in the middle of the poem:

The pure invention or the perfect poem,
Precise communication of a thought,
Love reciprocated to a quiver,
Flawless doctrines, certainty of God”. (C.P. p. 5)

Most of the critics have pointed out that there is an underlying spiritual quest in his poetry. But being an Indian poet, Ezekiel’s own judgment about his poetry has become the chief characteristics of his personality where one can get a glimpse of poet’s own self-conviction. As the poet himself describes:

“I am not a religious or even a moral person in any conventional sense. Yet, I’ve always felt myself to be religious and moral in some sense. The gap between these two statements is the essential sphere of my poetry”.³

However in *A time to Change* poem after poem, Ezekiel is trying his best to obliterate the obstacles coming all along in the fulfillment of his dreams. The poet’s own self-diagnosis can be seen when he describes that he is “corrupted by the things imagined” (“*A Time of Change*”) but in the important poem “*The Double Horror*”:

“I am corrupted by the world, continually

Reduced to something less than human by the crowd.

Ezekiel's striving to become a finished man compels him to the self-analysis and introspection we come across in some of his poems. For instance in the poem "The Warm", seeing a warm crawling blindly to a drier spot after the rain, he speculates:-

"Oh God! To think that I
By such absurd and devious routes should reach
My destination. I there anywhere
A warm blinder than I have been." (C.P., p. 10)

But in "Words in a Gentle Wind", he comes to know "The empty zone within" and in "Commitment", "I am reduced/ To appetites and godlessness." Keeping in view this characteristic of Ezekiel, Makarand R. Paranjape beautifully remarks that "such relentless self-scrutiny and castigation continues unabated through the other collection as well. Hence, the obstacles in the way of the poet's self-realisation, in his own eyes seem formidable."⁴

Expanding his poetic sensibility, Ezekiel at the end of his volume, *A Time to Change* comes to final resolution. The last two poems "Declaration" and "Encounter" suggest a transformation similar to the mystical experience in which the poet ultimately understands the meaning of life. For instance:

And took, the liberation! The poise of
Being one with God, the precious quietude
Of blood, the aftermath of bold acceptance!

Intimation of some final good comes in
Surrender: waiting instead of seeking
Wanting nothing, being nothing, like a
Crab or Kingfisher by the water, in the
Sun, and lighted up within. (C.P. p. 34)

Here it seems that the poet does not surrender completely, attaining the "poise of being one with God" and the impact of this clear realization can be seen in the rest of his poetry. In the last poem of this volume "Encounter" too some illuminating experiences are vigorously suggested: The poet realizes that the question itself suggests the answer, that it is not always necessary to ask questions. An old pattern of the mind is broken. A mystery is divulged in the answer of the unknown converser, simply life, merge with its rhythm. The key seems to be in

ever-moving, flowing with life, taking refuge only in “living images”, not clinging to dead or fossilized ideas of yesterday. Wordsworth finally comprehends that the sole aim of life is to live harmoniously with the universe and to being one with its eternal laws.

Moreover, in *A Time of Change* Ezekiel is concerned with morality in life, and other burning issues of the day haunt him without end. The journey of the “Self becomes a metaphor in his poetry is further carried to its logical conclusion in his subsequent book of verse, *The Third* and *Hymns in Darkness*. Ezekiel has learnt from W.B. Yeats how to compose poems about the self while keeping away from it. In *The Third*, he takes the stance of a detached observer and discusses personal emotions and conduct intellectually in obstructions. For instance the poem “Portrait” in *The Third* presents the predicament of the modern man including the poet himself.

“Beneath his daily strategy,
Reflected in his suffering face
I see his dim identity,
A small, deserted, holy place. (C.P. p. 87)

Ezekiel’s quest for realization seems to be diffident but recollecting his own poetic talent he becomes successful in discovering the truth whether about himself or about others which is his objective. He really believes that:-

“Myself examined frightens me...
I have long watched myself
... ..
I have heard the endless silent dialogue
Between the self-protective self
And the self naked”
(“What Frightens me, “C.P., p. 106)

But in his second phase of self-realisation Ezekiel’s doubt and ambivalence of early poetry constitute elements of his later knowledge because his poetry, through variations, repetitions and the increasingly open-ended nature of his vision, becomes a record of the growth of a mind acquiring a more complex and inclusive knowledge. His most recent work *Hymns in Darkness* is a poetry of process and growth blending reason and intuition. Most of the poems of this volume are simple, direct intensely evocative and self-satisfying. The poet does not tell us about the nature of readers he writes for. But he is certainly ‘a man speaking to men’.

His railway clerk opens his heart to the reader and speaks in the tone of great intimacy: for instance:

“I am never neglecting my responsibility,
I am discharging it properly .
I am doing my duty,
but who is appreciating?
Nobody, I am telling you”. (C.P., p. 184)

Ezekiel is a philosophical poet and proceeds systematically in the treatment of his subject. Like Chaucer, in the famous poem “Guru”, for instance, he tells about a saint, sketches the inward story of the man, and finally strikes a deep note. How philosophically, the poet broods over the lot of modern human beings:-

If saints are like this
What hope is there then for us?” (C.P. p. 192)

Ezekiel is a great love-poet and in his poetry he has dealt with his own awareness about the love relationship. The marvelous lyric “poem of the Separation” included in *Hymns in Darkness* shows greater detachment and maturity than the lyrics of the earlier volume. While comparing the reaction in the lover’s life with the blast of a bomb, the poet becomes introspective and remembers his beloved who has broken with him.

To judge by memory alone
Our love was happy
When the bombs burst in Kashmir,
My life had burst
And merged in yours.” (C.P., p. 195)

Ezekiel’s poetic talent is perhaps at its best; his tour de force being the disarming irony. The way information about pictures in a book reaches the poet is meaningful. It is an amusing situation when poet speaks in the beginning of the poem:

“My daughter tells my wife
Who tells my mother
Who tells me.” (C.P. , p. 200)

Ezekiel’s appeal is for a growing knowledge which can make of his place an ‘environment’. The environment in which he lives, has a genuine meaning for him. India becomes somewhere to reduce to survive, where he is not imprisoned by time, place or idea. The poet in the verse “The Egoist’s Progress” advocates that India is indispensable for him:

“Confiscate my passport lord,
I don’t want to go abroad
Let me find my say
Where I belong.” (C.P., p 213)

However, Ezekiel’s poetry reveals his primary concern with understanding of the meaning of his life and attaining self-realisation. Poetry seems to be the means to his goal. In the process of pursuing his quest, he is acutely conscious of his own failings and self-deceptions, yet he finds himself preserved frequently. No other poet than Ezekiel has felt ultimately the secret truth of restoration of the soul while confessing about the path of self-righteousness in the latest poem “Latter Day Psalms” where poet seems to be contented by his achievement and scrutiny of the sole self-realisation.

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