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Nissim Ezekiel: A Poet of Indian Cultural Spirit

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Abstract

The paper is an effort to observe poetry of Nissim Ezekiel as part of cultural studies in the light of Indian cultural context. After giving in brief about 'Cultural Studies', the paper discusses Ezekiel's attitude as a poet, his origin and commitment to Indian land and major themes of his poetry. He treats poetry as a journey, a way of life, a continuous flow and as something which is closely related to human existence. Indian social life, city life, family life, relationship of Indians with God, Indian values, relations and traditions along with certain peculiar oddities of Indian behaviour become an essential part of Ezekiel's poetry and are presented in the this paper through examples of his poetry.

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Introduction

The human existence is possible in the cultural periphery of the society as it binds him with other people. Everyone abides by the norms, values and traditions of the localized social, religious and political culture. Cultural Studies, which emerged as a specified field of academic study in 1960s with the publication of Raymond Williams' Culture and Society (1958) and Richard Hoggart's The Uses of Literacy (1958) and with the establishment of Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (UK) in 1964, has brought to English literature a new concept to analyse and study literary works in the cultural context of the society. Cultural Studies analyses a piece of work in the context of its social background. M.H. Abrams defines it as "a recent and rapidly growing cross-disciplinary enterprise for analyzing the conditions that affect the production, reception and cultural significance of all types of institutions, practices and products" (53). He clarifies further that the chief concern of cultural studies is "to specify the functioning of social, economic and political forces and power structures that produce all forms of cultural phenomena" (53). Cultural Studies is the field which attempts to address many of the struggles within diverse current social and political scenarios.

It is committed to examine the entire range of societal beliefs, institutions and communicative practices. Its basic assumption is that a work cannot be studied independent of its social and material contexts and so "context" becomes "co-text" to be studied along with a work. Cultural Studies, a loosely-structured phenomenon, has elements of Marxism, new historicism, feminism, gender studies, racial studies, urban studies and postcolonial studies. Every area that focuses on social and cultural forces is the subject matter of Cultural Studies.

Nissim Ezekiel is one of the most notable post-independence Indian English poets. He wrote many important poetic works, namely, A Time to Change (1952), Sixty Poems (1953), The Third (1953), The Unfinished Man (1960), The Exact Name (1969) and Hymns in Darkness (1976). He treats poetry as a journey, a way of life, a continuous flow and as something which is closely related to human existence. Bruce King puts it in these words: "He aimed at a contemporary manner which would voice modern concerns and which in style and theme would avoid the dated provincialism of colonial verse" (91). Ezekiel is deeply rooted in the cultural spirit of India which gives to his poetry thematic diversity and authenticity. He himself reinforces,

I have made my commitments now.
 This is one: to stay where I am,
 As others choose to give themselves
 In some remote and backward place.
 My backward place is where I am (181)

In the poem 'After Reading a Prediction', the poet accepts,

This is the place
 Where I was born. I
 Know it
 Well. It is home,
 Which I recognize at last
 As a kind of hell
 To be made of tolerable.
 Let the fevers come,
 The patterns break
 And form again
 For me and for the place.
 I say to it and to myself:
 Not to be dead or dying
 Is a cause for celebration. (155)

As Nissim Ezekiel belongs to a Bene Israel family of Jews and has been educated and brought up in a metropolitan Bombay, he is said to be basically alienated from the Indian ethos. However, this position helped him to see the realities of Indian life from the vantage point of a neutral observer.

Ezekiel becomes the voice of the middle class of India and captures them in various life situations. As a representative Indian, Ezekiel talks about the familial and social values with which an Indian is attached deeply. In his very first collection *A Time to Change*, the wish of an Indian to lead a limited satisfied life with his family is well captured. He also presents ironically certain unique oddities of character and behaviour of Indians like feigned patriotism, corrupt practices, materialism and social vices in poems like "The Patriot", "The Professor" and "The Railway Clerk". He critically presents the peculiarities of Indians such as their belief in non-violence, peace and universal brotherhood which make them a separate entity from others.

At times, Ezekiel points out the oddities of commoners in language and other manners and at some other times, he stands with them and passionately feeling their problems. His social consciousness dipped in human sympathy can clearly be seen in his description of Bombay full of wretched beings in "In India",

Always in the sun's eye
 Here among the beggars
 Hawkers, pavement sleepers,
 Hutman dwellers, slums,
 Dead souls of men and gods
 Burnt out mothers, frightened
 Virgins, wasted child
 And tortured animal,
 All in noisy silence
 Suffering the place and time
 I ride my elephant of thought (131)

His poem "Morning Walk" inspired by the local habitation of India is an eye-opening work for readers in telling about the wastage of human potential, animal existence of slum-dwellers and need of social justice for them.

Barbaric city sick with slums
 Deprived of seasons, blessed with rains
 Its hawkers, beggars, iron-lunged
 Processions led by frantic drums,
 A million purgatorial lanes,
 And childlike masses, many tongued,
 Whose wages are in words and crumbs. (119)

City life, problems related to marriage, alienated existence, quest for how to live happily, calmly and ethically as an integrated human being are some of the themes which immediately relate the poetry of Ezekiel with Indian masses. Bruce King puts it very interestingly in these words "his very outsidership, his marginality makes him representative voice of the urbanized western educated Indian" (92). The "cultural politics" of Ezekiel's poetry against the post 1947 political scenario, as seen by Akshaya Kumar, is to follow "Nehruvian brand of politics" which says that "Indian metaphysics is alright but that is not enough to fill the bellies of poor Indians" (246). Many of Ezekiel's poems relate us to Indian sense and sensibility. In "Night of the Scorpion", Ezekiel captures behavior of peasants, the father, the mother and a holy man when the mother was poisoned by a scorpion's sting. He highlights the community life in India as when the mother was stung by a scorpion, many peasants came there to help her. There is no doubt that Ezekiel's quest for integration is an acceptance of the actualities and ordinariness of Indian life. This shows their faith in the power of God that by naming Him again and again an evil can be taken care of. The poet also depicts superstitions and blind beliefs of uneducated villagers of India which may sometimes be harmful. Thus from a very simple instance of biting by a scorpion, Ezekiel presents Indians' concern for each-other, a close bond between husband and wife, superstition attached to Indian life and very comforting motherly concern for her children. Indian city life provides Ezekiel a very revealing theme and he captures it with all its filth and dirt and its cramping and dehumanizing effect on men.

All this reminds one of the city life in India and the problems attached to it. The city life is affecting an average Indian in a great way and he is searching for some counsel and solace in such maddening circumstances. Ezekiel writes in "Latter Day Psalms" about some help from the psychiatrist, saint or god as the savior of trapped modern generation of Indian men and women. He tries to escape from the noise and filthy distractions of the city by relating himself to nature in his poem "Urban" but the realities of life take him back to the town's traffic and clamour. However his love for Indian urban life is clear in "City Song",

As I sway in the breeze,
 The city sways below.
 Suddenly I learn
 What I always knew:
 I don't wish to go any higher.
 I want to return
 As soon as I can,
 To be of this city,
 I feel its hot breath,
 I have to belong. (223)

Chindhade describes this tendency of the poet as, "Just as in Lawrence's novels relationships are often defined in terms of love and hate, similarly in Ezekiel's poetry the relationship with the city is of such a dual response" (33). In "Encounter",

the poet feels angry with city people who remain silent which weighs heavily on his bosom and conveys the cold nature of city-bred mass. In this way, Ezekiel presents the dilemma of a middle class Indian caught in the quagmire of the city life and his willingness to escape but it is of no avail.

Another major element which relates Ezekiel with ethos of a common Indian is his treatment of relationship with God. He is quite friendly with God and this reminds us of God being Sakha (friend) to an Indian. Moreover, he is very practical while talking to God and wants him to be useful in his worldly purposes. "The Egoist's Prayers" records this friendship of a common Indian with God in these words,

Do not choose me, O Lord
to carry out thy purposes
I'm quite worthy, of course
but I have my own purposes

.....

O well, if you insist
I'll do your will
Please try to make it coincide with mine. (213)

Again, he talks to God in a lighter mood about the fruit of his work,

No, Lord,
Not the fruit of action
Is my motive.
But do you really mind
Half a bite of it?
It tastes so sweet,
And I'm so hungry. (212)

All this reminds an Indian about his attitude towards God who is more of friend with whom he can share his moments of life. He emerges as the leader who sets standards to cut across the cultural ideals and social realities in reference to Indian nation space in his poetry. Nevertheless, he has been committed to his land which is expressed in his poems like "Background Casually" and "Island" where he reminds us of an Indian urge to stay connected in some way with the motherland. Many Indians moving out to foreign places at one point of time or another, try to search for roots in their motherland in one form or another. Akshaya Kumar accepts that "Nissim Ezekiel's poetry participates very much in the predicament of post-independence India at every conceivable level" (240) but finds it as "a calculated and measured response of an urban educated non-Hindu Indian" (243). There is no doubt that Ezekiel's quest for integration is an acceptance of the actualities and ordinariness of Indian life. His social awareness makes him critical and vehement sometimes.

In fact, Ezekiel's poetry tries to present many strands of Indian cultural context. Though it does not give voice to a large section of India related to rural masses, Ezekiel beautifully highlights many aspects which are generally identified with Indian "personality" which also gives him the credit of being a social reformer with humanistic spirit. Bruce King rightly appreciates him, "The opening up of Indian English poetry to reality in its many guises is perhaps Nissim Ezekiel's most significant influence" (109). No doubt, his non-Hindu self makes him 'alien insider', but it gives him an observation of a neutral analyzer who can present things more clearly as an uninvolved spectator. The cultural study of India with its realities enriches Ezekiel's poetry to reveal the true Indian ethos to the world and makes him the first Indian representative poet in real sense.

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