

Multitude of Themes in the Poems of Nissim Ezekiel and His Poetic Style

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Abstract

Nissim Ezekiel enjoys the status of father- figure in the field of Indo- Anglian poetry. He, along with Kamala Das and Ramanujan, shares the position of one of the foremost Indian poets writing in English. He is an Indian Jew who has lived most of his life in India. Thus, he is a keen observer of Indian life and as a poet he experienced much more of Indian sensibilities and behaviour than other contemporary native poets. He has enriched Indo-Anglian poetry and also gave it a new dimension. The present paper is an attempt to explore the multitude of themes in the various poems of Nissim Ezekiel. He is an Indian poet who at sometimes felt alienated in this country. He is also a post- colonial poet whose poetry seems to be a quest for identity and harmony in life. His poetry depicts the tension of two opposites – his effort to involve himself emotionally in life and his desire to detach from it. His poetic bent of mind has the questioning spirit and skepticism like that of a modern poet. His manner of portraying his themes also makes him distinctive in poetic style.

Keywords

Indo- Anglian, Jew, Sensibilities, Multitude, Alienated, Post- Colonial, Identity, Harmony, Questioning, Skepticism, Modern, Style.

Feeling of Anti – Indianness in Ezekiel's Poetry

The feeling of anti- Indianness in the poems of Ezekiel is due to his childhood experiences. In his autobiographical poem, "Background, Casually," Ezekiel gives an expression to the feeling of social and cultural alienation in India. He studied at a Roman Catholic school and in this poem he narrates his painful experience which he had to go through in that school. He was very badly treated by the boys of other religions whether they were Hindus, Muslims or Christians. He found himself,

A mugging Jew among the wolves.

They told me I had killed the Christ... (Ezekiel 179)

M.K. Naik rightly observes in this connection,

“A major shaping factor in Ezekiel’s poetry is that he belongs to a Bene-Israel family which migrated to India generations ago. Thus substantially alienated from the core of the Indian ethos, Ezekiel is acutely aware of this alienation being accentuated by the fact that he has spent most of his life in highly westernized circles in cosmopolitan Bombay. With Marathi as his ‘lost mother tongue’ and English as his ‘second mother tongue’, Ezekiel’s quest for integration made for a restless career of quick changes and experiments.”
(193-94)

At the same time, Ezekiel has been feeling alienated from his own Jewish ethos too. He cries in the poem, “Background, Casually,”

Could I, perhaps, be rabbi saint?

The more I searched, the less I found. (Ezekiel 179)

Blend of Indianness and Anti- Indianness in Ezekiel’s Poetry

Ezekiel’s poetry is blend of his feelings of Indianness and Anti- Indianness. He definitely wants to see a better India with better life conditions and sensibility. In his poems, he satirized the Indian way of life, Indian thoughts and way of speaking English. His Indian poems satirizes on the orthodox views and superstitions of Indian people. His poem, “The Visitor,” is the narration of personal experience of Ezekiel regarding an Indian superstition. It is believed that if a crow persistently caws in the morning, it indicates the arrival of a guest in the house. The poet imagines the guest as, “an angel in disguise,” who will bring gifts. But when the guest arrives, he turns out to be an ordinary human being who is empty-handed. Ezekiel expresses his disappointment:

His hands were empty, his need:

Only to kill a little time. (Ezekiel 138)

Similarly, “Night of the Scorpion,” is a sharp satire on the Indian beliefs and superstitions. Ezekiel has satirized the Indian characters, rituals, beliefs and thoughts in the poem. In this poem, it is depicted that a scorpion has beaten the mother of the poet-persona. The villagers pay visit to his mother to express their sympathies:

The peasants came like swarms of flies
And buzzed the Name of God a hundred
Times to paralyse the Evil one. (Ezekiel 130)

They believe that the poison of the scorpion is purifying her blood and flesh. The animal imagery reflects the superstitious beliefs of Indian common people. The poem ends with the utterance of a typical Indian mother:

Thank God the scorpion picked on me
and spared my children. (Ezekiel 131)

Portrayal of Common Indian Habits

Ezekiel has reflected some behaviour patterns and characteristics which are inherent in Indian people in general. Some such characteristics are – excessive concern with politics, excessive importance given to the achievements of ancient India and fondness for high sounding, pompous words. Ezekiel has made fun of habit of speaking wrong English by Indians. He has pointed out that Indians mostly use Present Continuous Tense in place of Simple Present Tense. In the poems, “The Patriot,” “The Railway Clerk” and “Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S,” Ezekiel has presented such incorrect use of English by Indians. In the poem, “The Patriot,” the speaker says,

I am standing for peace and non- violence.
Why world is fighting fighting
Why all people of world
Are not following Mahatma Gandhi,
I am simply not understanding. (Ezekiel 238)

Feeling of Detachment and Belongingness for City- Life

Ezekiel has, on various occasions, expressed his feelings of detachment for the city- life. In the poem, “In India,” he has depicted the picture beggars, hawkers, slums, factories, chimneys and “frightened virgins.” The city with its tall buildings is choking the human souls. These terrifying pictures compel Ezekiel to pray to God to grant him privacy and the kinship with the formative elements of the universe – sky, air, earth, fire and the sea. In the poem “Urban,” he again presents a depressing picture of life of Indian city, especially the life of Bombay city. This kind of poems is very common in the middle phase of his poetic career. Similarly, the poem “Island,” is also concerned with the social life and experiences of an individual in a big city. Ezekiel has drawn a haunting picture of depressing life of Indian Metro city in this poem. In the very beginning of the poem, Ezekiel says that Bombay as a city is,

Unsuitable for song as well as sense
the island flowers into slums
and skyscrapers, reflecting
precisely the growth of my mind. (Ezekiel 182)

However, Ezekiel reconciles his mind towards the end of the poem. His resigned acceptance of the present situation reflects his love and sense of belongingness for the Bombay city. He shares his feelings:

I cannot leave the island,
I was born here and belong. (Ezekiel 182)

The kind of restlessness and feeling of alienation, which is quite evident in the poems of Ezekiel, is due to his early experiences and circumstances of life. His brief stay in foreign country, quick changes in his career and his numerous experiments with Philosophy and poverty during his stay in his basement room are the cause of his feeling of frustration. After returning to India he tried his hand at Journalism which resulted in the strong and persistent feeling of alienation in him of various kinds. It is not only the misuse of English by Indian people but also the society and environment which are the cause of his feeling of alienation

from the Indian Society. For instance, in the poem “Rural Suite,” there is the Guru who lacks all the virtues of a saint and Ezekiel expresses his rhetorical anguish here:

If saints are like this,
What hope is there then for us? (Ezekiel 192)

Ezekiel as a Modern Poet

Ezekiel is modern in the sense that he seems to be skeptic and cynic in his treatment of things which are considered sacred. He addresses God as if He were a friend or as a person who has to be reminded of His duty in the poem “The Egoist’s Prayers:”

Who can rescue Man.
If not his Maker?
Do thy duty, Lord. (Ezekiel 212)

He also questions the injunction that the fruit of action should not be the aim of man. He asks God jokingly:

But do you really mind
half a bite of it?
It tastes so sweet,
And, I’m so hungry. (Ezekiel 212)

The poetry of Ezekiel is modern in essence also, as it has an element of self- doubt. The conflict of the mind is presented by him in his various poems. His poems reflect his quest for self- identity. “A Time to Change,” is the perfect example of the poet’s quest for the achievement of his self- identity. He poet urges,

To own a singing voice and talking voice,
A bit of land, a woman and a child or two. (Ezekiel 4)

This modern approach to the Indian context is adopted by various other Indian poets who wrote in English – Jayanta Mahapatra and Ramanujan, to name a few. Keki N. Daruwalla

rightly asserts, "Nissim Ezekiel was the first Indian poet to express a modern Indian sensibility in a modern idiom." (xvii)

Poetic Style of Nissim Ezekiel

In the initial phase of his poetic career, Ezekiel's poetic style was very much limiting. His early poems are highly formal in tone and style. In the middle phase of his poetic career, he wrote poetry of free verse. And, by the end of his poetic career, he used simple and plain words with beautiful use of images and metaphors. Ezekiel has made a valuable contribution in the use of stylistic devices in Indo- Anglian poetry. The poem "Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher," is the perfect example of the excellence of poetic craft. Ezekiel has defined the poet in terms of the lover and the birdwatcher. Here, poetry is described as an act of waiting with patience like loving and bird watching. Ezekiel says,

To force the pace and never to be still
Is not the way of those who study birds
Or women. The best poets wait for words. (Ezekiel 135)

Conclusion

Ezekiel has used common day vocabulary in his poems but with different meaning. Simple words are converted into metaphors, symbols and images. Much importance is given to craftsmanship along with subject matter. Adil Jussawalla rightly observes: "Ezekiel is perhaps the first Indian poet to show the Indian readers that craftsmanship is much important as subject matter." (7) Ezekiel prefers to create such poem in which there is an organic blend of form, manner and style. His art of combination of themes and style places him in the front rank of modern Indian English poets. It is true that he has written poems which depicts his detachment from India and Indian society but, "it is to the credit of Ezekiel that he has reflected not only what many Indians think but also the way they think in English." (Karnani 97)

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