Socio-cultural Ethos and Indianness in the Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel: An Overview

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Abstract: Indo-Anglian literature, irrespective of the genre; poetry, drama, fiction, or essays reflects social, political, cultural, religious, geographical and spiritual background. Indianness in the words of Prof. V.K. Gokak, is “A composite awareness in the matter of race, milieu, language and religion.” In other-words we can say that it is one’s feelings of being an Indian, whether he lives in India or abroad. Nissim Ezekiel is the father of modern Indian poetry. Major themes of his poetry are based on typical Indianness. In the words of Keki Daruwalla, “Nissim Ezekiel was the first Indian poet to express modern India’s sensibility in a modern idiom.” The images of ‘city’ which have become an integral part of modern Indian poetry come out well in his early volumes of poetry such as The Unfinished Man (1960) and The Exact Name (1965). Ezekiel incorporates the heat and dust, the sun and floods, the sense of poverty and deprivation beautifully into the texture of his verse. The images of Indian Landscape prevail all through his poetry. This paper concludes that Indian values, culture, customs, habits, rituals, spirituality, language and Indianness are always there in his blood and writing.

Keywords: Indo-Anglian, typical-Indianness, communal discrimination, Indian sensibility.

I. Introduction

Different critics interpreted Indianness differently. It is the sum total of the socio-cultural patterns of India, the deep-seated political, spiritual beliefs, philosophical ideals – spiritual, social, economic and political – that constitute the very mind of India, which categorically is different from the rest of the world and are reflected in the rapidly growing body of literature which is unseen by the Indians. Indianness can be described as the author’s feeling of being an Indian, whether he lives in India or lives abroad. Indian writers have a tradition and community value that gives them a sense of special identity. They are deeply rooted in Indian contexts. And when they write their beliefs, ideologies, myths, rural and urban societies, their religious-philosophic bonds of mind, the Indian writing in the midst of differences – all find fitting expression through English which is a foreign language. It is difficult to define “Indian sensibility” or “Indian experience.” Defining Indianness is a tough task because of the diversity of Indian culture and languages.

II. The Post Independent Indian Poetry in English (After 1950):

Like various other literatures of the world, Indian English literature also used to express the British influence. But the post independent poetry of modern India discarded the so called influence of the West. The post independent Indian poetry in English shared beliefs, values, customs and behaviours of the society. The poetry gave wide range of cultural trait through symbols, situations, themes and others. They presented the real world conditions, i. e. the contemporary India. Indian legends, folklores, situations, idioms, and themes became the features of Indian English Poetry. Naturally the variety of myths, symbols, images, emotions, sentiments became associated with Indian tradition and culture. The poets’ attempts were consciously Indian. Even the conventional poetic language was replaced by colloquial. The modern Indian English poets reflected perspective and milieu after the independence. Due to the changes in the modern world, the nature, living standard and behaviour of the man was being changed. The persona in this poetry was also changed. His inner conflict, alienation, failure, frustration, loneliness, his relations with himself and others, his individual, family and social contexts, his love, etc. became the themes of the poetry. At the same time the modern Indian poetry in English became complex, harsh and defiance of tradition. Indian poetry in a true sense was being appeared by the fifties. In 1958, P. Lal and his associates founded the Writers Workshop in Calcutta which became an effective forum for modernist poetry. The first modernist anthology was ‘Modern Indo-Anglian Poetry’ (1958) edited by P. Lal and K. Raghavendra Rao.
III. Nissim Ezekiel and Indianness

Nissim Ezekiel (1924 – 2004) was the first of the ‘new’ poets. He is rightly called the father of modern Indian poetry in English. He is a very Indian poet in Indian English. He has experimented idioms and language of Indian’s which became the matter of criticism and was looked down upon as ‘Baboo Angrez / Bombay English / Hinglish etc. Ezekiel’s poetry was a kind of debut in the literary field. He wrote prolifically in addition to prose and drama. His published poetry collections are: ‘A Time to Change’ (1952), ‘Sixty Poems’ (1953), ‘The Third’ (1959), ‘The Unfinished Man’ (1960), ‘The Exact Name’ (1965), ‘Hymns in Darkness’ (1976) and ‘Latter-Day Psalms’ (1984). His ‘Collected Poems’ was also appeared in due course. He is the poet of situations, human beings about which he wrote with subtle observations. He wrote with a touch of humour and irony but with genuine sympathy. The alienation is the central theme of Ezekiel’s poetry. He is the poet of city culture especially of the city, Bombay. Obsessive sense of failure, self doubt and self laceration, exile from himself, love, marriage, art and artist are also themes of Ezekiel’s poetry. Ezekiel’s poetry also reveals technical skill of a high order. His talent and major poetic utterance will remain by virtue of opening new vistas.

Indianness has been very distinct feature of Modern Indian English poetry and Nissim Ezekiel is no exception in this regard. He reveals the Indian sensibility in his poetry. Historically, myths, legends, folklores all go together to establish a distinct Indian idiom and identity. His poetry is truly Indian which draws artistic material from its heritage. Mostly the Indianness is expressed through imagery. Very few of the modern Indian English poets write in English only. Most of them are bilingual poets. The poet like Nissim Ezekiel writes only in English. Otherwise all these poets wrote in their regional languages as well as in national language. These poet tried to mold enrich Indian English in a true sense.

Nissim Ezekiel has given Indian poetry ‘a local habitation and a name,’ Ezekiel’s commitment is to India and he deals with various aspects of Indian life, the superstitious rural people, the Babu English and the city life in Bombay. Ezekiel creates Indian characters in their situation. He also recreates their language as well. His ‘Very Indian poems in Indian English’ are not caricatures. His language is typical Indian English. He creates new idiom. He brought everyday conversational language very close to poetry.

Ezekiel’s use of the English language was linked to colonialism and resulted in controversy. His poetry has all the elements of love, loneliness, lust, and creativity. He joined The Illustrated Weekly of India as an assistant editor in 1953. He started writing in formal English but with the passage of time his writing underwent a metamorphosis. As the time passed he acknowledged that the darkness has its own secrets which light does not know. His poem The Night Of Scorpion is considered to be one of the best works in Indian English poetry and is used as a study material in India and British schools. He worked as an advertising copywriter and general manager of a picture frame company. He was the art critic of ‘The Times Of India’ (1964-66) and editor of ‘The Poetry India’ (1966-67). He was also the co-founder of the literary monthly ‘Imprint’. Ezekiel was awarded the Sahitya Akademi award in 1983. In 1988 he received another honour, ‘Padma Shri’, for his contribution to the Indian English writing. In Hymns in Darkness Nissim Ezekiel has experimented with poster and passion poems. There are memorable changes in the collection. His interests and themes are widened. He is more reflective. His religious and philosophical interests come to the forefront. It is a series of commitments to belong to the place of his birth and the determination to give Indian English poetry “a local habitation and a name”. He has made an attempt to recreate Indian characters in their own situation so that there will be immediate participation by readers. We laugh at such characters but not at them. The idiom in which the poems are written gives a distinct colour to the Indian English Poetry. Irony becomes Ezekiel’s favourite modes in his poems. But here it is gentle and soothing, not bitter and pungent. In some of the poems, he tries to speak of love and sex in the manner of the ancient Sanskrit poets. Most of the poems in this volume bear out Ezekiel’s observation of the modern India with greater authenticity. Consisting of twenty-seven poems and dedicated to Keku and Khoshed Gandhy, ‘Hymns in Darkness’ moves along with deeper thoughts and sure techniques. On the whole, with Hymns in Darkness begins a new era in Ezekiel’s poetic career. He is the most versatile poet who experiments endlessly with form and craft. Subject of Change is the best example of fusion of craft and insight together. The cosmos itself is caught in the narrowing concentric of a vision which is apocalyptic. The co-relation of cosmos with the eye is memorable. The poem shows that the vistas are opened before the poet for the mind to sally forth. They bring new interpretations, when the poet says,

… a flight of birds
fills the sky with a million words.1

The poet presents a real view of phenomenal reality around that is the view of Indian landscape. The poem is an intimation of change that is inevitable. In Subject of Change, the poet makes a beautiful use of simile, metaphor and figurative expression in barely twenty lines.

Background, Casually is a confessional and autobiographical poem. It shows the Poet’s commitment to India and especially to Bombay. He ponders over his failures and achievements and reveals his love for India. The poet ironically describes the feeling of religious and communal discrimination in India.
I went to Roman Catholic school,
A mugging Jew among the wolves.
They told me I had killed the Christ,
That year I won the scripture prize.
A Muslim sportsman boxed my years.
The Hindus were equally unkind.²

His poetry has established some kind of recognizable order and relevance for his self in the irrational and featureless world that surrounded him. His gradual emotional disassociation from the immediate environment of the city where he was born began in the early childhood. At school he considered himself a “Mugging Jew” among the Hindu, Christian and Muslim “wolves”; perpetually a “frightened child”. His failure to get into the mainstream of Bombay’s life is symbolically expressed: He presents a comprehensive picture of the city, at once realistic and ironic. Background, Casually expresses the travails of an intelligent Jew boy of “meagre bone” living and growing up in a multi-racial, multi-religious and multilingual urban society where he was so alienated and frightened that:

One noisy day I used a knife.³

In spite of his disgust with the futilities of the sprawling city, he early in life, made a commitment to choose Bombay as his place of residence.

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.⁴

This inevitable choice to stay, however, unsettles the poet. Instead of providing a peace for his thoughts and hopes, it launches the poet into an unending search for stability and repose. “However, Ezekiel has kept his commitment by portraying life faithfully as he finds it in the city of Bombay. He has not shown any craze for visiting foreign countries. Instead his poetry has acted as a mirror for reflecting life as it is actually lived in this backward place”. His desire to belong to the city he chose is often frustrated by the impact of the strange city’s truculent mass culture. The city has become his addiction. No one escapes from the labyrinth of the Circle-like city. The city of “slums and skyscrapers” has seduced the poet to a gradual bitter resignation. In Island he wrote,

I cannot leave the island
I was born here and belong.⁵

As a “good native” he is ready to reconcile with the “ways of the island”. However, the poem has ominous undertones of frustration and sadness expressed through contrasting images like “slums and skyscrapers”, “dragons claiming to be human”, “echoes and voice”, “past and future” and “calm and clamor”. Island is a beautiful lyric consists of five stanzas of five lines each. It deals with his favourite urban theme – the city of Bombay with all squalor and dirt, noise and violence, poverty and human misery. It became a part of poet’s consciousness; he could not live without it. Bombay is described as an island of “slums and skyscrapers” The poverty and dirt symbolized through the slums. The radiance symbolized through the skyscrapers. Bombay with its paradoxical growth and contracts reflects the uneven and paradoxical growth of poets mind. The city has bright and tempting breezes which separate past from future. The air becomes calm and the poet sleeps—“the sleep of ignorance”. The city dweller cannot escape from reality. The Couple is a poem about a love between husband and wife. A woman is shown as indolent and arrogant in her will. She is a wonderful woman with infidelity. Yet a man has to love her. She is beautiful and lovable but difficult to win. Flattery and advances are necessary. Her false love became infused with truest love only in making love.

She is a typical pagan woman:
Her false love became infused
With truest love
Only making love.⁶

The poet speaks of freely about her indolence and arrogance, about her deception, passion, feeling and possession. The poem is ironical in nature. It is about self – deception. The poet holds his views on love, sex and sensuality in daring manners.
The Railway Clerk is a satire on the corruption and dishonesty prevailing in India. Honest, sincere and hard-working persons are humiliated, harassed and tortured. The railway clerk is the speaker who expresses his feeling of discontentment and unhappiness over his sad predicament. Despite his honesty and dedication to work, he has to face odds, difficulties and problems at every step. He sincerely carries out the orders but nobody appreciates his work:

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.  

The poor railway clerk finds it difficult to make both ends to meet. Because his duties are searched as no one offers him bribe. His colleagues get bribe. His wife demands money to meet household expenses. But he doesn’t know how to earn extra money. He has no prospect for getting any promotion because he is not a graduate. He has to face many difficulties at the work place. His leave application is rejected twice in a year. He is overburdened but not paid for his over-time work. Even he doesn’t get any facilities at the work-place. He goes to see a movie once in a week; He meets his friends occasionally and discusses various problems of the country.

The poem is remarkable for the combination of humour, pathos and irony which are interwoven together. It is a monologue in which the speaker speaks aloud to himself. The Truth About The Floods is based on a newspaper report published in ‘The Indian Express’. Some parts of the districts of Balasore, Mayurbhang and Katak in Orrissa and North Bihar were flooded. The flood created havoc there. A relief party came with five students with a transistor/ a teen of biscuits/ a camera. When the villagers approached them, they asked the villagers to keep quiet and make a circle.

Don’t make noise
Said the students
Sit down in a circle
…………………..
…….film songs.

The poet talks of the hatred the people of Panjab against the Govt. servants or officials. He says,

I arrived at Arda
But the villegers wouldn’t talk to me
Till I told them I wasn’t a government officials.

The poem brings two important things to light- firstly, the callousness of the students who have undertaken relief work; secondly, the lack of understanding between the administration and the people. The poet has beautifully highlighted everyday reality that we encounter daily in our country. The indifferent attitude of the official and apathy for the victims of the flood and the craze for the publicity of the relief party are highlighted with a touch of satire. Misery and poverty are very common and rampant. The poem is equally authentic and speaks volumes of reality in context with India and Indian federal system. Bellasis Road exposes the snobbery and false sense of respectability of the so called venerable persons. The middle-class gentlemen keep on remembering the image of the prostitute on Bellasis Road. The poet describes agony of the prostitute who is waiting for the customer. He presents a vivid picture of a waiting lady.

I see her first
As colour only,
Poised against the faded
Red of a post box:
Purple saree, yellow blouse,
green bangles, orange flowers in her hair.

The poet tries to strike roots in the reality which is the meaningful centre of India. The poet is indifferent to her. He can’t do anything for her.

I cannot even say I care or do not care,
Perhaps it is a kind of despair.

The poem, Good-bye Party For Miss Pushpa T. S . is another beautiful poem in Indian English. The poet parodies the craze for “foreign”, modern among the westernized ladies and their typical way of speaking
English. It reflects the mental state of the young ladies who are full of affectations and pretentions and have no ideals and ideas. It is a piece of social satire. It is in the form of a fare-well speech. A party is arranged in to bid fare-well to Miss Pushpa who will soon go to a foreign country to improve her prospects. It highlights the personality of Miss Pushpa T. S. The speaker showers praise on her. It is the reminiscent of any fare-well scene in India. Flattery and hypocrisy becomes the norm of such conventional fare-wells. The typical Indian thought processes are expressed.

Miss Pushpa is coming
From a very high family
Her father was a renowned advocate
In Balsar or Surat
I’m not remembering now which place.
Surat? Ah, yes.

The poem is typically Indian in presentation that is the speaker showers praise in superlatives on Miss Pushpa. This is the vivid reproduction of Indian way of speaking English. The language is simple and colloquial as the poet has employed Indianisms in the poem. It is the Indian way of speaking where the speaker makes digression form the main topics it. After much digression the speaker again describes the qualities of Miss Pushpa. She is very popular both with men and women. She is very obliging and faithful. She never says no. She is always willing to help her friends. She is always friendly to all. The speaker praises her good spirit. He informs quite late that she is going to foreign to improve prospectus. He wishes her a bon voyage. He asks the other speakers to speak and in the end Miss Pushpa “will do summing up.” The poet points out insincerity of the speaker. The height of hilarious nonsense is scaled in Miss Pushpa’s description. The poem is typically Indian in its laxity and shallowness. The entire poem is a biting satirical comment on the way Indians speak. In it the poet draws our attention to hypocritical attitude of the people of our country.

IV. Socio-cultural Ethos in Ezekiel’s Poetry

One cannot dwell into ethos of India without involving into the Indian scene. Nissim Ezekiel has essentially involved into the Indian scene. As Ezekiel says, “I am conscious of my very special situation in relation to India, as a poet, but as a person and citizen I identify myself completely with the country. Its politics, social life, civic problems, education, economic difficulties, cultural dilemmas are all part of my daily life. I would like that cultural identification to be fully expressed in my poetry but it is perhaps only partially so.” Ezekiel’s poetry has recently received more critical scrutiny than that of the others, and one of the reasons for this special focus on his work might be related to the fact that he is the only to state that:

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.\(^{10}\)

However we find Ezekiel making an attempt especially in his later poetry, to understand India’s past, its culture and relate himself to India.\(^{11}\) It has always been on-going conflict for Ezekiel either to be objective to the outside phenomenon or to involve in. He wrote in an essay in 1997 that, “As a poet, it is a contradiction that I have felt most strongly: that the nature of my avocation demanded withdrawal and that simultaneously events that were taking place outside demanded that I be connected with them. How to bridge this gulf is perhaps one of the dilemmas of the poet everywhere in the world, but in the India of the last 50 years, it was an acute problem.”\(^{12}\) It is fact that one who loves has a right to criticize as well. So when Ezekiel depicts the Indian ethos, it is a combination of both the things. By being intimately involved with India, he naturally possesses the right to criticize the hypocrisy of institutions and double practices of many professions. Such stance doesn’t take away the authenticity of Indianness. Ezekiel’s unwillingness to be isolated has already been underlined. It, in fact, has been his constant, positive struggle to develop a meaningful, intimate kinship with the weird world of India. the poet explicitly writes that:

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.\(^{13}\)

Another Ezekiel’s comment further clarifies his relationship with India: “I am not a Hindu, and my background makes me a natural outsider; circumstances and decisions relate me to India.”

Nissim Ezekiel is also fully aware of the necessity of local knowledge to make the poetry genuine, realistic and alive. The poet clearly knows and accepts that, “All my writing comes out of staying here. I am happy to be unhappy here rather than somewhere else. If I stay anywhere else, I will only be unhappy. Here, at least the unhappiness makes sense, unhappiness leads to critical perceptions.”\(^{14}\)

On the one hand Ezekiel associates with Indian scene, and on the other he maintains a secular and unemotional stance towards India. This unique combination of association and disassociation must be kept in mind while discussing Indian ethos in his poetry. In the poem, ‘Something to Pursue’, the poet admits that one needs to drink the waters of one’s soul to be authentic:

- But drink at first the waters of
- Your own soul; a fool instructed
- May remain a fool. Renounce
- Your folly first, my son.\(^{15}\)

As far as material and contents are concerned Ezekiel’s poetry is full of Indianness. A typical Indian atmosphere is always prevailing in the poems of Ezekiel. The Indian society, the Indian relationship between society and nature surprise the reader with their freshness of approach and observation.

Ezekiel’s Indian ethos is a method of surprising discovery in the course of his poetry. He never tries to make the direct statement about India. Rather he creates characters who are representative of Indian life style and mentality. And what more rather than looking down on the meanness of the characters, he shares smile and laughter with them. But how a person who is conscious about the unity of India can be non-nationalist? He wrote in one of the essays, “We must make it clear that separatism is a political crime against the unity of India. The valid issues raised by it should be discussed only on the assumption that the framework never to be touched is Indian national integrity.”\(^{16}\)

Being a city poet in general and Bombay poet in particular, we can easily say that in his poetry he is not representing the Indian ethos in Toto. Sans some poems like ‘Night of the Scorpion’, he describes the moods and mentality of urban people. So it is just to say that here is a poet who is busy in analyzing the urban Indian ethos. In the poem ‘A Morning Walk’, the poet says:

- Barbaric city with slums,
- Deprived of seasons, blessed with rains,
- Its hawkers, iron-lunged,
- Processions led by frantic drums,
- A million purgatorial lanes,
- And childlike masses, many tongued,
- Whose wages are in words and crumbs.\(^{17}\)

The same expression is also repeated in his another poem, ‘In India’:

- Always in the sun’s eye,
- Here among the beggars,
- Hawkers, pavement sleepers,
- Hutment dwellers, slums,
- Dead soul of men and gods,
- Burnt-out mothers, frightened
- Virgins, wasted child
- And tortured animal,
- All in noisy silence.\(^{18}\)

Nissim Ezekiel believed that the city of Bombay is not a city of soul. The people come to Bombay not in search of salvation but success. He wrote: “BOMBAY IS NOT a holy city. No one comes here on a pilgrimage. No one
boasts of having learnt during a short visit how to speak in a softer voice or breathe the purer air of solitude. No, Bombay is not an ancient city of myths and poetic experience. What matters in it more than anything else is success, wealth, power, publicity and awards for achievement. No recognition here of miracles, mystic experience, real prayer instead of religious rituals as mechanical as machines. In the presence of the spirit, the ultimate reality of enlightenment, there is, at best, admiration but rarely an embrace of souls.”

‘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.” The poet successfully catches the belief system of various rural people in this poem. 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.

The last stanza of ‘Night of the Scorpion’ is the very culmination of the sense of sacrifice and vicarious suffering of the mother for her children:

My mother only said
Thank God the scorpion picked on me
And spared my children.

These lines have rich cultural undertones typical of the orient and remotely typical of Hinduism. Only a typical Indian woman can think so.

V. Conclusion

So Ezekiel’s very Indian Poems in Indian English are a good document to look into the Indian ethos of the poet. They are not simply for the purpose of creating humor through caricature of Indian people and Indian scenes. Rather the poet has made use of an Indian idiom to explore the reality and the social structure as he enables him with a first-hand experience. In his more recent verse he has tried to create an Indian flavor by the use of common Hindi words. Guru, Ashram, Burkha, Chapatti, pan, mantra, etc. 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.

References

2. Ibid. pp. 150-180,
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid. pp. 150-180
5. Ibid.
18. Ibid. 131.
22 Ibid. pp. 130-131