

Poetry Reading of Nissim Ezekiel: Examining the Poetic World through Indian Epistemology

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Abstract:

Nissim Ezekiel is an important Indian poet who has created almost a new genre of Indian English Poetry. Almost for the first time, the English poetry has become 'native' to India and thus a new vernacularisation process has started with the poems of Nissim Ezekiel. In this context, this research article tries to understand the 'Poetry Reading', a poem representing the poetic world view of Nissim Ezekiel, in the context of the Indian Epistemological systems. This article largely is an attempt also to understand the poetic process through the epistemological categories of Indian Knowledge Systems. This way of studying a poem can be further applied to other poems of Nissim Ezekiel or of other poets. For Nissim Ezekiel, it is even more relevant as it may gradually help us understand the amalgamation of the Occidental language with the Indic creative processes.

Keywords: Indian Epistemology, Poetic processes, Nissim Ezekiel, Means of Knowledge, Poet's epistemology, Reader's epistemology

Nissim Ezekiel (1924-2004) is an important Indian poet who represents in various ways the international consciousness as he may be viewed as an amalgamation of the Abrahamic and Indic cultures. Born in a Jew following, he is often considered a pioneering figure in the Indian English poetry (Dulai, 2000). Nissim Ezekiel's streams of consciousness appears to emanate from the epistemology of various cultural connects as he writes with an Indic sensibility. As Mohammed Shafiqul Islam writes, Nissim Ezekiel "was the first Indian English poet who brought modernity into the Indian English poetry scene. Despite his orientation with and sojourn in the western world – Europe and America – he remained deeply attached to his country of birth. Wherever the poet stayed during his active years of studying, writing, and teaching, his love for India did not diminish as its beautiful landscape always reminded him of his roots – he was deeply rooted in Indian nature and culture." (Islam, 2017)

His musings over the 'poetry' itself in one of his lesser famous poems entitled "Poetry Reading" stands witness to his attachment to the Indian minds. His poetic epistemology can be found to be closely connected to the Indian ways of acquiring knowledge of this world. In this article, we intend to examine the poem "Poetry Reading" by Nissim Ezekiel in terms of epistemology from the Indian systems of understanding and explaining the texts and the world. Since the poem is relatively less famous, though extremely significant due to its epistemology construct of the poetic world, the text of the poem is appended in the paper at the end. Also, in order to understand the epistemological construct of the poem,

we would go verse by verse understanding of the poem and try to understand the text in the context of the five means of knowledge as explained in the Indian knowledge systems.

To examine a poem in terms of epistemology, we would have to keep in mind the five means of knowledge which are perception, inference, analogy, verbal authority and intuition. (Unit 6, IGNOU). As the present poem is about the reading of the poetry by the poet himself, so through the very title of the poem "Poetry Reading", the poet, who is the narrator for the readers as he is telling about his poet friend, persuades us to construct an image of poetry in our mind, as and when it is read. The narrator is with the poet and follows him "to hear him read and be applauded". Aural perception is involved here. A scene is thus constructed for the readers where they imagine the narrator going after his poet friend and then using their aural perception, they imagine the poet reciting poetry and then the audience appreciating him. Then through his own visual perception, the narrator constructs an image of the poet standing "infirmly, tall and dim". The readers also use their visual perception to conceive this image of the poet, as imparted by the narrator. Then the poet having "half a halo around his head", is an image of not the poet's visual perception, but his intuition, as no person has the 'halo' around his head in reality. It is rather an image suggesting the sacredness of a person. So suggestion is involved here, which is suggesting the solemnity of the poet on his being a poet. The reader can take "half a halo" for yet another meaning, in the sense of the poet not being fully perfect; as he is with not "a halo", but "half a halo". Within intuition, suggestion is involved here thus.

The narrator is recollecting his own experience in a way, as concerned with his poet friend. His epistemology in this stanza is visual perception and intuition, through which he is suggesting certain things to the reader. Although the epistemology of reader is certainly different from that of the poet, because for the poet, the perception is real and through that, he presents the images for the readers, yet it can be said that through the construction of these images, he invites the readers to participate in his own epistemology. The readers are thus tempted to think and imagine almost in the same terms, as the poet himself is thinking and imaging.

In the second stanza, it is through aural perception, that the narrator is able to tell about the poet, who "raised his voice" and the readers have to imagine his voice rising. But what the narrator hears is different from what the readers hear, because the narrator hears the real voice and the reader has to imagine the sound also. The "image" falling like "silver coin upon the floor" is also the result of the narrator's intuition, as the image is not something concrete, which may fall upon the floor. It is the narrator himself imagining it like that and conveying to the readers the same, through language, to create the impression of a sound like that, in the minds of the readers. In lines 5-7, there is an analogy within the intuition as for the narrator, the falling of the image is similar to that of the falling of a silver coin upon the floor having a certain echo.

The echo then swells the "message from another shore", where "another shore" is again the narrator's intuition, as it is not the same real world, but the 'poetic world', where the poet gets lost in, as he there feels himself "released from worldly things". Then the whole world of poetry (lines 9-16) presented before the readers is what the narrator himself imagines, and then constructs the same image before the readers. In the poetic world, the poet was "dumb before the sight he saw". A suspense is

created in the mind of the readers as what did he see and how was he looking while he was dumb. The visual perception of the readers comes into play to imagine or perceive the image of the dumb poet. If we go into the suggestion involved in the dumbness of the poet, it can be said that the poet was dumb on seeing the contrast between his public, that is, poetic world and the private world which is his inner self. [This contrast is evident in the following lines] In the "demons" wearing "angelic wings", visual perception is involved. Then in this and the next line, the intuition also is involved, as the things mentioned in these Lines 11-12 are not real, but the result of poet's imagination, suggesting the truth of poetic world. Line 13 is a statement of uncertainty, where the poet does not know and hence wants to know "Against those demons who can win?" It can be a statement of ambiguity also, as it may mean that none can achieve victory over these demons, suggesting that the poet cannot improve upon his private life, full of contradictions and pretensions. We can say here, that poet's knowledge is uncertain and the nature of reader's knowledge is ambiguous.

In the world of poetry, the poet, who is the narrator's friend, drinks, drugs himself, and indulges in sin with a number of ladies. And in his poetry, he articulates the meaning of every act, which he has experienced in his private life; although the manner of presenting the experiences and truths of private life is different (as we come to know through Lines 11-12). We can say that the narrator is presenting before the readers the poetic world of his poet friend, which he himself had imagined through his friend's poetry. So from the poet to the narrator, and then from the narrator to the reader, the poetry travels. However, it is the poet's intuition and the reader shares the poet's epistemology via visual and aural perception.

If we see the image of poet outside the world of poetry [lines 17-20], it is an altogether different image, where he stands "remote". The narrator's visual perception thus imparts the language to the readers, enabling them to construct an image for themselves. As we know that in poetic world, the poet portrays his private life as different from what it really is; the tussle between the poetic self and the poetic statement is what creates a hell, as we come to know in line 18, that the poet is calling it the "news of hell". The poet or rather the narrator here is thus using verbal authority as a means of knowledge to use the word 'hell' or it can be poet's intuition also to imagine it like that. We can see analogy also involved here, as it is the poet's epistemology, which is associating his private life with hell. Then the poet reads his poetry with "steady throat". Aural perception is involved here. Then the picture of the poet as being "unmoved" or "bored" is what the narrator infers from the reading of the poetry by poet "with a steady throat".

In the last stanza of the poem, we can thus see the poet's epistemology including all the five means of knowledge. We can find his visual perception, aural perception, inference, analogy, verbal authority and intuition. However, the basic difference between poet's and reader's epistemology is that the poet's is the actual retinal image in case of visual perception and the actual image in case of aural perception also; but the readers can not have the very same image as that of poet's. And the images of different readers are different. There is, therefore, a variability in readers' images. In case of intuition also, it is not the actual retinal image of the poet himself, but just his imagination, which constructs the reader's epistemology through mental imaging, with the help of the language given by the poet himself. And the poet provides that language to the readers, which is derived from his own epistemology. In

response to that language, the reader only constructs the images on the basis of analogous experiences of his own, as his images have roots in his own experiences. Hence the difference between the poet's and the reader's epistemology.

In the reading of the above poem with the help of the Indian Epistemological tools, i.e. Pramana-s, as categories for comprehending the poetic consciousness of Nissim Ezekiel, we can find that the poet creates a mental image that represents the poet's as well as reader's ways of looking at the world. The poet himself is split into both as a 'reader' and as a 'poet' – this self-reflection by Nissim Ezekiel helps us identify him as part of the 'attributes' that he identifies in himself as a reader. Though he distances himself from the 'poet', he has lived the creative process as well because we know that he is the poet. This kind of dichotomy takes us to the Indian understanding of 'tat tvam asi' (*Chhandogya Upanishad* 6.8.7) i.e. 'that thou art'. The poet and reader are merged in one and we have seen above various expressions of this poetic sensibility while linguistically realising the creative poetic urge.

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Addendum:

"Poetry Reading" by Nissim Ezekiel
The poet's friends, we followed him
To hear him read and be applauded
He stood infirmly, tall and dim,
With half a halo round his head. (4)

He raised his voice. An image fell
Like silver coin upon the floor,
We listened to its echo swell
That message from another shore. (8)

Where he, released from worldly things,
Was dumb before the sight he saw:
His demons wore angelic wings –
The monstrous truths of moral law. (12)

Against those demons who can win?
He drank, he drugged himself, he went
With wives and whores galore. In sin
And song he spelt out what they meant. (16)

He stands before us now, remote
From all that news of hell explored
And reads it with a steady throat
AS though unmoved or even bored. (20)

Ezekiel, Nissim, (2005)"Poetry Reading", *Collected Poems*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, Page 136.