

Indian Influence on Ezekiel's Poetry

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Nissim Ezekiel, a man of divine quality, was born on 24th December, 1924 in Bombay, in a Marathi speaking Bene Israel Jewish family. By profession his father was a Botany Professor and his mother, a principal of her own school. He finished his school education at Antonio D'souza high school, Bombay. In 1947 he got master degree in literature, with first class, from Wilson college, Bombay University. From 1947 to 48, he taught English Literature at Juter college Bombay. During the period of teaching he published literary articles. In 1948 he went to London to study philosophy. He returned to India after a three and half years stay. He started his writing career in the late 1940s. Initially his adoption of formal English was controversial. Yet he naturalised the language to the Indian situation and breathed life into the Indian English poetic tradition. He is the most marvellous poet in Indian writing in English. He is a man of diverse tastes and interests. He attracts significant critical attention from scholars both in India and abroad. But he is a true Indian poet who shows concern for common men and their difficulties in society.

The increasing and successful poetic career of Nissim Ezekiel is nothing, but the result of Indian influence on him. The influence of both the urban and rural theme forms an important strain in Ezekiel's poetry. Naturally he stands as a poet of the city of Bombay as he was born, brought up and educated there. The different values of Indian life have two sides, urban and rural and these two are the reflections of Ezekiel's national and personal emotions. His search for an idealized city is indeed the poet's search for his identity too. The city Bombay where the people belong to different languages, religions and creeds, seems to be the core of all Indian values. People from different corners of India and even the globe dwell there under one multi-cultural shade. Such a city greatly influenced the poetic life of Ezekiel. Being highly influenced by the ways of Indian life, the poet passes through every bit of existence and makes it his own source of inspiration. Many things in urban life like common scenes and sights, religions, cultures, hotels, restaurants, east west tension and conflict of two cultures, ceremonies, Hindu mysticism, philosophy and theology, low status of women, the representations of different professions like the railway clerk, suffering men and children, beggars, saints, sadhus, healers, yogis, the society girl, the English boss and various human beings fascinate the poet and he presents them in his own fashion. In the same way we find that he is influenced by the various rural things and he tries to present them like poverty, the squalor, the heat and ugliness, oppressed section of the society, dirtiness in hotels, hopeless and jobless people, birds, animals, monkey-show in bazar, very ordinary and common visitors etc. He gives Indian flavour by using common Hindi words like Guru, Ashram, Burka, Chapati, Pan, mantra etc. These things of Indian life dominate both the soul and mind of the poet and reflect in his poetry.

Ezekiel is the poet laureate of the ordinary. He seeks to transmute the mundane, in himself and in his surroundings. He is also the poet of the Indian city. The city of Bombay dominates in his poetry. He is fascinated by everything in Bombay but he tries to present its ugliness, dirt, squalor and wickedness etc. In the poem "A Morning Walk" he shows the city of Bombay as a living-hell:

"Barbaric city, sick with slums,
Deprived of seasons, iron-lunged,

Processions led by frantic drums,
A millions Purgatorial lanes
And child-like masses, many-tongued
Whose wages are in words and crumbs”

In the poem “Island” he describes Bombay as a pleasure island of ‘slums and skyscrapers’. He says, the city has it’s bright and tempting breezes but it fails to provide him with a single-willed direction. This paradoxical life is expressed in following lines:

“How delight the soul with absolute
Sense of salvation, how
hold to a single-willed direction?
I cannot live the island;
I was born here and belong”.

The poem “In India” shows some striking reality of Indian environment. It presents the poverty and prosperity, the heat and dust, the misery and treachery and the exploitation of women, children and animals.

“Always in the sun’s eye
Here among the beggars,
Hawkers, pavement sleepers,
Hutment dwellers, slums
Dead souls of men and goods,
Burnt-out mothers, frightened
virgins, wasted child
And tortured animal
All in noisy silence
Suffering the place and time”.

The poem “On Bellasis Road” is a clear picture of prostitution in Bombay. A lowly prostitute with her “purple sari, yellow blouse, green bangles and orange flower” a combination of multi-colour is ‘poised against the faded red of a post-box’. To earn her daily bread, she makes a sale of her body to hawker or mill-worker, coolie, fortune-teller or street barber.

With his Indian sensibility, Nissim Ezekiel advocates authentically the old customs and conventions, traditions and superstitions mostly in the rural areas. He has close association with India and hence his portraits of India are realistic because they are drawn from his personal experiences and close observation. The poet seems to be deeply rooted in the culture of India hence he searches the truth ironically in customs, conventions and superstitions. His poem ‘Night of The Scorpion’ is the best example, where the superstitious beliefs of the Indian are highlighted with particular emphasis on an ordinary homely situation. One rainy night the poet’s mother is stung by a scorpion and the family members and neighbours are too worried to bring her instant relief because mother occupies an important place in Indian homes.

“The peasants came like swarms of flies
And buzzed the name of God a hundred times
To paralyse the Evil one”.

The villagers have strong faith in prayer and they believe that prayer can prevent the evil influence. They also believe that if the scorpion moves, it’s poison will also move in the blood of the mother.

“With every movement that the scorpion made
His poison moved in mother’s blood, they said”.

The poet ironically displays the world of magic, superstition, irrationality and blind faith represented by the Indian villagers. The same poem highlights the self-effacing love of an Indian mother.

“My mother only said
Thank God the scorpion picked on me
And spared my child”.

In the lyric called “The Visitor” Ezekiel shows an ordinary Indian situation with a typical superstition that cawing of a crow predicts the arrival of some guest, though the crow is a very common bird that continues its cawing naturally without any intention. In some parts of the country the crowing of the crow is considered as ill-omen. In a poem “Entertainment” the poet genuinely reveals another aspect of Indian audience that is street-entertainment through the monkey show which is played on any street of India. In a poem “Cows” he portrays the familiar sight of a cow munching and marching on the road. He is inspired by a cow because it is a sacred animal in India and it is treated as the mother.

Although Nissim Ezekiel’s background makes him a natural outsider, by writing on both rural and urban themes he seems to be more Indian than real Indians. His acquaintance with the Indian scenes and sight makes his poetry as a depository of different images of India.

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