NISSIM EZEKIEL: AN APPROACH & ANALYSIS

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Abstract: This paper deals with the multi-faceted aspects of Nissim Ezekiel’s poetry and is an extension of my conference paper published earlier.

Nissim Ezekiel’s poetry shows the effective use of English Language, which is spoken and written in India. The English language as moulded in India has a flavour of its own, and in the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel it is present in all its strength and weakness. He has shown that the idiom and structure of English as developed in India, is a suitable vehicle of poetry, which can be favourably compared with the poetry of other English speaking nations.

Nissim Ezekiel has defined the tone and trend of the Indian poetry in English in the contemporary period, which may provide new directions and angles in 21st century. Nissim Ezekiel’s poetry has enhanced the confidence level of Indian poets writing in English, and a new breed of poets have established their credentials in English poetry. Nissim Ezekiel is a trend-setter, and the Indian poets writing in English will be benefited by his poetry.

Nissim Ezekiel’s poetry contains the dark shades of alienation arising out of unsatisfied desires, unfulfilled ambitions and failure in love. He ruminates on the growing anxieties regarding the quality of personal and social life, and the resulting feeling of alienation growing within him. But, Nissim Ezekiel is far from being a pessimist, for he has also shown a way to overcome the feeling of alienation, and existential anxiety in his poetry. The poetry of Nissim Ezekiel is a landmark in the modern Indian poetry in English. His poetry shows his approach towards the world in general. He has pointed out that the experience of changing situations and turmoil’s of life should be the bedrock of poetry.

1. Nissim Ezekiel has experimented with patterns of rhythm, meter and structure in his poetry. He shares with T.S.Eliot an experimental outlook, and has used words and phrases in a way which is innovative. He has pointed out that the ideas or images in his poetry, have correspondence with his life and experience.

2. Nissim Ezekiel’s poetry is confessional in tone, and reflects the contradictions and anxieties faced by him. Nissim Ezekiel’s insight into the social structure surrounding him, and his sympathy for the underdog is equally present in his poetry. For Nissim Ezekiel the aim of poetry is to voice the desires, feelings, emotions and aspirations of the individuals.

He says that, poetry should analyze the ‘self’ and provide insight into the world surrounding the individual. Poetry is not merely metre, metaphor, image, symbol, structure and texture, but more than all these. For Nissim Ezekiel poetry ought to reflect the inner conflicts, anxieties, experiences and the place of the individual in the universe.

With the publication of Nissim Ezekiel’s collection of poems A Time to Change in 1953, a new era began in the development of Indian poetry in English. The use of English for creative writing in different areas of literature, gained a new momentum during the sixties. The rich heritage of literature in the languages of India, provided a new inspiration to poets, novelists, essayists using English language for creative writing. Nissim Ezekiel, Ramanujan, Parthasarathy and others became role models for poets and writers in English. Within the Commonwealth literature, a significant place is occupied by Indian literature in English.
Nissim Ezekiel is a master of free verse, which is characterized by the matching of rhythm with theme and emotion. He has mirrored his views on fellow beings, society and the problems of common man in his free verse. Nissim Ezekiel knows well the art of writing metrical verse. In the narrative poem “Night of the Scorpion” the changing rhythm in free verse, brings out the divergence between superstition and scientific knowledge. The correct stress on syntax and grammar in the verses, enhances the emotional impact of the poem. The poem is pervaded by the pungent irony of Nissim Ezekiel.

Nissim Ezekiel’s has pointed out that he has special liking for the two collections of his poetry, The Exact Name and The Unfinished Man. Another collection of his poetry titled Hymns in Darkness has a unity of its own and it is far from being confined to isolated incidents. His poems termed as The Poster Poems, The Poster Prayers and The Passion Poems have initiated new trends in this genre.

Nissim Ezekiel’s poetry is a product of his self-awareness, and self-realisation. He has explored many new avenues, and novel themes in Indian poetry in English. His eminent predecessors like Sarojini Naidu could not provide him any direction or motivation in shaping his poetic creativity. Nissim Ezekiel’s poetry is broad-based and takes into account a variety of themes. His poetry reflects his insight into the socio-political conditions surrounding him. He has delved into the dynamics of the spirit and nature of self. He has accepted the realities of the changing world and society. He finds no dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual, and asserts that both are necessary for leading a life of harmony and peace. He has analyzed the different aspects of human life including love, marriage, sex and religion. His dispassionate analysis of events, and actions of persons, is laced with irony which is sharp and piercing.

The solid basis of sense experience pervades the poems of Nissim Ezekiel. The materialist foundation of life is not denied by him. He has pointed out that along with the ugly and the brutal, there exist the elements of rhythm, nobility and beauty in the world. Nissim Ezekiel visualizes the world of harmony and growth, amidst the chaos and crisis surrounding the individual. He says “Subsidized by dreams alone/The stubborn workman breaks the stone, loosens/Soil, allows the seed to die in it, waits/Patiently for grapes or figs, and even/finds, on a lucky day, a metaphor / Leaping from the sod. If this is not a miracle/Then I am God….”

Nissim Ezekiel accepts the significance of life-forms, and finds in the growth and transformation in nature a movement towards perfection, and higher goals to be reached by mankind. Along with the secular outlook he is aware of the teaching of religions, and the possibility of redemption.

Nissim Ezekiel has protested against the erosion of values and undignified acts which are an insult to humanity. He does not like the ultra-modern trends which degrade the well established value systems, which have proven their efficacy down through the ages. He has described the predicament of persons in the modern age, who are faced with problems which divert their attention from the basic values of life. Nissim Ezekiel says, “Posters selling health and happiness in bottles./Large returns for small investments, in football pools/Or self-control, six easy lessons for a pound/Holiday in Rome for writing praise of toothpastes”.

Nissim Ezekiel explores his self while in search for perfection and truth. He has affirmed that truth only can clear all contradictions in life and help the individual in knowing the real state of affairs in life and the world.

7. ibid., p-9

Nissim Ezekiel’s *A Time to Change and other Poems* shows the search of the poet towards the vision of reality. He wants to unravel the nature of truth, and the rhythm underlying human existence. Nissim Ezekiel likes to know the inner dynamics of the self, and on the foundation of experience finds the answers to the doubts and riddles which have always perplexed him. Without renouncing the raw foundations of biological urges, he wants to find hope and solace in life. He says, “To own a singing voice and a talking voice/ a bit of land, a woman and a child or two/ Accommodated to their needs and changing modes/And patiently to build a life with these…….”

Nissim Ezekiel explores the possibility of combining the secular outlook, with religious feelings. His poem “Something to pursue” indicates the amalgamation of the secular and religious within the modern city life. Nissim Ezekiel also hints the possibility of combining the temporal with the eternal, and feels that the individual can seek for his own salvation. He says “This theme, with variations, turns the mind/To meditation, morning and afternoon,/The gentle close of day, the feminine/Caress of night before the body sleeps, /And time is only meditation, /Prayer and poetry, poetry and prayer”.

In his poem “Something to Pursue” he has stressed on the power of women to cast the spell on man. When man is under such a spell he will lose his sanity, and unity of thought and action, and is under heavy stress and strain. Nissim Ezekiel says that, in such a situation the man will not find “unity/Of thought sensation purpose deed.”

The possible changes in the attitude and approach of woman towards man have been visualized by Nissim Ezekiel in “The old Woman”. He thinks that non co-operation of the wife with her husband grows with the passage of time. He says “She lived on cornflakes, hate and sweetened milk,/Came into the world to be a woman,/Reflect a poem in the hearts of men/And feed their delicate virilities,/But hardened at the core she lived alone,/Her ethic symbolized by stone, by stone”.

8. ibid., p-6
9. ibid., pp 15 & 16

Nissim Ezekiel has no bent of mind towards any metaphysical theory, but his poetry in many places pulsate with religious emotions. In his approach towards religion, Nissim Ezekiel has some resemblance with romantics like Blake and Yeats. He has consistently presented the human predicament and problems in his poetry, with sympathy and understanding.

10. ibid.,
11. ibid.,

Nissim Ezekiel has described the several dimensions in the relationship between man and woman. He has dealt with the transitions, in the union of man and woman in his typical way. He suggests in the poem “An Affair” that she does not distinguish between fact and fancy, and confuses one with the other. She may believe that, her own emotions will be equally reciprocated by her companion. He says “just like this / As I had seen the yellow blondes declare/Upon the screen, and even stroked my hair,/But hates me now.”

Nissim Ezekiel’s collection of poems titled *Sixty Poems* is far from being thematically close-knit, like in A *Time to Change*. The subject matter of *Sixty Poems* is broad-based, throwing light on the wide emotional range of the poet. But *Sixty Poems* cannot be regarded as the diary in verse, dealing with the inner life and commotions experienced by the poet. However, the anxieties, concerns and bent of mind of the poet can be seen in *Sixty Poems*. Nissim Ezekiel has maintained that, in poetry the experiences and memories of the poet reach a higher level of creative expression. He says “I do not want the Yogi’s concentration/ I do not want the perfect charity/Of saints nor the tyrant’s endless power./ I want a human balance humanly/Acquired,
fruitful in the common hour.”  Nissim Ezekiel’s book Sixty Poems throws light also on the different aspects of the relationship between man and woman.14

The theme of man and woman relationship also figures in Nissim Ezekiel’s collection of poems titled The Unfinished Man. The influence of Yeats on Ezekiel is quite evident in The Unfinished Man. According to Ezekiel no person is perfect, and everyone has to strive to learn from the society and interact with fellow human beings, in order to gain insight into the web of human relations including man-woman relationship. The element of harmony in man-woman relationship is stressed by the poet in “Love Sonnet”. He says “We look in consort at the distant sea.”15

Nissim Ezekiel has also portrayed the sentiments of the mother in his poem “Night of the Scorpion”. The mother says “Thank God the scorpion picked on me/and spared my children”.16 The portrait of the ideal mother who is ready to sacrifice her life for the survival of her children, is presented by Nissim Ezekiel in this poem.

Nissim Ezekiel has defined his poetic credo in “A Poem of Dedication”. He has laid stress on absorbing the changes in the world, and move with the flux of time. He says “Each season brings its own peculiar fruits,/A time to act, a time to contemplate”.17 With the passage of time, varied themes and tastes become the fashion of the day, and the poet has to take cognizance of the emerging forces guiding the destiny of people. Nissim Ezekiel wants to create harmony out of clashing interests, and produce “a human balance humanly”. The poetry should reflect the changing scenario in the world. The poet need no super human powers, and his creative faculty is enough to depict the aspirations of mankind. He says that one should not “seek release but resolution,/Not to hanker for a wide, god-like range/Of thought, nor the matador’s dexterity.”.18

Nissim Ezekiel has fused the form and theme in the collection of poems titled The Third. He has explored a new direction and vision, with the stability of structure and expression in The Third. There is also enhanced feeling of anxiety along with irony in The Third. Nissim Ezekiel has laid more stress on his experiences, than on the manipulation of words and phrases in The Third. He says “No longer young but foolish still/He wakes to hear his words unspoken,/A sadness in his toughened will,/And all except his faith unbroken.”19

Nissim Ezekiel’s The Unfinished Man is an important contribution to Modern Indian poetry in English. His poetry has reached a new peak of perfection in The Unfinished Man. Nissim Ezekiel has delved into the basis of human life and the nature of self, and conveyed his vision and understanding of the human pursuit for perfection. The imperfect individual, is termed as unfinished individual by Nissim Ezekiel. He says that no one is perfect, before reaching the ideal of perfection. Distress and anxiety haunts the unfinished man and he suffers from “his own clumsiness”.20

The disadvantages of life in urban environment, is symptomatic of the life of the unfinished man according to Nissim Ezekiel. Life is devoid of charm and aesthetic sense in the urban setting, and people start behaving like machines says Nissim Ezekiel. The hostile environment does not help the individual, to coalesce with it harmoniously. The urban

12. ibid., p-11
14. Ibid.,
15. Ibid.,
16. Nissim Ezekiel “Night of the Scorpion” The Exact Name, Poem III

Nissim Ezekiel, Sixty Poems
individual is always subject to the jarring effects of the environment, which stunts his growth morally and creatively. Nissim Ezekiel says in his poem “Urban,” “At dawn he never sees the skies /Which silently are born again./Nor feels the shadows of the night/Recline their fingers on his eyes./He welcomes neither sun nor rain./His landscape has no depth or height.”

Nissim Ezekiel does not like the urban life, but he accepts that there is no escape from it, and he had to accommodate himself with it. The poet is ready to make the compromise, and live with the contradictions and complexities of life in the city. He finds that, in the present world he is not the only person who is confronted with the contradictions of urban life, for the entire contemporary generation is faced with the same dilemma. Nissim Ezekiel feels that, human existence cannot escape the perplexing situation enveloping it. He says in his poem “A Morning Walk” that the city is barbaric and “sick with slums,/Deprived of seasons, blessed with rains./Its hawkers, beggars, iron-lunged, Processions led by frantic drums,/A million purgatorial lanes,/And child-like masses, many-tongued,/Whose wages are in words and crumbs.”

Nissim Ezekiel is an urban poet. He knows the pulse of city life, and has dealt with the different dimensions of life in the city in his poetry. The tribute paid by him to Jamini Roy, the world renowned artist is equally applicable on Nissim Ezekiel. It is in the collection of poetry titled The Unfinished Man he said, “A people painted what he saw/With eyes of supple innocence,/An urban artist found the law/To make its spirit sing and dance”. A big city like Mumbai has people from all corners of India, and in fact it is a mini-India. The undercurrents in the social and cultural life of Mumbai, has been presented authentically by Nissim Ezekiel in his poems. The diversity in the life style of people in the cities, and the unique party-culture followed by them have been depicted by Nissim Ezekiel in his inimitable way. The ironies and vicissitudes of city life find a place in his poetry.

Nissim Ezekiel has pointed out that, there is hardly any need to undertake torturous journey to reach the religious places, for one can have the grace and the benediction of God in the home itself. He says that over exhibition of religious fervor smack of thoughtlessness and artificiality. In his poem “Enterprise” he has indicated how the pilgrims go on a long march facing many hazards on the journey, without any genuine religious fervor. He believes that one need not visit the distant places to have the grace of God, for “Home is where we have to gather grace”. 

In the collection of poems titled The Exact Name, Nissim Ezekiel appears to be in search to know the nature of reality, and analyse the structure and content of poetry. The poet aims to attain more precision in the expression of his ideas, feelings, emotions and experiences. He says that, poetry should help in knowing reality behind all changes in the world. The poet has a higher task before him. He says “Not only flesh and bone but myths of light/With darkness at the core, and sense is found/By poets lost in crooked, restless flight,/The deaf can hear, the blind recover sight.”

The good poetry is slow to surface in the mind of the poet, says Nissim Ezekiel. Poetry cannot be coerced to take form, and until the right words emerge slowly and steadily the poet has to nurture his mood. The right words are the hallmark of great poetry, and “The best poets wait for words” says Nissim Ezekiel. Like the lover and the birdwatcher the poet has to wait patiently and never hurry to write a poem “before his spirit moved”. 
The poems in Nissim Ezekiel’s collection *Hymns in Darkness*, shows his significant contribution to modern Indian poetry in English. His poetic sensibility has reached the high peak of expression and refinement in *Hymns in Darkness*. The poems in *Hymns in Darkness* express his vision and knowledge of the different aspects of human existence and society. His attempt to find a solution to the complexities of life has been indicated by Nissim Ezekiel in the following poem. He says “unsuitable for song as well as sense/the island flowers into slums/and skyscrapers, reflecting/precisely the growth of my mind./I am here to find my way in it.”

Nissim Ezekiel has shown his insight into some aspects of Indian metaphysics and Vedic hymns in *Hymns in Darkness*. The variegated phenomena in the field of perception, becomes a part of the metaphysical explanation in *Hymns in Darkness*. All the contradictions, and predicaments in human existence get resolved in the hope of attaining salvation. Nissim Ezekiel comes to believe in the benediction of God in *Hymns in Darkness*. He says in his inimitable way, “Don’t curse the Darkness/since you are told not to,/but don’t be in a hurry/to light a candle either./The darkness has its secrets/which light do not know./It’s a kind of perfection/while every light / distorts the truth.”

Nissim Ezekiel’s *Latter-Day Psalms* has much in common with *Hymns in Darkness*. These two collections of poetry describe and clarify the nebulous religious outlook of Nissim Ezekiel. The *Latter-Day Psalms* are modeled on biblical psalms, with irony and dispassionate analysis. Beside these similarities, there is not much in common between the religiosity of Nissim Ezekiel, and the basic tenets of Christianity. This aspect can be observed in the following verses from *Latter-Day Psalms*. “Blessed is the man that walketh/Not in the counsel of the conventional, and is at home with/sin as with a wife. He shall/listen patiently to the scornful, and understand the sources/of their scorn.”

There is a streak of alienation in the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel. His poetry trace his own pilgrimage and inner development in overcoming the anxiety, hopelessness and the challenging situations of life.” If in *A Time to Change* he appears to be at his wits end to find the meaning of all the transformations in the world, in *Latter-Day Psalms* he is able to read clearly the puzzles he is faced with, and is convinced about the possibility of identifying himself with the social environment constructively. Yet the feeling of alienation haunts him, along with the obsession for love and sex.

Nissim Ezekiel has defined the content of his poetry, as well as his primary interests. He has presented himself as a person who is in search for new avenues of expression, and to focus attention on the ever growing problems confronting the individuals and societies. He has frankly admitted the aspect of sensuality and its significance in the lives of the individuals, for it cannot be over looked under any pretext. In his poem “A Different Way” he says that his “drugs are work, sensuality, poetry, and the dance of the self…. “ Nissim Ezekiel revels in expressing his innermost feelings, without censoring them. He is forth-right, and believes in self-expression without any inhibition.


30. The poetry of Nissim Ezekiel reveals his march towards self-discovery, self-assertion and self-realization. In his poems comprising *Latter-Day Psalms*, Nissim Ezekiel is more self-confident, and seems to have over- come the confusions and delusions expressed in his early poems.
Nissim Ezekiel’s verve and sensual delight did not diminish even in the poems written between 1983-1988. He is always frank in the expression of his pet ideas. He has expressed his approach to life in a poem, which also mirror his autobiography. In the poem ‘The Way it went’ he says, “I gave myself/a shake or two/and then there is a child on my lap– he or she is calling me grandpa”. Nissim Ezekiel has described the love between Radha and Krishna, to express his sensual feelings. In Indian mythology and religion, Radha and Krishna are indicative of religious and metaphysical ideas, which have not been taken into cognizance by Nissim Ezekiel. Nissim Ezekiel may not have been acquainted with the outlines of Indian mythology, and religious tradition. According to Nissim Ezekiel, “Radha says she longs for Krishna/As the soul longs for union with god./Krishna likes the idea.”

The significance of the religious tradition which has developed around the Radha-Krishna lore, has not been dealt with in a comprehensive way by Nissim Ezekiel. Nissim Ezekiel has a soft corner for the plight of the teeming masses, who lack the basic amenities of life. The people living in city slums, have to face many hardships in everyday life. While Naipaul did not like the socio-cultural life in India, and found only uncouthness in the Indian way of life, Nissim Ezekiel has identified himself with the common man, and he is never over critical like Naipaul on the habits and customs followed by people. Beneath the irony and satire of his poetry, Nissim Ezekiel has nothing but sympathy for the poor people living below the poverty line. Nissim Ezekiel did not like Jhavula’s book Cold and Dust, and retorted that he could also write a novel, titled Cold and Dust, dealing with the capricious weather of England and snobbish behavior of Englishman. Nissim Ezekiel never disliked the socio-cultural environment, and preferred to live in his own country. He says “Confiscate my passport, Lord,/I don’t want to go abroad./Let me find my song where I belong.”

Nissim Ezekiel’s deeper layers of humanism, which seldom come out openly in his poetry, find full expression in his poem “Yashwant Jagtap”. Yashwant Jagtap is like any other poor man who can be seen in all corners of India, facing all kinds of disadvantages, troubles and hostility. Yashwant Jagtap’s equanimity has not diminished with his advancing age and at sixty he ‘pushes a handcart’, and carries a child on his shoulder when rain water enters the hut in which he lives with his family and children. The pitiable condition of the common man in India, is sketched by Nissim Ezekiel in his poem “Yashwant Jagtap”. Nissim Ezekiel wants to approach the people and the society with an open mind, and if possible provide the healing touch to those who suffer from social neglect. He says in his poem ‘At 62’, “I want my hands / to learn how to heal / myself and others./before I hear/my last song”.

Nissim Ezekiel believes in the fluxional character of life. Human existence is never static, and change is the characteristic of all social institutions says the poet. As change and growth remains the order of life and existence, Nissim Ezekiel wants to explore the different dimensions of existence, and move with the flux of time. His poetry is an assertion of vitality, and expression of the hidden joys of life. Nissim Ezekiel’s poetry reflects the exuberance of youth, unsullied by hypocrisy and pretensions. He does not believe that, at any point of time one can have the total wisdom, and that it should be the aim of individuals to forge ahead continuously, gaining new experiences and knowledge.

According to some critics Nissim Ezekiel has no patience to wait for the use of choicest and appropriate words, for the expression of his poetic ideas. But there are poems like ‘A Poem of Dedication’, ‘For Love’s Record’, ‘Case Study’, ‘Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher’, and ‘Paradise Flycatcher’ etc., which are acclaimed by critics for the use of chiseled language, flow and rhythm.

In the post-independence period, the contribution of Nissim Ezekiel in the development of Indian poetry in English is outstanding. His poetry has substantial technical perfection and has combined irony and apt images in a harmonious way. In the poem titled ‘For a Friendly Critic’ he says, “Awareness of acute/deficiencies, my own / and other peoples’, counterpoints/my daily fiction, riddled with the spirit / I talk of
ugly privacies/as though of ugly privacies/as though of roses,/flaunting them in button-holes/mistrustfully…”.
The poet does not hesitate to expose the deficiencies of himself and others, with equal candour. He is against hypocrisy, and double standards in social life. His poetry reflects on the actual facts in the lives of individuals, without hiding anything.

Nissim Ezekiel’s short poems are pieces of perfection. His short poems are an integral whole, with the depth of ideas, along with the elements of humor and satire. Nissim Ezekiel rises above the personal caprice, and his vision transcends the surrounding limitations. The interplay of humor and satire in Nissim Ezekiel’s short poems can be seen in his oft quoted poem ‘Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.’.


Nissim Ezekiel has laid stress on the primary significance of imagination in all creative activities. He has experimented with different structural forms in his poetry. He has used the classical forms of verse, and also modern form of free verse. His choice of themes cover a wide range comprising religious and spiritual values and the predicament of the individual in the modern world. The poems of Nissim Ezekiel in Hymns in Darkness and other works depict his vision, simplicity and spontaneity of expression. Nissim Ezekiel is an experimenter with poetic diction and expression.

37. Nissim Ezekiel’s poetic technic is quite effective, but very simple. His free verse is very concise, conveying deep meaning in few words. Repetition of lines with changes in words has introduced much novelty in his poetry.