

A study of post independent Indian society as portrayed in Nissim Ezekiel's plays

Sanjana Antil

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English and Foreign Languages, Central University of Haryana,
Mahendergrah, (Indian)Email: sanjanaantil01@gmail.com; Contact No. +91-8607852700

Abstract: Ezekiel's poetry seems to be a comment on the Indian social scenario where he tries to present "what", "how" and "why" of the various aspects of Indian society. He not only tries to highlight the social facts and problems which Indians face because of their poverty, superstitions, squalor etc. but also expresses his deep admiration for the Indian spiritual values. But the admiration for the Indian spiritual values does not mean that he is not aware of the degradation or perversion of the social, moral and spiritual values in the Indian society. He is equally attentive to them as they lead the society to the way of spiritual hypocrisy. Ezekiel's India can be highly individual; at times it can also be subjective to the point of being quirky. However, his own gift for telling detail and reference emerges from his outstanding understanding of the society. What is the most amusing fact of his observation is that his observation does not involve the rejection of the aspects of Indian society and life. He sometimes adopts critical language for India. He criticizes her because he loves her. Even the language of Ezekiel's poems contains a large amount of "Indian" English. The colloquial language and the frequent use of present tense features the use of "Indian English" by the native Indians. The two are the very prominent features of Indianness in Ezekiel's poetry. His poems like "Very Indian Poems in Indian English", "The Patriot", "The Professor" and many other such poems work as a subtle comment on English and the way it is used for communication in Indian society. [Sanjana Antil. **A study of post independent Indian society as portrayed in Nissim Ezekiel's plays.** *Rep Opinion* 2019;11(6):34-38]. ISSN 1553-9873 (print); ISSN 2375-7205 (online). <http://www.sciencepub.net/report>. 6. doi:[10.7537/marsroj110619.06](https://doi.org/10.7537/marsroj110619.06).

Keywords: Nissim Ezekiel's plays, Post Independent, Indian society**Introduction:**

Indian English Literature is a little more than hundred and fifty years old. The British people gave rise to "a new climate of thought and purpose" (Iyengar 37) in the Indian soil. Indian English Poetry has won international distinction and fame. Tracing its growth, it can be divided as Pre-Independent and Post-Independent poetry. The early pioneers like Derozio, Ghose and others, though they were mostly imitative, they paved the way for the later significant Pre-Independent poets like Tagore and Sarojini Naidu. India's Independence did not only bring a change in the social, economic and political fields but also in the field of Literature. The Post Independent poets like Nissim Ezekiel, Keki N. Daruwalla, R. Parthasarathy, A.K.Ramanujan and Jayanta Mahapatra were very much influenced by writers like T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound that their poetry is highly modern. They no longer based their poetry merely on the theme of love and nature. The daring presentation of the contemporary society, the complications of human relationships, alienation, East – West identity, the problems of women, etc., also form the themes of their poems. Keki N. Daruwalla is one of the experts in depicting the contemporary Post-Independent Indian society.

Nissim Ezekiel, one of the most notable among the new postindependence Indian English poets, is the first to publish a collection. His *A Time to Change* appeared in 1952. Hailing from a Bene-Israel family migrated to India generations ago, the theme of alienation is central to Ezekiel's work and colours his entire poetic universe. His poetry reveals a gradual evolution of his art and genius and describes love, loneliness, lust, creativity and political pomposity, human foibles and the „kindred clamour“ of urban dissonance. Some of his collections are *Sixty Poems* (1952), *The Third* (1959), *The Unfinished Man* (1960), *The Exact Name* (1965) and *Hymns in Darkness* (1976).

Nissim Ezekiel (1924 – 2003) was the first of the 'new' poets. He is aptly called the father/pioneer of modern Indian poetry in English. He is a very Indian poet in Indian English. He experimented idioms and language of Indian's which became the matter of criticism and was looked down upon as 'Baboo Angrezi / 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 'LatterDay

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 work. 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.

Nissim Ezekiel is one of the prominent poets who has enriched the modern Indian English Poetry. This unit discusses the life and work of Ezekiel who has touched the various aspects of Indian society in his poetry. There is a fusion between the substance and the medium of expression. His poetry ranges from personal emotions and lyricism to complex linguistic experiments and satire.

Life Sketch and Literary Career of Nissim Ezekiel

Nissim Ezekiel is considered to be the Father of Post Independence Indian poetry in English. He is a prolific poet, playwright, critic, broadcaster and social commentator. He was born on December 24, 1924 in a Jew family. His father, Moses Ezekiel, was a professor of Botany at Wilson College, and his mother was Principal of her own school. The Ezekiels belonged to Mumbai's Jewish community, known as the 'Bene Israel.' In 1947 Ezekiel took his MA in English Literature from Mumbai University. Then he studied philosophy at Birbeck College, London. He married Daisy Jacob in 1952 and the same year his first collection of poems titled *A Time to Change* was published by Fortune Press (London). Returning home Ezekiel joined *The Illustrated Weekly of India* as an assistant editor in 1953 and stayed there for two years. He published his second book of verse *Sixty Poems* the same year. He also worked as a broadcaster on arts and literature for *All India Radio*. Prof. Ezekiel was the head of the Department of English in Mithibai College, Mumbai from 1961 to 1972. He rendered his service as visiting professor at University of Leeds (1964) and University of Chicago (1967). Ezekiel was inclined to the poets such as T.S. Eliot, Yeats, Ezra Pound in his school days. The influence of all these literary personalities was apparent in his early works. His formal use of the English language was linked to colonialism and resulted in controversy. His first collection of poetry *Time To Change* was published by Fortune Press (London) in 1952. 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. *Sixty Poems* was his next

book followed by *The Unfinished Man*. 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. He passed away on January 9, 2004, in Mumbai after a prolonged illness.

Major works of Nissim Ezekiel:

- * *Time To Change* (1952)
- * *Sixty Poems* (1953)
- * *The Third* (1959)
- * *The Unfinished Man* (1960)
- * *The Exact Name* (1965)
- * *The Three Plays* (1969)
- * *Snakeskin and Other Poems*, translations of the Marathi poet Indira Sant (1974)
- * *Hymns In Darkness* (1976)
- * *Latter-Day Psalms* (1982)
- * *Collected Poems 1952-88* (1989)

Ezekiel became the pioneer of "New Poetry" by his greater variety and depth than any other poet of the Post-independence period. In the words of Bruce King, "Of the group of poets—attempting to create a modern English poetry in India, Nissim Ezekiel soon emerged as the leader who advised others, set standards and created places of publication.... Ezekiel brought a sense of discipline, self-criticism and mastery to Indian English poetry. He was the first Indian poet to have such a professional attitude" (qtd. in Awasthi 78). Under the modernist influences he has portrayed a galaxy of themes such as urban-life, sexuality, alienation etc. "Among them 'alienation' and 'belongingness' are the most striking issues in the entire bulk of his poetry" (Awasthi 79).

To sum up, Ezekiel is not only a good poet in the post-Independence India, but also a cause of good poetry in others. He has opened a new era and trend in Indian English poetry. He is the pioneer and father of modernity in Indian English poetry. There are many contemporary Indian English poets who voyage along the path Ezekiel has opened. Let me wind up the paper quoting Mallikarjun Patil:

P. Lal and Dom Moraes have admitted the fact that Nissim Ezekiel was their poetic father.... The

other poets of the younger generation think that Ezekiel is perhaps the first Indian poet consistently to show Indian readers that craftsmanship is as important to a poem as its subject matter.... What Thomas Hardy was to England in the early twentieth century, Ezekiel is to India in the post-Independence era. In fact he is a great spirit to Indian poets in English for several decades.

Nissim Ezekiel's Night of the Scorpion, Jayant Mahapatra's Relationship, A K Ramanujan's The Striders, Kamala Das's The Invitation, R Parthasarathy's Rough Passage, K N Daruwalla's Boat-Ride along the Ganga etc. are some of the well-received pieces of quality of post-independence era. It is not surprising if defending the authenticity of the poetry of this era, Bruce King writes:

"The only answer to those who claimed that Indians could not write authentic poetry in the English in which they had been educated, was to write poetry as good as that of British, American and Irish poets but to write it about Indian lives and conditions."(King, 1987)

This inevitable choice to stay, however, unsettles the poet. Instead of providing an anchor for his thoughts and hopes, it launches the poet into an unending search for stability and repose. "However, Ezekiel has kept his commitment by depicting 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. His desire to escape from the tantaliser city of his birth is never realised because one cannot escape from oneself. 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.

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 clamour".

Nissim Ezekiel is an outstanding poet of post – Independence India. 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.

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's is a versatile genius and the most outstanding Indian English poet. He is a great love poet and his poetry reveals a gradual evolution of his art and genius. A number of major themes run through his poetry gaining in depth and intensity with each successive volume that he has published. No theme recurs so frequently as the theme of love and sex. There are highly sensuous descriptions of the human body and of love-making in the bed. His treatment of the act of love, and of the charms of the female body, is characterized by extreme frankness. This has exposed him to the charge of being a poet of the body, of the female anatomy, of wallowing in sex, but such criticism is superficial and unjust. He is certainly neither a Platonist nor romantic dreamer, nor does he object the claims of the body. His all poems have a great impact on the readers. For example:

Don't curse the darkness

Since you're old not to,

But don't be in a hurry

To light a candle either.

The darkness has its secrets

Which light does not know?

It's a kind of perfection.

While every light Distorts the truth.

Ezekiel's poetry seems to be a comment on the Indian social scenario where he tries to present "what", "how" and "why" of the various aspects of Indian society. He not only tries to highlight the social facts and problems which Indians face because of their poverty, superstitions, squalor etc. but also expresses his deep admiration for the Indian spiritual values. But the admiration for the Indian spiritual values does not mean that he is not aware of the degradation or perversion of the social, moral and spiritual values in

the Indian society. He is equally attentive to them as they lead the society to the way of spiritual hypocrisy.

As far as Ezekiel is concerned, the concept of “Indianness” is quite controversial because of his foreign origin. He has accepted the fact in his poetry that being a “natural foreigner”, he himself felt alienated from the Hindu culture but his desire “to turn the situation” to the positive made him committed and dedicated to Indian society and culture. That’s why, in “Background, Casually” he says:

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.

Ezekiel’s India can be highly individual; at times it can also be subjective to the point of being quirky. However, his own gift for telling detail and reference emerges from his outstanding understanding of the society. What is the most amusing fact of his observation is that his observation does not involve the rejection of the aspects of Indian society and life. He sometimes adopts critical language for India. He criticizes her because he loves her. He is ironic not only about India, but of himself too. He states his position honestly and without being rhetoric,

India is simply my environment. A man can do something for and in his environment by being fully what he is, by not withdrawing from it.
I have not withdrawn from India.

Even the language of Ezekiel’s poems contains a large amount of “Indian” English. The colloquial language and the frequent use of present tense features the use of “Indian English” by the native Indians. The two are the very prominent features of Indianness in Ezekiel’s poetry. His poems like “Very Indian Poems in Indian English”, “The Patriot”, “The Professor” and many other such poems work as a subtle comment on English and the way it is used for communication in Indian society.

Corresponding author:

Sanjana Antil
Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English and Foreign Languages,
Central University of Haryana, Mahendergrah,
(Indian)
Email: sanjnaantil01@gmail.com
Contact No. +91-8607852700

References:

1. “Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T. S.” *Reading Literature in English*. Ed. Dr. Leesa Sadasivan. New Delhi: Cambridge University Press India Private Limited, 2009. 72-73. Print.
2. Awasthi, Mandavi. “Alienation and Belongingness in the Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel and A. K. Ramanujan: A Comparative Study.” *Seeds in Spring: Contemporary Indian English Poetry, Drama, & Critics*. Ed. O. P. Budholia. New Delhi: Adhyayan Publishers & Distributors, 2008. 78-88. Print.
3. Chindhade, Shirish. *Five Indian English Poets: Nissim Ezekiel, A. K. Ramanujan, Arun Kolatkar, Dilip Chitre, R. Parthasarathy*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2001. Print.
4. Ezekiel, Nissim. *Collected Poems*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989. Print.
5. Gautam, Sreedhar. “Rejection of Dejection in Nissim Ezekiel’s Poetry.” *Indian English Literature: A Post Colonial Response*. Eds. Gajendra Kumar and Uday Shankar Ojha. New Delhi: Sarup & Sons Publishers, 2005. 184-187. Print.
6. Iyengar, K R S (1985): *Indian Writing in English*, Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi.
7. Iyengar, Srinivasa K.R. *Indian Writing in English*. New York: Asia Publishing House, 1962.
8. King, Bruce (1987): *Modern Indian Poetry in English*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.
9. Madge, V. M. “Pride and Prejudice in Nissim Ezekiel’s Poetry.” *Indian English Poetry and Fiction: A Critical Evaluation*. Eds. N. R. Gopal and Suman Sachar. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2000. 83-93. Print.
10. Mathews, Fed. “*Latter-Day Psalms: A Postcolonial Reading*.” *Postcolonial Readings in Indo-Anglian Literature*. Ed. K. V. Dominic. New Delhi: Authorspress, 2009. 49-56. Print.
11. Naik, M K (1984): *Dimensions of Indian English Literature*, Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi.
12. Naik, M K (2002): *A History of Indian English Literature*, Sahitya Academy, New Delhi.
13. Nissim Ezekiel, “Egoist Prayers”, *Collected Poems* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, Ed. II, 2005) 212.
14. Nissim Ezekiel, “Guru” *Collected Poems* (Delhi: Oxford University Press Ed. II, 2005) 191.
15. Nissim Ezekiel, “Morning Prayer”, *The Unfinished Man* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, Ed. II, 2005) 121.

16. Nissim Ezekiel, "Song of Desolation", *The Third* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, Ed. II, 2005) 103.
17. Nissim Ezekiel, "The Patriot", *Collected Poems* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005) 237.
18. Patil, Mallikarjun. "Nissim Ezekiel: The Poet." *Indian English Literature: A Post Colonial Response*. Eds. Gajendra Kumar and Uday Shankar Ojha. New Delhi: Sarup & Sons Publishers, 2005. 169-183. Print.
19. Ramakrishna, D. "Nissim Ezekiel's Credo." *Critical Writing on Indian English Writing*. By D. Ramakrishna. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors, 2005. 17-32. Print.

6/21/2019