

INDIANNNESS VS ALIENATION: IN NISSIM EZEKIEL'S SELECTED POEMS

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Every creator, while creating, gets inspiration from his own ambience. Indian English poetry writers are very much different from their western counterparts in their theme, language, use of diction, style of writing, imagery, sensibility etc. Such differences make Indian English poetry "Indian". Indian writers are very much concerned with or influenced by the Indian culture, tradition, customs etc. They write with a view to appealing the Indian audiences. The writer also writes for non-Indian audiences, and to them the features of Indianness makes it exotic and gives a deep feeling and experience of real India.

Prof V.K.Gokak defines 'Indianness' as "a composite awareness" in the matter of race, milieu, language and religion. Thus, Indianness is a sum total of cultural pattern of India, deep rooted in idea and ideas which from the minds of India.

Oncontrary, the sense of alienation, a modern phenomena, an exclusive word in European literature since World War II, depicts a state of mental condition in which people feel 'insecurity', separation from others on the ground of religion and ethos and develop a sense of arrogance towards their natives. The sense of alienation generally succumbs to 'diaspora' or the migrants from one country to another because they, being aliens, suffer a sense of otherness, of rootlessness, a bicultural predicament.

The proposed paper concentrates around the dominancy of these two elements- the Indianness and the alienation, in the Nissim Ezekiel's poetry.

Ezekiel's poetry contains both of the elements of 'Indianness' and 'alienation', and it can be perceived in some of his celebrated poems.

Nissim Ezekiel, born with Parsi religion and ethos in a Bene-Israel family residing in Bombay, is highly acclaimed for his writing in English amongst the modern Indian poets. He, having Jewish lineage, cultivated himself to be an Indian both in his principle and views of the world and established into a temperament that was too multifaceted to calm analysis. He calls himself a good native and protests that he "can not leave this Island/ I was born here and belong". His oversaid assertion makes his claim stronger for being Indian.

On contrary, a sense of alienation- a state in which the 'self' is located in position of insecurity, anguish, anxiety and loss of identity can be found in many of his poems.

If Ezekiel's works are based on love, realism, Indian identity, superstition and imagination; they, too, have the themes of individuality, alienation, resolution and belonging. A steady alteration can be observed in his poetry. While his early poems are dispensed with love and self-doubt, his later poems seek out to associate and connect with his society and culture.

"Many of his poems derive their effectiveness from the poets puzzled emotional reaction to the modern emotional dilemma which he feels to be poignant conflicts of tradition and modernism, the city and the village: some what obvious theme but treated by Ezekeil as an intensely personal exploration"(Williams).

Ezekeil contributed a lot to the world of literature through his literary works. His poetic career spanned for more than three decades. His works are: 'A Time to Change'(1952), 'Sixty Poems' (1953), 'The Third' (1959), 'The Unfinished Man' (1960), 'The Exact Name'(1965), 'Hymns in Darkness' (1976), 'Latter-day Psalm'(1982) and his collected poems. He was bestowed the Sahitya Akadami Award in 1983 and the prestigious civilian award "Padma Shree" in 1988.

Ezekeil's earlier poetry expresses his sense of alienation because his Jewish ancestry in Hindu- muslim society, brutal city civilization modern science-tech influences, new outlook of secularism all impacted him much.

According to M.K.Naik, a major shaping factor in Ezekeil poetry is that he belonged to a Ben-Israel family which migrated to India generations ago. Thus "substantially was acutely aware of this alienation by the fact that he had spent most of his life in highly westernized circles in cosmopolitan Bombay".

In his autobiographical poem, "Background, Casually" he talks:

"My ancestors among Castes,
were aliens Crushing seed for bread".

He, further, expresses his anguish in a satirical vein for his social and cultural alienation from the country to which he does not belong but which he has adopted as his own. He tells us that he had attended a Roman Catholic school where he found himself:

"A Mugging Jew among the wolves
they told me I had killed the Christ".

Further, he explains how his boyhood feelings of persecution at the hands of the natives tormented him when he was punched to ears by a Muslim Youth sportsman:

"A Muslim Youth sportsman boxed my ears"

He also complains of how a Hindu boy terrified him and compelled him to bring out a knife either with the purpose of retorting him or for self defence.

“I grew in terror of the strong
but under nourished Hindu lads
.....one noisy dey I used knife”.

In this very poem he calls India a backward place and declares that “the Indian handscape seers my eyes”. Ezekeil’s sense of alienation gets reflection in his aversion to the mad rush of urban life, particularly of Bombay.

In his ‘Morning Walk’, Ezekeil calls Bombay as a “living hell” and calls it even a barbaric city, “sick with slums”, with a “million purgatorial lane”. Having felt suffocated and alienated amidst lunatic metropolitan life, the poet confines himself and tries to establish communion with self and with God.

In his poem ‘Island’ and a ‘Small Summit’ the poet displays to be “my own guest” in my “one room lunatic asylum”. In ‘Island’ he states:

“I can not leave the island
I was born here and belong”.

Obviously, alienation appears to be one of the characteristics of modern poetry. Here, the poet seems to be disconnected to his ambience. However, in the midst of the sense of alienation in the feeling of ‘not belonging’, Ezekeil craves to ‘belong’. The longing to belong is also a way of reacting his feelings, a reflex response of his alienation. Ezekeil’s alienation from the Indian ethos also appears in his depiction of the conditions in contemporary society where charlatans pose to be God’s incarnation and try to impose superstitions on followers. He asks;

“if saints are like this
What hope is there then for us”.

But his longing to ‘belong’ is not merely a reflex response of his sense of alienation but it is also an endeavour, to reflect his suppressed sensibility of Indianness. The sense of ‘Indianess’ gets vivid expression in his poem ‘Goodbye Party for miss Pushpa T.S’. The title of the poem shows about Indian speech as the word “Goodbye Party” is used here, instead of “Farewell Party” which is commonly used in western circles. The speaker in this poem addresses his colleagues as “friend”, but when he addresses Miss Puspa he uses the word “Dear sister” which is very much accustomed to Indian sensibility. Indianness begins in the very first line of the poem:

‘friends,

Our dear sister.

[Ezekeil-1-2]

The way the speaker uses the ‘tense’ in this poem is also close to Indian English speakers. The frequent use of present imperfect tense instead of simple present tense like-“ you are all knowing, friends”, Miss Pushpa is coming from a high family,..... “is departing for foreign”; “we are meeting today” etc are simple mistakes and Indian English speakers do such mistakes as they never mind mistakes of their words. They just express their feelings without caring the dignity of language. They give impetus to their feelings over the language and English being alien language could become uncomfortable to Indian speakers. However, the essence of Indianness in this poem remains. Pushpa’s gracious behaviour and her benovelent attitude, too proves the spirit of Indianness.

Ezekeil’s ‘Night of Scorpion’, very close to Indian sensibility, depicts the reminiscence of the poet’s past when his mother was groaning with pain after having been stung by a venomous scorpion. The scorpion-bitten incidence and panic situation arose out of it were so vividly and realistically delineated that it could successfully present the picture of religious bent family with Indian ethos residing in remote rural area. It also exhibits a heart-touching example of motherly love when she thanks God because the soorpion picked her up and did not harm her children:

“my mother only said

Thank God the scorpion picked on me

And spared my children”

(Night of scorpion).

Such amazing motherly love and care is not generally seen in other countries. It is overwhelmed only in Indian mother. The other picture imbibed with Indianness is how the villagers gathered around her mother and instead of medicating her, started searching scorpion with candles and lanterns in their hand. They were doing so because they had belief in the superstition that the movement of the scorpion would raise poison into mother’s blood. The depiction of her husband’s effort of applying herbal medicine and pouring paraffin on the scorpion-bitten place and calling on the holly man to chant incantation in order to bringdown the poison, all present the picture of Indian sensibility. The picture in the poem:

“I wanted the flame feeding on my mother

his rites to tame poison with an incantation”.

[Night of scorpion]

Ezekiel's another poem 'The Railway Clerk' represents the miserable condition of a lower middle class Indians:

“My wife is asking for money
Money, money where to get money?
My job is such no one is giving bribe-
I wish I was was a bird.

[The Railway Clerk]

His poem 'Entertainment' focuses not only on the traditional Indian way of amusement but it also shows the means of earnings for livelihood of poor people as well as it also describes the plight of monkeys, too. The scene is as:

Two tiny monkeys
In red and purple pantaloons
prepare to dance
crowd collects
froms a cercle.

But in sarcastic remarks poet exposes the lowering conditions of some of the India who do not even bother to pay for the show:

“anticipating time for payment
The crowd dissolves.

(Hymns in Darkness)

Thus, Ezekeil's poetry possesses both of the elements of Indianness and of Alienation. Thematic variations are obviously remarkable in his poetry because of his minute observations of his surroundings. His poetic achievement is a single most dynamic influence on contemporary Indian poetry in English. Through some of his poems he expresses his feelings of alienation but at last he cheerfully accepts all that he felt and experienced.

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