

Inevitable Triangle: A Literary Study of Identity Crisis in the Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel

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Abstract: As a prolific poet, journalist, critic, playwright and teacher, Nissim Ezekiel established his own style of modern poetry in Indian English poetry. Surprisingly, such a distinguished poet suffered from his personal, national and religious identity. At personal level he considered himself as 'A poet, rascal-clown' for, he illustrated himself as 'The frightened child who would not eat/ or sleep, a boy of meager bone'. He also was left alone by his wife and all his family. At the national level, the more he tried to prove his Indianness, the less he gained. Though he wrote many Indian poems to prove that he is also swimming in the same river of India, but in many cases they were used against him as a poet who insulted Indians. The crisis was to such an extent that he wished to be seen an Indian in the eyes of foreigners in India. His blond hair, blue eyes and fair skin made an outsider out of him. And finally, as liberal Jews, his family and himself were not considered as catholic Jews as his ancestors. A poem like 'Background Casually' from 'Hymns in Darkness' 1976 might be considered as the best autobiography poem that exposes all Ezekiel's identity crises.

Keywords: Nissim Ezekiel, indianness, alienation

Alienation could be one of the most dominant themes of Ezekiel's poetry from his first book '*A Time to Change*' (1952) till his last volume of poetry '*Latter-Day Psalms*' (1982). Though the theme of alienation partly fades its appearance from the beginning to Ezekiel's last works, a keen reader can find its unavoidable outcomes on Ezekiel's life and his poetic career. Ezekiel's identity crises might be different from other writers. His, was not because of exile, imprisonment, poverty, lack of education or living in an unknown place. He was born in Bombay, as a big metropolis, he also lived in Bombay, except for three and half years voluntary sojourn in London. He grew up from a middle-class family. His father was a professor in Department of Botany and his mother was a school teacher. He himself was an educated person and was known as '*Big daddy of Indian English Poetry*'. In fact, Ezekiel's sense of alienation backs to his misfortunate ancestors from 2000 year ago. Belonging to a minority in a vast and multicultural country like India is enough for one to find him/herself as an outsider. Ezekiel was not the first or the last one who suffered from his ancestors' journey from Israel to India. The story of Ezekiel's ancestors and the way they reached India and their early life in Maharashtra is a tragedy of its kind. These new-comers were discriminated against in many ways. They were not allowed to marry out of their own small community. The Bene Israelis too were conservative about marrying outside the community. There was no job for them to

take. They took to farming, and especially oil-pressing for a living. Some others opened shops, but they were not allowed to sell the goods that the local people were selling. The only reserved job for them was crushing seeds. That is why Dr. R Raj Rao in his book *Nissim Ezekiel: The Authorized Biography*, gives the title "The Saturday Oil-Man" to the first chapter. Saturday is the holy day for Jews and pressing seeds and getting oil was their profession. Nissim Ezekiel also refers to his origin in his poem "*Background Casually*" when he writes '*My ancestors, among the castes/ Were aliens crushing seed for bread*'. That is the way the poet, playwright, critic and a professor in literature reveals his isolation from the environment. The sense of failure, loneliness and terror was in him from childhood. The main reason could be that he was not an Indian by blood. His Judaism grew up the sense of alienation in him. That is why in school he finds himself "*a mugging Jew among wolves*":

I went to Roman Catholic school,
A mugging Jew among the wolves.
They told me I had killed the Christ,
That year I won the scripture prize.
A Muslim sportsman boxed my ears.

Ezekiel shouts out his anxiety in the same poem and exposes his sense of terror while he was a small boy in the school:

I grew up in terror of the strong
But undernourished Hindu lads,
One noisy day I used a knife.

One more crucial reason for Ezekiel's sense of alienation could be the detachment of his family to their ancestors. Though they were a known Jew family, the way they lived showed they were no more than a dogmatic Jewish family. Unlike other Jews, Ezekiel was born and grown in a secular Jew family. Culturally, his family was entirely orientated toward the West. As a poet, Ezekiel was not inspired by Indian poets. The poets on whom Nissim Ezekiel was reared were Eliot, Pound, Yeats and some other Western poets. One more shocking aspect of Ezekiel's life is that no one has ever seen Ezekiel's interest in Israel, while many of his community emigrated to Israel since 1950. Language, as a vital feature for each society, brought about big crises in Ezekiel's identity. Nissim Ezekiel was sent to an English-medium school, where speaking in Marathi was strictly forbidden. The spoken language at home was also English. When he became a poet, one of his main regrets in life was his inability to write poetry in Marathi. Though he was born in Bombay, he could not converse in Marathi or Hindi. But, Ezekiel tried to compensate for it by translating some poems of Marathi poet Indira Sant into English. He did it with help from his colleague from Bombay University, Vrinda Nabar. In fact, he did it to come closer to Indians and swim in the real river of India. Nissim himself said why he did it: "*Part of my reason for translating from Marathi was to belong even more fully to Indianness.*" But Nissim's effort at translation was looked down upon and the papers he wrote on were torn to bits. Once he attempted to write some poems in Indian English. But, Vilas Sarang, claimed that Nissim Ezekiel's Indian English

poems have done more harm than good to the cause of Indian English. His passion and willingness to connect with the local culture and language only reflect Nissim's undying love for the country of his birth. Unfortunately, the people of India always considered him as an outsider and a semi-Indian poet. He replies to this isolation thus: *I need India even if India doesn't need me*. His 'Very Indian Poems' could be the best evidence of his passion and concern for India and Indians. Poems such as *Night of Scorpion*, *The Railway Clerk*, *Entertainment*, *Goodbye party for Miss Pushpa T.S.*, *The Truth About the Flood*, *How the English Lesson Ended* and some more poems give words to Nissim's hidden love and passion for India and Indians. As a human being, Ezekiel found himself a man of failures. Nissim's childhood, as he himself says, was a life of failures. As a schoolboy he never participated in any game. This sense of failure seems to have accompanied him to old age. Nissim once said that if he had to write his biography, he would call it *A Thousands Failures*. The poem *Background Casually* from *Hymns in Darkness* would be the best autobiographical source for his life. He frankly accepts his failures which mostly illustrate his childhood:

A poet-rascal-clown was born,
The frightened child who would not eat
Or sleep, a boy of meager bone.
He never learnt to fly a kite,
His borrowed top refused to spin.

It seems that Ezekiel retained the same sense of emptiness throughout his life. Even in his middle and old ages he had the same feeling. Surprisingly, an international poet, literary critic, art critic, mentor of young poets, university teacher ... was not able properly to type letters on the computer. He typed his poems with one finger and as slow as possible. He was not able to drive a vehicle and never got a driving licence; but the worst failure was when Nissim realized he didn't know how to operate a cassette player. The story is that when Nissim wrote songs for his nephew 'Nandu Bhende', the boy included some of these songs in his album and presented the cassette to Ezekiel; but the master-writer could not operate the cassette player and told Nandu: *I will ask Elkan {Ezekiel's Son} to play this cassette for me. He will know how to operate the cassette player*. Ezekiel's self-perception is quite different with many other poets and writers. Unlike others, he never tried to make a hero out of himself. His self-perception is immediately attached to the irony, where he calls himself *rascal-clown*. In fact, he seems to corner his reader's sympathy by showing his lack of heroism in the self. The reader is required to agree that this *boy of meager bone* who *never learned to fly a kite*, is not destined to achieve anything too noble. It could be Nissim's many failures, mostly in childhood, that made him so concerned about weeping children. As his colleague 'Gieve Patel' says, the scene of a weeping child could obsess Nissim; and if the crying did not stop after speaking with the child, it would increase his agitation and his final words to the scene was always: *How on earth can anyone let a child go on weeping*

like this? In fact, a crying child always smashed Nissim's forehead on a wall. But this humanistic feeling was not only for child. Nissim could not also bear animals being tortured by humans. The poem *The Worm* could illustrate his deepest passion toward an invisible creature in the modern world. The best articulation for such an issue is done in 'Latter-Day Psalms II' when he writes:

How can I breathe freely /Thou breakest the teeth of /The ungodly.

This sense of isolation in Ezekiel's poetry could be the outcome of his uncertain life in India. When he discusses his childhood and his passion for India, when he appeals to God for help, to confiscate his passport, when he confesses: *I can not leave the island/ I was born here and belong* or when in his poem *Background Casually* he makes his commitment and writes in a decisive voice:

I made my commitment now. /This is one: to stay where I am,
As other chose to give themselves
In some remote and backward place.
My backward is where I am.

In his essay, *Theme of Alienation in Nissim Ezekiel's Plays*, Dr. R. Raj Rao considers three factors for alienation in Ezekiel's works. He considers 'culture' as the first factor and believes that it is the major factor for an individual isolation and loss of identity. Cultural features like race, dress, food, language and sensibility are those things that can alienate people from each other. The second factor is 'social alienation'. It is the social relationship that can determine the level of acceptance for people. The third and the last factor for professor R. Raj Rao is 'The Offensive Sense in an Individual's Nature'. He believes that it can upset the balance in human interaction and culminate in alienation. Throughout his prolific life, Ezekiel tried to tell his Muslim classmate who boxed his ears, his Christian classmates who accused him of killing the Christ, that he too is an Indian and if he is from a minority community, they are also from a minority, though their community was bigger than his. He wishes to tell Hindus, even if I'm not a real Indian, I have dedicated my life for Indian English literature. In fact, Nissim Ezekiel was right. He did a great service to Indian English literature. That is why he got the Padma Shri award from the President of India in 1988.

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