

The Individual and the Existential Problems: Critiquing the Cultural Conflicts in Nissim Ezekiel's Poetry

- Abhinandan Malas

Abstract: Nissim Ezekiel has contributed prominently in the development of the major trends of modern Indian poetry in English. Ezekiel's poetry depicts the existence of the individual in several spaces. These spaces are influenced and often distorted by the social and cultural discourses when the individual interact with society and other people living in that society. These influences and distortions often threaten the existential space of the individual. Culture becomes an important deciding factor in carving out the existential space of the individual. Ezekiel's poems are often autobiographical in nature. In his poems Ezekiel depicts his various experiences of conflicts that occur due to the difference of cultural background and ancestral past. In his poetry we see how this cultural conflict gives rise to the identity crises for the individual that result in various problems that threaten the existence of the individual. Ezekiel's poetry often shows the poet's tendency to search for a spiritual salvation after getting frustrated with the external chaos and conflicts that arise due to the cultural conflicts which pose a threat to the existence of the individual. Ezekiel's poems like, "Background, Casually", "Poem of the Separation", "Enterprise", "In India" are few examples from the vast corpus of Ezekiel's poetry that deal with the issues discussed above. In this paper I focus on the individual, as depicted by Ezekiel in his poetry, along with its existential problems that result from various cultural conflicts. An analysis of these conflicts gives a better insight into the life of the individual.

Keywords: Individual, identity, existential space, cultural conflicts, human psychology, spiritual salvation.

Nissim Ezekiel's poetic theme depicts a conflict that occurs on both, the physical level as well as the psychological level, and which is caused due to the cultural disparity and heterogeneity that occurs when the poet interacts with society. Ezekiel's poetry highlights the basic condition of the postcolonial Indian society that distorts the existential space of the modern individual and fixes it along with so many problems that threaten the real identity of the individual. Ezekiel's Jewish ancestral background makes him a natural outsider. But he relates his past to his present through culture. Cultural orientation gives him an Indian identity. But this cultural orientation is not easily realized. Complex social structure and multiple racial co-existences make the existence of an individual more complicated and dangerous. Throughout his poetic corpus Nissim Ezekiel has tried to realize his own identity and secure his own existential space by countering the cultural conflicts that he has experienced in his life. While aligning himself to the Indian culture Ezekiel stops from

discarding his cultural origin as well. Ezekiel's poetry focuses on the conflict between the individual and culture as well as between the individual and society. It is also a conflict between the past and the present. In such a scenario the social constructs and communal values play an important role in framing the existential space of the individual. Within Ezekiel we notice the conflict of cultures that transcends all boundaries and pervades all the levels of social and existential issues. This also gives rise to the question of spirituality as well. Ezekiel's poetry often shows the poet's tendency to search for a spiritual salvation after getting frustrated with the external chaos and turmoil that arise due to the cultural conflicts which pose a threat to the existence of the individual. Ezekiel's poems like, 'Background, Casually', 'Poem of the Separation', 'Enterprise', 'In India' are few examples from the vast corpus of Ezekiel's poetry that deal with the issues discussed above. In my paper I focus on the individual, as depicted by Ezekiel in his poetry, along with its existential problems that result from various cultural conflicts. In this paper I intend to highlight how Ezekiel presents these cultural conflicts and the resulting existential problems in his poetry, that consequently give rise to the major issues concerning social, material and spiritual developments of the individual.

Cultural conflicts threaten Ezekiel's existence by intruding into his social and psychological spaces. Social discrimination and the communal violence have been clearly depicted in the poem 'Background Casually' where Ezekiel enlists various occasions of discrimination right from his childhood till his maturity as an adult. As a boy Ezekiel is abused by the boys of the other communities. While this issue highlights the modern problem of communalism on the one hand on the other the psychological conflict is prominent through the poet's attempt to commit suicide. The severity of the conflict increases because Ezekiel can neither discard his Bene-Israeli origin nor can he get assimilated with the mainstream society. The poet's mind never talks for a cultural conversion. Rather, we see an effort in him to make an amalgamation of the two cultures that might define his actual identity and simultaneously his own space of existence that is threatened by this conflict. Society plays an important role in making Ezekiel realize this conflict both on the physical as well as on the spiritual level. The poems 'Background, Casually' and 'Enterprise' are important examples in the instance. Apart from these, the poems like 'Night of the Scorpion', 'The Railway Clerk', 'In India', 'Poem of the Separation' are important examples that depict the development of the poet's Indian sensibility. This Indian sensibility grows along with the consciousness of the Indian culture. To understand the nature of the conflict that rages through Ezekiel's poetry we need to have a study of some important poems of Ezekiel. Culture becomes an important driving force that makes Ezekiel's poetic themes develop. Through his poetry Ezekiel emphasizes on his desire to establish himself as an Indian. He himself says,

I am not a Hindu, and my background makes me a natural outsider:
circumstances and decisions relate me to India. (Parthasarathy, 28)

Ezekiel's obsession with his Indian sensibility justifies his poetic thoughts. But he never forgets his past. Thus, the conflict occurs between his orientations of his present and his past. The poem 'Background, Casually' is an important example in this regard. This poem stands as a confessional and autobiographical work which depicts Ezekiel as a very Indian poet writing in English and also expresses his total commitment to Indian culture and society. The poet dispassionately ponders over his failures and achievements in life and reveals his love for India. The poem depicts his childhood days when he was abused physically and verbally by the other boys from various communities. This occurred due to his different cultural background. Ezekiel has expressed his desire to identify himself with the Indian culture instead of becoming a member of any particular community. Ezekiel seeks his identity in the Indian soil. Ezekiel does not escape from community but wants to be a representative of the Indian culture in its totality. He gets assimilated to the Indian culture and expresses his commitment through the following lines of his poem 'Background, Casually',

The Indian landscape sears my eyes. | I have become a part of it | To
be observed by foreigners. | They say that I am singular, | Their
letters overstate the case... | 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. (Parthasarathy, 36-37)

So, Ezekiel finds his own existential space within the Indian culture where he resides along with his own cultural past. Ezekiel's affinity for the Indian culture and society is remarkably observed in his poems like 'Night of the Scorpion', 'Poem of the Separation', 'Marriage', 'In India', 'Urban', 'In the Country Cottage', 'Very Indian Poems in English', 'The Railway Clerk' and many others where he talks about the Indian family, husband-wife relationship, human bonding, the city-country contrast and many other colourful traits of Indian culture and lifestyle. This tendency to present himself rooted in the Indian cultural milieu itself depicts the underlying conflict which threatens Ezekiel's existential space in society. Poems like 'Enterprise', 'Poet, Lover, Bird Watcher', 'The Visitor', 'Philosophy', 'In the Country Cottage' and others are more philosophical and often spiritual that reflect the poet's inner conflict and the consequent sufferings that compel him to search for a secured space within society where he can exist along with his cultural binding that can remain free from any threat from the outside world. The problem of alienation, cultural displacement and pangs of stereotypical social constructs distort the existential space of Ezekiel. The conflict occurs at various levels and renders a dark colour to his poetry that underlies his thematic motifs. Ezekiel never considers himself to be a foreigner in Bombay and always feels as an Indian in spite of having a foreign ancestral past. But, the cosmopolitan Indian society thrusts on him the burden of communality and forces him to come into conflict with the other communities. Ezekiel's love for the Indian society makes him a true Indian that helps him to come to terms with the odds and barriers faced by him in society. Ezekiel's existential problems are clear from his

helpless expressions in 'Background, Casually',

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. |I grew in
terror of the strong |But undernourished Hindu lads, |Their
prepositions always wrong, |Repelled me by passivity. |One noisy
day I used a knife. (Parthasarathy, 34-35)

Perhaps, it is the existential crisis that leads him to alienation and compels him to search for a spiritual way out. In the poem 'Enterprise' Ezekiel uses the spiritual quest for his personal therapeutic purposes. The poem becomes a metaphor for, a symbol or an allegory of the human condition on Earth. The desire for spiritual relief evolves due to the utter frustration and failure in the materialistic world. In the poem Ezekiel compares the physical journey and the spiritual journey and comes to the conclusion that grace, consolation and salvation can be found and achieved within one's own self. He writes,

When, finally, we reached the place, |We hardly know why we were
there. |The trip had darkened every face, |Our deeds were neither
great nor rare. |Home is where we have to gather grace.
(Parthasarathy, 30)

Like 'Background, Casually' the poem 'Enterprise' also stands as a confessional poem with an existential note which signifies the poet's commitment to the acceptance of reality. Acceptance plays a major thematic role in Ezekiel's poetry. Human bonding, family and love relationships are important thematic motifs through which Ezekiel describes his Indian cultural consciousness and his philosophy of life. Ignoring the various predicaments Ezekiel portrays an individual within the postcolonial Indian society whose existence is threatened by so many problems. By depicting various aspects of the life of an individual Ezekiel portrays a common Indian image with which he identifies himself along with all its problems. Through the railway clerk, in his poem 'The Railway Clerk', Ezekiel expresses his own feelings of deep discontentment, unhappiness and anguish over his sad predicament. Like the individual depicted in the poem Ezekiel also has to face difficulties and problems despite his honesty and dedication towards his country and society. Through the railway clerk Ezekiel expresses his own mind,

I am never neglecting my responsibility, |I am discharging it
properly, |I am doing my duty, but who is appreciating? |Nobody, I
am telling you. (Ezekiel, 184)

The feelings of frustration and peace reside simultaneously in the psyche of Ezekiel. The awareness of the coexistence of terror and peace within the 'soul' and the relationship of reality to art are among the themes of 'On an African Mask'. The poem reveals familiarity with philosophy and twentieth century theories of art. The undercurrent of tension and the conflict reside simultaneously along with a sense of satisfaction in him for being a part of the Indian culture. The poem 'Night of the Scorpion' presents the mother and other family members along with their sufferings and sacrifices. The mother who is stung by the poisonous

scorpion and has suffered intense physical agony for hours is happy that none of her children has been bitten by the deadly insect. In the poem 'Poem of the Separation' Ezekiel describes with artistic detachment the deep and poignant feeling of irreparable loss the poet-lover sustained after getting separated from his beloved. The violent passion of the love is juxtaposed with the sweetness of the beloved. In both the poems ('Night of the Scorpion' and 'Poem of the Separation') Ezekiel depicts sufferings, sacrifice and losses that somehow relate to Ezekiel's own frustration, disillusionment and losses when he tries to relate himself to the Indian culture. The tension and the sense of loss indicate a threat to the existential space of the poet in society. The discrimination faced by Ezekiel in the postcolonial Indian society has created an urge in him to understand and represent a true picture of Indian society in its totality. This thing has been pointed out by John Thieme in his 'Introduction' to the book *Nissim Ezekiel: Collected Poems*,

Born into Bombay's Jewish (Bene-Israel) community, Ezekiel writes from a very specific Indian viewpoint and many of his poems, particularly his love lyrics, deal with private experiences. Nonetheless his verse offers a social vision which moves outwards from his urban experience and minority background to provide optics on many areas of Indian life. (Ezekiel, xxi)

The experiences that Ezekiel has gathered while living in a city like Bombay have been a source of frustration and loss for him. This is also a cause for his alienation as well which has been aptly depicted by M. K. Naik in the following words,

Ezekiel's background itself provides a copy-book example of social and cultural alienation, the story of which is told in "Background, Casually." (Gupta, 95)

Perhaps, that is the reason why Ezekiel tries to explore the country life that is full of vitality and is spiritually rejuvenating. The city society becomes a complicated space where Ezekiel's existence is threatened. While talking about Ezekiel's poetic themes Bruce King writes,

Life in city, sexuality, the problems of marriage, the need to overcome alienation and to create integration among the various aspects of his character are Ezekiel's early and continuing themes. (King, 91)

That is why in the poems like 'In the Country Cottage', 'Urban', 'In India', 'Night of the Scorpion' and others Ezekiel has tried to offer an image of the complications and degenerated conditions of the city life compared to that of the rejuvenating, virile and energetic life of the countryside. In the countryside milieu the poet rediscovers his secured space for existence. These poems also highlight the difference between the city culture and the country culture. Ezekiel's spiritual quest and his interest in the Indian philosophy and Vedic hymns, as depicted in the poems like 'Hymns in Darkness' and 'Latter-Day Psalms', aptly indicate his desire to overcome the tension in him that has resulted from the cultural conflict. The spiritual peace and the philosophical concepts have provided him with enough scope to re-construct his existential space that has been

shattered by the threatening intrusions of the other cultures. But, the scepticism still persists and Ezekiel fails to nullify the conflict totally. While talking about the matter in his 'Introduction' to the book *Nissim Ezekiel: Collected Poems* John Thieme observes,

In his later verse, beginning with *Hymns in Darkness* (1976) where he draws on Vedic hymns, and continued in *Latter-Day Psalms* (1982), Ezekiel appears to move into new poetic territory. Urban experience, understated accounts of love affairs and wry social observation are replaced by a dialogue with spiritual genres, but Ezekiel's response to the Sanskrit and Judaic originals on which he draws is as sceptical as anything in his earlier poetry. (Ezekiel, xxxvi-xxxvii)

The conflict intrudes deep into Ezekiel's subconscious mind where he feels the threat of alienation. In 'Postcard Poems' he talks about the dilemma that almost drives him to 'madness'. This dilemma arises from his inability to locate his existential space along with his true cultural identity. His spiritual quest in 'Enterprise' is an attempt to explore the sub-conscious and locate that existential space and stability within himself that he fails to locate in the outer world. But, the very conflict of cultures within him keeps him doubting about the authenticity of this spiritual or psychological space. As a result of that the threat of alienation looms large over his poetry. The poem 'Sub-conscious' depicts the poet's alienation on the psychological level where he finds himself separated from his own thoughts, his poetry. The loss of poetry depicts the loss of creative power in Ezekiel and again we realize him along with his existential problems. The poet, in utter despair, finds the situation threatening and adverse for staying alive. Loss of poetry is not only the loss of creativity for the poet but also a loss of the secured space for existence. The poems like 'Song of Desolation', 'Something to Pursue' and 'A Poem of Dedication' talk about poet's alienation from the cruel reality, spiritual quest, withdrawal from the world and contemplation followed by moral resolution and returning back to the world. This act of withdrawal from the material world and then returning back to it depicts Ezekiel's desire to re-establish his secured space, which resides in his psychology, in the material world where his actual cultural identity lies. Thus, Ezekiel's poetry becomes a presentation of the cultural conflicts that reside in him and also in the outer world that surrounds him. Through his poetry Ezekiel has often tried to establish his cultural identity as a true Indian and has desperately attempted to carve out his secured space of existence through various interactions within society and with himself. In establishing his identity as an Indian by nature and culture and nullifying his existential problems Ezekiel often explores the paths of spirituality, human psychology and culture. The conflict that originates in culture rages through these various levels and depicts Ezekiel's struggle to overcome this conflict thus, presenting him as a true representative poet of modern India. Ezekiel's poetry not only depicts the predicament of an individual belonging to the minority community but also makes the reader realize the true nature of the conflict that occurs

both inside and outside the individual thus threatening the existential space of that individual. The problems of alienation and dilemma depict the intensity of this conflict and the seriousness of the threat to the existence of the concerned individual. Ezekiel's poetry presents him as not only a representative poet but also as an individual with true identity of Indian sensibility.

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