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ANTI-INDIANNESS IN NISSIM EZEKIEL'S POETRY

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Anti-Indianness in Nissim Ezekiel's Poetry

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Abstract – Nissim Ezekiel occupies a unique position among Indo-Anglican poets of post-Independence era. He gave a new thought and a new outlook to Indian English Poetry and is universally recognized and appreciated as being one of the most notable and accomplished Indian English language poets of the 20th century. He was against the idealism and romanticism of the earlier group of Indian writers in English. High sounding learned words and phrases, metaphors and expressions of Victorian English, long and complex syntax, etc usually mark formal Indian writing in English. . He comes of a Jewish family who had migrated to India and settled down in Bombay where Nissim was born, brought up and educated. As a poet he has observed and experienced much of the Indian life. He tried to look at any typical Indian situation with an Indian attitude and insight. But his poetry seems to be a comment on various aspects of Indian society. He has largely rebelled against the Indian way of life and Indian way of speaking the English language. The present article explores this anti-Indianness in the poems of Nissim Ezekiel.

*Let me show you, friends
A man in jail,
they offered him bail
but he didn't have the money
so he lives in jail...*

(Undertrial Prisoners)

Key words: Anti-Indianness, Indianness, Indian Life, Indo-Anglican, Nissim,

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INTRODUCTION

Nissim Ezekiel occupies a unique position among Indo-Anglican poets of post-Independence era. He gave a new thought and a new outlook to Indian English Poetry and is universally recognized and appreciated as being one of the most notable and accomplished Indian English language poets of the 20th century. He is not only a poet but also a promoter of poetry. He comes of a Jewish family who had migrated to India and settled down in Bombay where Nissim was born, brought up and educated. As a poet he has observed and experienced much of the Indian life. Nissim Ezekiel was an Indian Jewish poet, actor, playwright, editor and art-critic.

Ezekiel enriched and established Indian English language poetry through his modernist innovations and techniques, which enlarged Indian English literature, moving it beyond purely spiritual and orientalist themes, to include a wider range of

concerns and interests, including mundane familial events, individual angst and skeptical societal introspection. In the *History of Indian English Poetry* Lal wrote "after the death of Sri Aurobindo, Nissim Ezekiel is the first major voice that represents, more or less, the change of an era" (Lal, 1969).

He was against the idealism and romanticism of the earlier group of Indian writers in English. High sounding learned words and phrases, metaphors and expressions of Victorian English, long and complex syntax, etc usually mark formal Indian writing in English. He tried to look at any typical Indian situation with an Indian attitude and insight. But it seems that he has largely rebelled against the Indian way of life and the Indian way of speaking the English language. He was more annoyed by the Indian people.

In his poem , *Background*, Casually Ezekiel wrote

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 backward place is this country i.e. India. This is the place where he decided early in his life to continue to live. His poems show more of anti-Indianness than of Indianness. He has written a large number of poems depicting the Indian conditions of life, especially the life in the city of Bombay. In such poems, he has not admired the conditions of life in the city of Bombay, rather has criticized them. There are the smart fellows who fleece the superstitious villagers in the poem *Rural Suite*; there is a Guru who totally lacks all the virtues of a saint in the same poem:

If saints are like this
 What hope is there then for us?

Goodbye Party to Miss Pushpa T.S. is one of the Ezekiel's 'very Indian poems in Indian English'. It is a hilarious parody of and a biting satire on the idiolectal features of English spoken by some people from India. Besides underlining the common Indian use of the present progressive for the simple present and a variety of other Indianisms, the poem vividly reflects the rambling style invariably associated with Indian speakers (Damodar et al., 2012).

Another common mistake pointed by him is the use of the word 'foreign'

Friends,
 our dear sister
 is departing for foreign
 in two three days,
 and
 we are meeting today
 to wish her bon voyage.
 (Goodbye Party to Miss Pushpa T.S.)

The same error in the use of the tense and the word 'foreign' is highlighted in *The Railway Clerk* when the railway clerk says, "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". At another point he says "Some are thinking of foreign". The articles 'a' and 'the' are often omitted by Indians; and the railway clerk commits this

error in his monologue. Further, his poems like *Very Indian poems in Indian English*, *The Patriot*, *The Professor* and many other such poems are a comment on the way English is used for communication in Indian society. In the words of Karnani (1974) "No other poet has successfully exploited the nuances of Indian English as Ezekiel has done".

In the poem, *The Truth About the Floods* Ezekiel mocks at the students whose idea of social service is limited to getting themselves photographed while distributing biscuits among the flood affected villagers.

'Don't make a noise'
 said the students
 'sit down in a circle'.
 The villagers sat down in a circle.
 They did not say another word.
 The transistor was on,
 the biscuits were distributed,
 the camera clicked,
 Then the students left
 Humming the tune
 Of a popular Hindi film song...

He also comments on the inefficiency of our administrative system.

For a visitor
 To the Flood affected areas.
 Of Balasure, Mayurbhanj and Cuttack
 In North Bihar
 In is a job to get at the truth.
 Meet any official.
 He will claim, his distinct
 Sub-division or block
 Is the worst hit'
 And pass on a hand out
 with statistics of relief work.

(The Truth about the flood)

In *Railway Clerk* he portrays the status of the clerk who complains

Money, money where to get money

My job is such, no one is giving bribe

While other clerks are in fortune position

And no promotion even because I am not graduate

His pictures of Indian life emphasize the negative aspects. In *India* he has presents the sight of the beggars, hawkers, pavement sleepers, slum-dwellers etc. He prays for a kinship with the sky, air, earth, fire and sea after a choking sensation by the tall buildings and the factory chimneys.

Here among the beggars,

Hawkers, pavement sleepers,

Hutment dwellers, slums,

Dead souls of men and gods,

Burnt-out mothers, frightened

Virgins, wasted child,

And tortured animal,

All in noisy silence

Suffering the place and time,

I ride my elephant of thought.

(In India)

He describes the city of Bombay as a "barbaric city" sick with slums, deprived of seasons, full of hawkers and beggars crying in *A Morning Walk*. The inhabitants are sick people in the city, which, with its vastness, pollution and sickness seems to have a death- wish.

Barbaric city sick with slums,

Deprived of seasons, blessed with rains,

Its hawkers, beggar, iron-lunged,

Processions led by frantic drums,

A million purgatorial lanes,

And child-like masses, many-tongued,

Whose wages are in words and crumbs

(A Morning Walk)

Bombay is depicted as an unplanned city in *Healers*. The only medicines available on sale are those manufactured by quacks who offer to sell "health and happiness in bottles". The sickness is not just physical but also mental. In *Occasion* Ezekiel describes the routine of a south Indian who returns to the slum in which he lives.

In such a city even the relationship between man and woman is not satisfactory. Poems like *The Couple* and *To a Certain Lady* is a satire on the above relationship. Man's love is a mere "charade of passion and possession" to temporarily possess the woman in order to satisfy his passion. Woman is a kind of a leech sucking the man's flesh and the sexual act is a tasteless encounter in the dark.

"No true poet can escape tradition, for all our yesterdays are involved in the poet's deeper consciousness; and no true poet can escape the pressure of the present, for he is in it and for it..." (Iyengar, 1985).

I cannot leave the island

I was born here and belong.

(Island)

His Indianness lies only in his commitment to this country and his sincere endeavour to bring about some improvements in the conditions of life in this country through his poetry. He wanted to improve the depressing, degrading and disgusting conditions of life as represented by the metropolitan city of Bombay. He wanted to make the people aware of the miserable conditions in which they live. He himself writes:

In India which I have presumed to call mine, I acknowledge without hesitation the existence of all the darkness...In other countries I am a foreigner. In India I am an Indian. When I was eighteen, a friend asked me what my ambition was, I said with the naïve modesty of youth, 'To do something for India' (Ezekiel, 1976).

I am standing for peace and non-violence.

Why world is fighting fighting

why all people of world

Are not following Mahatma Gandhi,

I am simply not understanding.

(The Patriot)

"As a poet, he is aware of his cultural milieu, and native problems. His sharp sensibility enables him to grapple with the situation around him; without nostalgically recalling his stay in England or drawing of a foreign land. He gives careful thought to his ideas, medium of expression and form of works and phrases..." (Mehta, 1984).

He claims and defends India as he writes "...in Naipaul's India, 'the clerk will not bring you a glass of water even if you faint'. In my India, a clerk will do virtually anything for you if he is treated humanely." In his poem 'Background, Casually', he says

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.

But the fact remains that Nissim Ezekiel is critical of much in India as he says: "I see India in most ways as Naipaul ...the routine ritualism, the lip service to high ideals, the petrified and distorted sense of cleanliness, and a thousand other things, all this is true." At another place in this write-up he says: "I am incurably critical and skeptical. That is what I am in relation to India also" (Ezekiel, 1976).

Nissim Ezekiel thus draws attention to the realistic aspects of Indian life and writes about the way English language is used in India for conversation, the flood-affected people, the behaviour of government officials, the wanton women, the Hindu, Christian and Muslim boys and indicates that everything is not well in this country and what exists stands in need of much improvement.

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