

# Poetic Concerns of Nissim Ezekiel and Keki Daruwalla: A Comparative Analysis

Rana Zaidi<sup>1\*</sup> Zakir Hussain Kalis<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Assistant Director, School of Languages, Literature and Society, Jaipur National University, Jaipur, India

<sup>2</sup> Research Scholar, School of Languages, Literature and Society, Jaipur National University, Jaipur, India

**Abstract – Keki N. Daruwalla and Nissim Ezekiel are two powerful voices of modern Indian English Poetry. Their literary communication is testament to their poetic ability and singularity. Though Ezekiel and Daruwalla are among the current Indian English Poets, yet Ezekiel is senior to Daruwalla by almost two decades. Ezekiel began writing in the 1950s whereas Daruwalla in the 1970s. Hence, the work attempts to discover the matching bonds between the two poets in order to analyse the poetic cosmos of the two distinct time periods and in what manner these two poets, representatives of their age, are paving the way for the upcoming poets. In contrast to Ezekiel, Daruwalla is influenced by the western style of writing, more given to language and poetic form. Furthermore, in both the poets the personal and subjective experiences go a long way in shaping their poetic communication. In this background, this paper aims to highlight the various similarities and differences in the poetic themes of Nissim Ezekiel and Keki Daruwalla. It concludes that, both the poets highlighted social, cultural, traditional, superstitious, religious, mythical attitudes of the society recaptured the Socio-cultural aspects of Indian society in a realistic manner. They also highlighted various techniques and styles of writing poetry in Indian English literature.**

**Keywords: Poetic techniques, modernism, socio-cultural ethos, lexis, poetic cosmos.**

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## INTRODUCTION

Both Ezekiel and Daruwalla have recaptured the Socio-cultural aspects of Indian society in a realistic manner which makes them as the greatest artist. Although born in orthodox Jewish and Parsi families, Ezekiel and Daruwalla are found to be freethinkers who mix the sacred and the secular with traces of sarcasm. The outstanding achievements of the two post-colonial Indian-English poets validate the conclusion that Indo-English poetry is no longer be detached from the realities of life and society rather it is truly innovative and Indian in its content.

Although Ezekiel, a professor, and Daruwalla, a police officer, belong professionally to diametrically different camps, they are of the same mind in the way they view and expose political, social and familial ills. They both strive for socio-economic regeneration by quickening the consciousness of their readers through the images of social and familial decadence and disharmony. Most of the poems of Ezekiel and Daruwalla derive much of their strength from their awareness of local conditions of society, pretences of political leaders, troubles of the poor, misery of women and children, contradictions between faith and practice and their own personal pleasures and pains.

Being one of the finest post colonial English poets, Keki Daruwalla and Nissim Ezekiel have tried to explore the practical realities of Indian society through their energetic poetic expertise. They highlighted the social structure of Indian society through their own perspectives. Both possess similarities and differences which have been explored in the following ways.

### 1. Regional Differences.

India has been pictured differently by Nissim Ezekiel and Keki Daruwalla. Daruwalla presents the picture of India which has been distorted by the mass-media and presented to the West with a bit of truth and a lot of shame.

Ezekiel presented Indian Social structure which is characterized with the squalor, slums, heartlessness, brutality and destruction of humanity and individual. His social awareness compels him to indulge in the prevailing social life around him in which he witnesses inequalities, poverty and pretensions. A tone of sadness pervades as he witnesses the degradation of the Indian masses in the overcrowded, dirty and unhealthy environment of the

city. He raised a voice against the rampant poverty which is the root cause of many social evils.

Ezekiel is generally regarded as a poet of the city Mumbai whereas Daruwalla is a poet of rural landscape. The former represents the urban ethos in his poetry whereas the later represents the rural ethos in his poetry.

Being a city poet in general and the poet of Mumbai in particular, we can easily say that Ezekiel is not representing the Indian ethos in Toto. In some of his poems like *'Night of the Scorpion'*, he describes the moods and mentality of urban people. So it is just to say that here is a poet who is busy in analyzing the urban Indian ethos. In the poem *'A Morning Walk'*, the poet says:

*Barbaric city with slums,*

*Deprived of seasons, blessed with rains,*

Nissim Ezekiel believed that the city of Mumbai is not a city of soul. The people come to Mumbai not in search of salvation but success. He wrote, "Bombay is not a holy city. No one comes here on a pilgrimage. No one boasts of having learnt during a short visit how to speak in a softer voice or breathe the purer air of solitude. No, Bombay is not an ancient city of myths and poetic experience. What matters in it more than anything else are success, wealth, power, publicity and awards for achievement..."

### 3. Views on Women.

Both Nissim Ezekiel and Keki Daruwalla talks about the fair sex in their poetry freely and frankly. However their treatment of the female body is widely different. Nissim Ezekiel has been regarded as a poet of love, sex and man-woman relationship. Most of his love poems are concerned with physical, sexual relationship between man and woman. The themes of such poems are sensuality and lust, and not true love or love which has its basis in the heart and emotions. In this regard Rakha observes that "Nissim Ezekiel treated man-woman relationship in frank and sincere manner. The theme of love and sex obsessed his mind and found expression in his early poetry."

Majority of the poems from Ezekiel's first book *'A Time to Change'* (1952), a few poems from *'Sixty Poems'* (1953) and very few poems from *'The Third'* (1959) may be regarded as confessional poems, because in them he treated the physical dimensions of the relationship between man and woman freely and frankly.

Ezekiel in his number of poems presented the descriptions of female body in stark nakedness. Some of such poems are: *'Description'*, *'Gallantry'*, *'Motives'*, *'Haiku'* and *'Beach-scene'*. An excerpt from the poem

*'Description'* clearly shows the poet's fondness and keen desire for a woman's nudity;

*I will begin but now should I begin?*

*With hair, your hair, remembered hair,*

*Touched, smelt, lying silent there*

*Upon your head, beneath your arms,*

*And then between your thighs a wonder*

*Of hair, secret*

*In light and in darkness*

*Bare, suffering with joy*

*Kisses light as air.*

*And I will close-but is this fair?*

Keki Daruwalla on the other hand presents the miserable condition of the women who suffer a lot in the hands of their male-counterpart. In his poem *'Monologue in the Chambal Valley'* (*Under Orion 22*) he pictured an incident of girl and woman trafficking is brought forward to depict the deplorable condition of women. Her selling off is an example of women exploitation by treating them like commodities for profit. The poet states:

*Do you recall how it was with the women?*

*When we started? Taut-breasted ones from the hill*

*Brown ones from Bihar-soft and overripe*

*Daughter of the desert*

*Daughters of the forest tribe?*

Dowry is a specific cultural norm adhered by the people of the Indian subcontinent. The ironical dilemma is seen when the discordance is caused "over some trinkets perhaps. Also, a significant cultural practice and ideology is ascertained in the male's concept of a woman's role and status in the family:

*Women must be confined to the Zenana*

*Like quail in a wicker basket.*

### 4. Thematic Difference.

Major difference between Nissim Ezekiel and Keki Daruwalla lies in their thematic concern and subject matter.

## Major themes of Ezekiel's poetry

### a) Realism

Realism is one of the most recurrent themes in the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel. This theme adds to the flavour of postmodernism as well as post-colonialism in his poetry. A good example of his realistic approach in poetry is viable, in the poem 'The Truth about the Floods' which gives grim picture of poverty. The predicament of the flood-affected victims of Bihar occupies his poetic image. He depicts the picture in the following way:

*The villagers ran to them.*

*They slapped their bellies*

*and whined:*

*I have not eaten for three days.*

*My husband has been washed away.*

*My parents have abandoned me.*

*My son is dying.*

*I cannot find my daughter*

### b) Superstition

Superstition is a very important theme that is covered in the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel. His poetry explores certain facets of the Indian life that are so often questioned and considered obsolete, but still prevalent. In *Night of the Scorpion*, Ezekiel delineates a situation that is representative of the rural Indian ethos and brings out the prevalence of such a situation. He exposed the unrealistic faith and superstitious belief of the people in the following manner:

*May the sins of your previous birth*

*be burned away tonight, they said.*

*May your suffering decrease the misfortunes of your  
next birth, they said....*

*May the poison purify your flesh*

### c) Love

One theme that often surfaces in the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel is love. Love has occupied a central position in the realm of Indo-English poetry and Ezekiel has used it with superb artistic excellence. He has beautifully portrayed love and sex in his poems. He has portrayed love with extreme candor and openness in his poetry.

Such candor can be seen in many of his poems, in one such poem *Emptiness* he says:

*And make no rendezvous with love*

*I would rather suffer when I must.*

## Major Themes in Daruwalla's Poetry

In Keki Daruwalla's poem there are no fix themes because of his wide vision in capacity as an IPS officer. However, he wrote on various themes like Family, History, Social issues, Humor and Satire, misery etc. The major themes are,

### d) Family

Family remains one of the major themes in the poetry of Keki N Daruwalla. Like Ramanujan, he also shows his love for Indian family, culture and to some extent his concern for Indian woman. His love for mother and daughter is really commendable and he wants to simplify his reflection over woman through his poems. He shows how mother love their daughters. In his poem 'Mother', he depicts the picture of crippled and aged mother in such a way that she becomes the universal figure. He mentioned some body parts in the poem, 'Mother' in the following lines:

*"Your spine goes creaking now*

*across the bow of your body,*

*your skin preserves the past in*

*its creases.*

*like mummy-wrap"*

He shows in the poem mother how woman are treated in the family. They are not happy after marriage, before marriage as always she has to suffer different problems. Familiar and marital discords prevail there often from dowry, often from poverty and often they are treated as a commercial product. She is a source of entertainment and object of domination. Even they are placed in the inner apartments of the house. In a poem from 'The Keeper of the Dead', he says:

*"Women must be confined to the zenana*

*like quail in a wicker basket."*

### e) History

History is also one of the major themes in the poetry of Keki Daruwalla. He is really a poet par excellence. His poetic technique and craftsmanship are so

polished and sharp that even some historical events got a new shape in his poetry. In so many poems like 'Al-Azhar Lecture' 'Mehdi of Sudan' 'History' and 'The Middle Ages' he deals with history. He also mentioned various places across the globe in his poems. In his 'Al-Azhar Lecture' he shows us Egypt's history. Mamluk Sultana was the king of that time. A devastating plague snatched away the lives of Mamluk, peasants, fellahin and many more in 1387. Here the poet shows us the devastating

*plague with his poetic creativity:*

*"Take the plague of 1350,  
which travelled like a caravan  
from China across the Pamirs  
to the caravanserai called Egypt;  
rested here, refilled its water-skins  
and moved on to Europe.  
...Loveless in Gaza  
at mill with Hamas.*

#### f) Social Issues

Daruwalla is very much conscious about the society, its problems and issues. Actually very few things are left unnoticed by him. He shows various themes in his poetry. Terror, violence, poverty, slavery, pestilence, death, corruption are all present there in many poems of him. In his 'Notes' he shows how poverty and hunger change a person into a brutal one. But also he wants to show some high ranked persons taking advantage even such crucial times also. Here are the lines where he shows a bus full of food and the hungry people running after it but corrupted officers are making profit from the foods:

*"No end to hoarding!  
Breaking open the lockers they find  
a briefcase full of rice."*

He is such a conscious artist and craftsman that even religious and political condition and the hypocrisy and corruption also are shown in his poetry. In his 'Graft', he shows the actual condition of so called holy people. Actually corruption prevails everywhere and he also wants to throw light on that aspect. Here he shows:

*"To legalize a bastard you've to bribe the priest  
the catechism also has its price.  
He'll wed you to a Turk or a Rabbi's daughter*

*even though you may be uncircumcised."*

#### Similarities between Nissim Ezekiel and Keki Daruwalla

Apart from the poetic differences between Nissim Ezekiel and Keki N. Daruwalla, there are numerous similarities between the two in context with Indianness, culture-consciousness, social and political awareness, and above all their poetic techniques.

##### 1. Zeal for Indianness

Both Keki N. Daruwalla and Nissim Ezekiel's poems reflect aspects of Indianness which is witnessed through their attitude towards Indian; setting and subject matter, allusions to Indian myths, legends and philosophy, depiction of Indian culture, contemporary social and political issues, and the use of Indian words and sentence structure through the process of collocation, lexis, and by formal and functional nativism.

Both Nissim Ezekiel and Keki Daruwalla have essentially involved into the Indian scenes. Ezekiel though was a Jewish by birth, relating him with the Indian culture was not easy, despite this he was a good native, wrote on Mumbai and calls it a barbaric city. He further in one of his poem says,

*"I cannot leave the island  
I was born here and belong."*

Similarly, Daruwalla is also a true Indian by heart and soul. Although he is a Parsi by birth yet he relates himself with India, its culture and society. He never feels alienated from the social-structure and dogmas of Indian culture. He also loves Indian culture and language. When the discussion is about Indianism in Daruwalla then it is also mentionable that he shares his views on Indian English. He calls it his 'Mistress'. In the poem 'The Mistress', he tells us everything about Indian English and says;

*"My love for her survives from night to night,  
even though each time  
I have to wrestle with her in bed. . . .*

*She is Indian English, the language that I use."*

Like Nissim Ezekiel, Keki N. Daruwalla is a typical Indian poet and his poetry is full of Indianness. It is quite clear that it is a natural choice of the poet and not a deliberate one, and therefore, despite communicating foreign landscapes, historical and mythical allusions, and themes in a few of his poems, his poetry is seeped into the Indian sentiments and ethos, displaying the typical Indian



atmosphere and Indian perspectives. He presents the Indian landscapes at a large scale.

A typical Indian atmosphere is always prevailing in the poems of Ezekiel and Daruwalla. The Indian society, the Indian relationship between society and nature surprise the reader with their freshness of approach and observation

## 2. Socio-Cultural Ethos.

Socio-cultural ethos is another major common aspect of Nissim Ezekiel and Keki Daruwalla. Both the poets under study have inbuilt socio-cultural ethos in their poetry. Their poetry has been widely read and appreciated for their cultural consciousness.

Ezekiel's poetry has recently received more critical scrutiny than that of the others, and one of the reasons for this special focus on his work might be related to the fact that he is the only to state that:

*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.*

Another Ezekiel's comment further clarifies his relationship with India: "I am not a Hindu, and my background makes me a natural outsider; circumstances and decisions relate me to India."

Being a city poet in general and the poet of Mumbai in particular, we can easily say that in his poetry he is not representing the Indian ethos in Toto. In some of his poems like 'Night of the Scorpion', he describes the moods and mentality of urban people. So it is just to say that here is a poet who is busy in analyzing the urban Indian ethos. In the poem 'A Morning Walk', the poet says:

*Barbaric city with slums,*

*Deprived of seasons, blessed with rains,*

Similarly Keki Daruwalla depicts the city of Mumbai in the following manner. In his poem Mandwa he states the ugliness of metropolitan city, Mumbai as, "black yeast / from here, and black salt, a wall of rotting muscle." In this poem, the poet sketches the scenic beauty of seascape with its various moods realistically. 'Rumination at Verinag', is notable poem on scenic beauty of the place, Verinag.

Besides corruption, Daruwalla also highlights the stark reality of Indian life, particularly, the contradictory realities that are the co-existence of prosperity and abject poverty. In many poems he has dealt with dark images of death, decay, and destruction.

## 3. Poetic Techniques

Another remarkable feature of Nissim Ezekiel and Keki Daruwalla is their use of the poetic techniques. Both the poets have beautifully make use of numerous techniques in their poetry viz. simile, metaphor, pun, personification, humour, satire, irony, etc.

Daruwalla in his poetry has made his ironical and satirical treatment of certain social evils. Likewise Nissim Ezekiel is also masters of the weapons of irony and satire. Daruwalla too has made a contribution in this respect. Daruwalla's poem entitled 'The people' is a beautiful example in the field of irony and satire.

Similarly, in Ezekiel's poetry we can witness irony at large scale. An early poem, 'Background Casually' is an excellent example of his use of irony to achieve comic effects and to hit targets of criticism. In the very opening line of this poem he ironically describes himself as poet rascal-clown. The irony becomes more marked as the poem progresses. Ezekiel describes himself as a student in a Roman Catholic school in the following manner;

*A mugging Jew among the wolves*

*They told me I had killed the Christ (BC-34)*

Nissim Ezekiel has been compared with Daruwalla as both have in common a powerfully satiric tone, scientific outlook and images of violence through which they give vent to their righteous anger. Myths are used by these poets to make their questions and responses more meaningful.

## 4. Use of vernacular language.

Both Nissim Ezekiel and Keki Daruwalla make use of vernacular language in their poetry. Ezekiel is a very Indian poet in Indian English. Ezekiel has given Indian poetry a local habitation and a local name but with a Swadeshi stamp on it. His commitment to India is hundred per cent and he deals with various aspects of Indian life, the superstitious rural people, the Babu English and the city life in Mumbai. Ezekiel presents Indian characters in their own situation. He also recreates their language and idiom. In his more recent verse he has tried to create an Indian flavor by the use of common Hindi words. *Guru, Ashram, Burkha, Chapatti, pan, mantra, etc.* are a few of Indian words the poet has used to create an illusion of real life as it is lived in India. He reflects the Indian way of life both through the use of vernacular words

and imagery drawn from the common scenes and sights of India.

Similarly, Daruwalla introduces lexical items borrowed from Urdu, Hindi, and Sanskrit to use them with English words and expression in order to present a particular socio-cultural aspect. These words may or may not have an English equivalent; therefore these lexical items are register bound. Also an instance of cultural transmission can be noticed from the use of dialectical words like *banjaras* (a wandering tribe), *Vedangas* (name of certain words, usually six, regarded as part of the Vedas), *amavasya* (night of new moon), *pinddan* (Balls of rice symbolically offered to dead ancestors, but actually fed to cows), *salagram* (black stone worshipped by the Vaishnavas), *Chaitra* (first month in the Hindu calendar corresponding to Aril-May), *bara hazri* ('Pestilence in Nineteenth-Century Calcutta', *kanjars* (a tribe), *ekkas* (Two-wheeled carriage drawn by a horse), *yakshas* ('The King Speaks to the Scribe', *Agori* (a sect among the sadhus, which is not exactly known for its personal hygiene), *bhog* (sacramental food), *Alams* (Heraldic banners inscribed with Imam Hussain's name), *fatiha* ('Apothecary', *kahin* (the dream reader), *mehrab* (A niche in the center of a wall of a mosque which marks the direction of Mecca), *qawwals* (professional singers), *Pir* (a holy man), *arti* ('Small Space'), *dhoti*, *manzil*, *mazars*, *Zenana* etc. are used by the poet.

Thus, there is strong rootedness of Nissim Ezekiel and Daruwalla to their motherland. The scenes, the Nature, the cultural religious texts, the socio-cultural events and the creativity of the language are all testimonial of the poets' sense of belonging that invigorates their sentiments and the hidden emotions for the country, India.

Both the poets studied here are socially committed and concerned with political, familial and religious-cultural realities that disturb human harmony and happiness. Indian-English poetry here is seen to promote pluralism and to posit unity in diversity. The outstanding achievements of the two Indian-English poets confirm the conclusion that Indo-English poetry is no longer removed from the realities of life and society but innovative and truly Indian in its content.

## CONCLUSION

After analyzing the two poets, it can be concluded that Both Ezekiel and Daruwalla deal with the wide range of common themes; i.e. love, sex, human relationships, loss of identity, alienation and exile, loneliness, ambiguities and complexities of modern urban life, frustration and discontentment, Indian contemporary scenes, disintegration of human values, crisis of spiritual values, familiar past and personal memories. In the poetry of Ezekiel and Daruwalla these themes are very common.

Both Nissim Ezekiel and Keki Daruwalla are Indian poets, so they highlighted social, cultural, traditional, superstitious, religious, mythical attitudes of the society. They also highlighted various techniques and styles of writing poetry in Indian English literature. Both are the modern poets yet Nissim Ezekiel is senior to Daruwalla. Various themes are common in them.

Both the poets studied here are writers who have refused to shut their eyes to political, social and familial conditions in the post-colonial phase of Indian life. Their themes range in the main from the tension between inner life and outer life or between aspirations and frustrations on the social front as well as on the personal plane.

What makes them modernists are their use of free verse, new ideas and modern ways of expressing their sense of urban and rural cultural dislocation and their tendency to be mytho-poetic. Both the poets condemn those political demagogues who pretend and deceive the poor for their self-aggrandizement.

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### **Corresponding Author**

**Rana Zaidi\***

Assistant Director, School of Languages, Literature and Society, Jaipur National University, Jaipur, India

E-Mail – [drranazaidi@gmail.com](mailto:drranazaidi@gmail.com)