



A Look at The Ezekiel's Poetry and His Indian

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Abstract

After the World War 2, the situation changed all over the world. A new generation came up. There was a new poetry in England, in France and also in India and in 'Indo-Anglia'. Nissim Ezekiel also belonged to this new poetry that emerged after World War 2. Ezekiel's poems are as a rule lucid and are splendidly evocative and satisfyingly sensuous. In this article 'A Look at Ezekiel's Poetry and his Indian', endeavour has been taken to present his poetic journey from the beginning to the last phase. As an Indo-Anglian writer, how much he bears the fragrance of Indian Soil is remarkable

Beginning of Ezekiel's:-

Ezekiel is from India's sophisticated western metropolis. He is a professor of English, with a literary legend background. Ezekiel pioneered post independence Indian English poetry. Ezekiel's poetry is formally mindful. He wrote realistic verse upto the eighties. Ezekiel was considered the foremost among Indian English poets, but more recently he is being seen as a highly inconsistent poet.

Arvind Mehrotra recognizes two Ezekiel's; one compulsively written a bad verse and the other sometimes a good poem. Gieve Patel talks about a querulous tone in his poetry with the recognition of inadequacies, Ezekiel's poetry and poetics need to be considered afresh.

Ezekiel like many poets writing in Modern Indian languages was politically active. As member of M.N.Roy's "Radical Democratic Party" he was an active trade unionist too. He also wrote poetry, when he came in contact with Ibrahim Alkozi, a theatre person. Alkozi advised him to go abroad and educate himself in Contemporary culture, a piece of that Ezekiel followed, Ezekiel met Keshav Malik, the first editor of Delhi's political journal 'Thought'. Ezekiel started publishing poems in English magazines. C.R. Mandy an Irishman, was then the editor of the Illustrated Weekly of India. When he came to know of Ezekiel, he asked him to send his poems to the Illustrated Weekly of India. Fortune press brought about 'A Time To Change', Ezekiel's first collection in England in 1952. According to Bruce King, "this may be considered the beginning of the cannon of modern Indian English poetry". Before looking further at Ezekiel, career from now on, let's examine the title poem. Clearly it is a far cry from the Victorian sloppiness of the earlier poets. Here is someone who in the 1950s knew that modernism in English poetry was at least thirty years

old. Technique wise it is free verse. But otherwise too this poem announces its modernist identity in the lines like-

“Flawless doctrines, certainty of God,
These are merely Dreams; but I am human
And must testify to what they mean”.

The poem is a meditation in the Judeo-Christian tradition cast in an existentialist mould. But it is clearly heavily indebted to the Eliot of Four Quartets. The poet obviously had read the Wasteland and Ash Wednesday right down to the epigraph. Here is the same blending of themes philosophical, religious, artistic. The three sections roughly follow the stature of each quartet. Except for the personal sentiment expressed here, these poems cannot be called anything more than a good imagination of Anglo-American modern poem. Obviously, Eliot is not the only influence. Ezekiel had read Auden and the other 30's poets. Some of these poems were offered as social criticism. Many of them were formally structured with rhyme and stanzaic schemes. But the poems are a product of a highly intellectualized metropolitan mind, exercises in celebration and arid word arrangements. Occasionally we notice to flashes of modernist-irreverence in the same collection; he introduces the modern idioms, the Americanisms of the beat generation. These were the new found liberties. To my mind, none before Ezekiel had brought in to the vocabulary of Indian English poetry works such as “lipstick”, “brassieres”, “slips”, and ‘breasts’. No, not even “OK I don't love you”. He seems to be the first one in India to use the American colloquialism “OK”. Ezekiel even wrote prose poems. The collection contained a variety of poems, but it cannot be described the way King describes it a “quest for physical, social and spiritual integration of the self”. The speaking voice is evolving here, as also a new point of voice. A certain seriousness of purpose, of professionalism is evident.

After Returning to India from England:

After returning to India from England Ezekiel published his Sixty Poems (1953). Ezekiel in the early 50s himself describes Sixty Poems as a “modest, interim collection.....it does not claim to be poetry but it reveals a few small discoveries in the pursuit of poetry. That the pursuit is a failure is obvious”. He says as much in some of the poems as the one named “For William Carlos Williams”. However, the collection begins with brilliant. “A Poem of Dedication” which may be regarded as the poetic manifesto to his poetic programme for time to come:

“Not to hanker for a wide god like range
Of thought, nor the matador's dexterity
I do not want the perfect-charity
Of saints nor the tyrant's endless power
I want a human balance humanly
Acquired, fruitful in the common hour”.

There are a number of poems which deal with situation in which the poet's protagonist involves himself in difficulties, and does not know how to extricate himself from them. “Situation” and “A Short Story” are examples. They deal with a romantic love situation, but end in failure in one way or the other. The volume shows Ezekiel's gift of verbal portraiture at his best. There were

such verbal portraits in the earlier volume also, but here he brings a person alive through the use of ordinary and common place words and often the conclusion is ironical. "A Visitor" and "Portrait" very well illustrate the point. In "Boss" the mechanical life of a big over his head is working in urban setting. After a gap over five years Ezekiel came out with his third volume of verses, and called it simply "The Third". It shows greater maturity than the previous collection, and fore shadows the mature poet of the next publication, the Unfinished Man. The singing line is used with great mastery and singleness of purpose and the ease with which appropriate words come to him and fall in their place are a sufficient proof of his maturity. Ezekiel says:

"Not the words that are found
But the singing counts"

And many of the poems are written with metrical accuracy and haunting rhythms.

The volume also displays a fine structural unity and organization. The volume reveals Ezekiel to be a great poet of human relations. He is in favour of an integrated personality, a perfect fusion of body, mind and heart. This is clearly seen in one of the finest lyrics of this collection "Wisdom". There is a fine incantatory refrain, which lingers long in the memory, as also a perfect integration of verse movement and theme. In another lyric the Declaration he shows a Donne like concern for the body, and stresses that our natural instincts and impulses must be gratified. In this volume there is immense variety a deepening of psychological insights and widening of interest, as well as a fuller command on language and verification. The fourth collection of Ezekiel is called "Unfinished Man" (1960), expressing a realization that he needs to change yet again. Ten Poems are sequenced depicting the discontents of a "settled life". "Urban" as the title indicates about the disaffection of life in the metropolis, its distance from nature. But the treatment is not at all that of romantic nostalgia. The speaker never sees the skies. However, instead of leaving the city, he turns to the "Kindered clamour close at hand". The other important poem here is "Enterprise", which again is autobiographical. It is not unlike Pound's, Hugh Selwyn Mauberly, in which the poet recounts the poetic enterprise as a group activity. The pilgrimage described by Ezekiel in "Enterprise" is perhaps the literary one to England, closely modeled on Eliot's "Journey of the Magi". The poet and his friends return home wiser from the "pilgrimage", their literary enterprise. The poem thus can be read as religious allegorization of a secular enterprise; a rationalization of the poet's actual return from England because "home is where we have to earn our grace". The Unfinished Man is an inspired work, and we may fittingly conclude our account of it with the tribute of David McCutcheon, "Mr. Ezekiel achieves a laconic precision in which every word drops casually in to place, yet fits perfectly into a strict scheme of rhyme and metre. The virtuosity and technical brilliance strongly suggest Auden. We find the same deft precision, the same mastery of a colloquial idiom, the personification and generalized efforts, the stock phrases in new contexts, the juxtaposition of the common place and the erudite, the same compactness and startling appropriateness". Ezekiel will be remembered at least for the Unfinished Man, if not for anything else. Then comes "The Exact Name" (1965) containing some of his best poems; "Night of the Scorpion", "In Indian", "Poet, Lover, Bird Watcher". The volume carried an epigraph in the form of a quotation from Juan Ramon Jimenez. The epigraph shows how Ezekiel was consciously exploring alternative traditions and not just the Anglo-American one. It also shows Ezekiel's self-conscious role as a prophet. The function of poetry, for Ezekiel, is "beneficially" "the expression of

contemporary life". Such avoidance, if not a rejection, of the ideational aspects of poetry, is evident in the poem titled

"Philosophy".

"I, too, reject the clarity of sight;
What cannot be explained, do not explain"

Ezekiel's early poems are mostly expressions of his lonely state, his separateness for his environment, his alienation real or affected. But now he throws himself into whatever is around him, Bombay, India, as evidenced by the appearance of many Indian poems. For such a shift in the poet's subjectivity, two factors may have been instrumental in effecting such a change. First, probably this rich crop has something to do with the visit of Ginsberg Ororlovsky, who were critical of the Bombay Poet writing 'Old Fashioned English Poetry'. Second, but more important, one publishing event may have contributed to the significant mutation in the poet's art. Ezekiel uses the contradictory figures of nudity and nakedness, as in the sequence "Nudes" "Night of the Scorpion" and "Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S" are two of Ezekiel's best known Indian Poems, the latter being in Indian English. The Indian English poems are clearly entertaining meant to be funny in the way "Mind Your Language". "Night of the Scorpion" is also a much anthologized poem, reveals an Indian that is still gripped by superstition and witchcraft but not without the attendant strong bond of familiar and fellow feeling, values perhaps unknown to the west. But the poem has more at the end. ; "Thank God it picked on me and spared the children" one is reminded of Ezekiel's admonition to P.Lal about rounding off a poem with precise observation. In "Night of the Scorpion" the aim is to find poetry in ordinary reality as observed, known, felt experience rather to take resource to blind faith. The collection is remarkable in many ways, but it, too, has its faults some of which have been stressed by Adit Jussawala, "Glad Surprise" what has happened? Is Ezekiel who so successfully avoid the woolly terminology of the Indian philosophical tradition, about to be swallowed head first into it? Ezekiel in his poetry written after *The Exact Name* has increasingly given up the use of traditional verse forms and used free verse; "This loosening of verse form also seems to have resulted in the loosening of artistic control and discipline. He has tended to be prolix and diffuse, and there is too much of moralizing and sermonizing" the subjects often trivial and treatment prosaic. There are other changes too. There is a widening of interests and themes. He is more reflective and his religious and philosophical interests come to the forefront. There is a distinct slant for spiritual theme and exploration of the psycho-philosophical problems of man and his life. Poster Prayers' reveal Ezekiel to be a deeply religious poet, though he is too humanistic to belong to any particular creed or religious. He still values experience and wants to learn from it. However poems like "Island" and "A Small Submit" reveal the poet's desire, 'to withdraw into himself to be, 'my own guest', in, 'my own one room lunatic asylum' this urge for withdrawal is indicative of his alienation from his social environment, maybe owing to the compulsion of a fast life in an industrial city. Several of his more recent poems, reveal his increased awareness of the Indian social milieu and Ezekiel is seen to be "A very Indian poet in Indian English".

"The servant", deals with a very common Indian family situation at breakfast time and, "And I reject the Indian Noise" reveals his annoyance at the intrinsic part of the Indian social life and these are treated ironically and satirically in a number of poems. In spite of all, it is observed that Ezekiel is a very honest Indian poet in English. His commitment to Indian, and to Bombay which is his chosen home, is total as is shown by background, casually, and a host of other autobiographical

lyrics. He is entirely Indian in his sensibility. He has not only tried to describe Indian culture but he made good use of ‘Baby Angrezi’ or Indian poem in Indian English. He has performed half a dozen interesting experiments in this genre. ‘Very Indian poem in Indian English’ tries to depict the characteristic Indian attitudes in swadeshi Angrezi. It is common Indian mistake to use the present continuous tense in place of simple present. Ezekiel exploits this national trait throughout this poem and in ‘Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa’. As an illustration, consider the following from “From Indian Poem in Indian English;

“I am standing for peace and non-violence
Why world is fighting, fighting
Why all people of world
Are not following Mahatma Gandhi
I do simply not understand.

Such a person naturally believes in the glory that was ancient Indian and deplores the fact that the new generation is going after ‘fashion and foreign things’.

Conclusion

In short, Ezekiel’s more recent verse is a mingled web of good and bad. There is a widening of range and interest, as well as too frequent descents in to banality and triviality, which could have been avoided by careful and painstaking revision and excisions. In my view these are minor blemishes which do not detract from his real greatness. Which all is said, Nissim Ezekiel must be recognized as a major Indian poet writing in English, one who best represents the national identity. In Ezekiel’s words “I am not a Hindu and my background makes me a natural outsider; circumstances and decisions relate me to Indian. In other countries I am a foreigner. In India I am a Indian” it is true, Ezekiel has not inherited the great classical tradition of India, of Vedas and Upanishads, but to the “extent he has availed himself of the composite culture of India to which he belongs, he must be considered to be important poet not merely in the Indian context, but in a consideration of those that are writing poetry anywhere in English.

Reference

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