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Dr Shash ✓  
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7. INFLUENCE OF  
INDIAN ENGLISH POETRY  
OR

EZEKIEL'S CONTRIBUTION TO INDIAN ENGLISH POETRY

Nissim Ezekiel is one of the most towering figures in Indian English poetry. His poetry is many faceted, and it has certainly enriched Indian English poetry and given a new dimension to it by extending its scope and its range. Commenting on Ezekiel's influence on Indian English poetry Bruce King observes :

Of the group of poets attempting to create a modern English poetry in India, Nissim Ezekiel soon emerged as the leader who advised others, set standards and created places of publication. His main significance is not, however, as a promoter of poetry, it is in his will to be a poet, his continuing involvement in the poetry scene and the ways in which the developing body of his work express his personal quest for a satisfactory way of living in the modern world.

Ezekiel made poetry "Central to his life." While others wrote poems, he wrote poetry. Bruce King adds : "Ezekiel brought a sense of discipline, self criticism and mastery to Indian English poetry. He was the first Indian poet to have such a professional attitude." In all his works he stresses the centrality of man in the universe and prefers poetry of statement and purpose. He admires the American poetic tradition "that can be traced back to Whitman. Its peculiar qualities belong to its time and place, a poetry of utmost freedom, informality and freshness which expresses directly its own independent sensibility. No organized theory, no moral or social doctrine, no mask of reason or respectability, no imagist, symbolist or other technical imperative shapes...." It implies that literature of a very high order can only be created in an atmosphere of intellectual freedom. The aim of literature is "discovery and expression of truth" which is entirely personal experience for the writer. The society that promotes literature should aim at "the development of human sensibility." Ezekiel's poetry fulfils this qualification of poetic composition and in this respect he is a linear in Indian English poetry.

Ezekiel is a modern poet in the real sense. He discarded "Colonial, provincial, amateur poetry" which was old fashioned. His poetry reflects

the present and the modern age. His themes are modern "Life in the city, sexuality, the problems of marriage, the need to overcome alienation," says Bruce King, "and to create integration among the various aspects of his character are Ezekiel's early and continuing themes. Such modern characteristics as irony, heightened critical self-consciousness, strong intellectual purpose....., a multiplicity of tones, the artistic distancing of emotion through a persona were among his contributions to Indian poetry." In poem after poem he presents life as a quest for wholeness, for intellectual and spiritual satisfaction, for maturity. Ezekiel's quest essentially concerns how to live happily, calmly, ethically as an integrated human being.

Ezekiel brought a calm, dispassionate, intellectual and ethical note to Indian English poetry. He expresses the experiences of the educated and urbanized Indians in his poetry. He studiously and carefully avoids the provincial, mythological and chauvanistic sentiments. His poetic approach is creative and constructive, intellectual and urban, balanced and rational.

Do not, in your vanity, the tenuous thread  
Of difference flaunt, but be  
Asserted in the common dance. Participate  
Entirely, make an end of separation.

Ezekiel for the first time brought an urban an intellectual touch to poetry and with the help of irony and mild satire exposes the evils of urban society :

Barbaric city sick with slums  
Deprived of seasons, blessed with rains,  
Its hawkers, beggars, iron lunged,  
Processions led by frantic drums,  
A million purgatorial lanes,  
And child-like masses, many tongued  
Whose wages are in words and crumbs.

The city of Mumbai forms the core of much of his poetry. Fascinated by the sweep of the city, its blend of cultures and its streetspeak, some of his poems, as he once said, were inspired by phrases picked up in the city's colleges and local trains. The city of Bombay becomes a part of his consciousness and he identifies and acclimatizes himself to its dark and dreary spectacle.

I cannot leave the island,  
I was born here and belong.

Indian English poets – R. Parthasarthy, Grieve Patel, Jussawala, Peeradina, Rodrigues, O.P. Bhatnagar, I.H. Rizvi and many more are urban and intellectual poets in Ezekilean tradition.

Michael German rightly comments on Ezekiel's contribution to poetry :

He brings to the established traditions of love, religion and the passing hour, the modern attitude of the need for a commitment, an existential plunge into life, and of old analytic disgust, becoming more ironical and detached as he develops.

He fashioned a style, which is noteworthy for precision of diction and imagery, wit and irony, to express his balanced, intellectual, rational and unbiased observations of city life, man, love and sex etc. His poetic style is characterised by clarity, precision, logic and irony, for example :

Words, looks, gestures, everything betrays  
The unquiet mind, the emptiness within.

Mark lucidity and balance between emotion and reason in the following lines from "A Time to Change."

..... let me always feel  
The presence of the golden mean  
Between the elan of desire  
And the rational faculties.

Wit and Irony distinguish him from other Indian English poets. Irony "is present from the very beginning, though it becomes more pronounced in his later works, the analytical faculty progressively displacing feeling at the motivating force of the oeuvre." No other Indian English poet has shown the remarkable "ability to organise his experience into words as competently as Ezekiel has done.....he has shown remarkable ability to give his poems a certain finality of form. In this, he has believed in 'Yeats's dictum that poets, like women, must labour to be beautiful."

Ezekiel has also endeavoured to identify himself with his environment. He has proved that the roots and stems of great poetry are found in the native soil but the poet with the immaculate perfection of his art universalises his environmental ethos.

All great Indian English poets during the post-independence era—K.N. Daruwala, Arun Kolalkar, Kamala Das, I.H. Rizvi, O.P. Bhatnagar, R.K. Singh etc. have followed the Ezekielean tradition of urbanity, intellectuality, rationality, identification with environment, wit and irony and the importance of the flawless form. Shashi Iyer comments about his abiding contribution to Indian English poetry.

Ezekiel of course has been a kind of law giver to the young poets writing in Indo-English tradition. He has taught them to avoid sentimentality, looseness of structure and abstract sublimities which all seem to be peculiar traits.

## CRITICAL STUDY OF SELECTED POEMS

### 1. ENTERPRISE

"Enterprise", one of the finest lyrics of Nissim Ezekiel, appeared in *The Unfinished Man* in 1959. In it the poet generalises his own feelings of frustration, loss and deprivation in the world. He himself remarked