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Indianness in Nissim Ezekiel's Poetry

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ABSTRACT

Nissim Ezekiel position among Indo-Anglian poets of post-Independence era is unique. Nissim Ezekiel's contribution as a poet in Indian writing in English is very substantial and valuable. He was a Jewish whose forefathers migrated to India and settled in Mumbai. Though a Jewish still being born and brought up in India, his poetry contains some aspects of Indianness. Nissim ignored the idea of idealism and romanticism of Indian writers who were influenced by other English writers in India, instead he analysed Indian situations with Indian attitude. This paper attempts to find out use of Indian Experiences by Nissim Ezekiel and emerging Indianness in his writings. Nissim Ezekiel's contribution to Indian poetry is based on his experiences while living in Mumbai and his observation and experiences of Indian life and society. His commitment to India flows from his earnest and sincere desire to improve conditions of Life in India. He talks about the depressing, degrading and disgusting conditions of life in India. He brings about true picture of poverty in India in his poems.

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Introduction

Nissim Ezekiel's as a poet in Indian writing in English has made substantial and valuable contribution. Being a Jewish, his family migrated to India and settled down in Mumbai. Nissim Ezekiel was born in Mumbai. As being lived for long time in India, his poetry contains some of the aspects of Indianness. This paper is an attempt to find out how Nissim Ezekiel has beautifully used Indian experiences what we call Indianness from his poetry.

Ezekiel was born and brought up in Mumbai, and got educated in Mumbai. Besides some trips to various foreign countries, he has lived, worked and earned his livelihood in Mumbai. Therefore, the crucial point here is that as a poet, he has observed and experienced much of Indian life very closely. Ezekiel's sincere and earnest desire to improve living conditions of life in India is reflected in his poetry.

Ezekiel once described India as too large for anyone to be at home in all of it. However, after tenures as visiting professor at Leeds University (1964) and Chicago (1967), plus lecture tours and conferences, he always gravitated back to his native city. Though a natural outsider, he still felt Indian, albeit "incurably critical and sceptical". As he wrote in *Background, Casually*:

**"Others choose to give themselves
In some remote and backward place.
My backward place is where I am."**

Indianness lies in Ezekiel's commitment to this country and in his earnest and sincere desire to bring about some improvement in the conditions of life in this country through his poetry. Therefore we should appreciate the poet's desire for this country to the extent of wanting to bring about certain improvements in the depressing, degrading and disgusting conditions of life in this country. For instance, Ezekiel is able to depict a picture of poverty in his poem 'The Truth about the Floods'.

**"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"

The desire to see better conditions of life in this country contains degree of patriotism; and in Ezekiel's case it certainly shows his love for the country of his adoption. Another poem 'Background, Casually' in which Ezekiel has proclaimed his commitment to this country:

**'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 poetry contains various aspects of Indianness. Indianness is a vital element in Ezekiel's thought, feeling and imagery. Indianness has become one of the major themes of Ezekiel's poetry, which he treats as an intense personal exploration.

His poem "The Patriot", in which Ezekiel expresses his deep concern for the contemporary problems that India faces and again the use of "Indian English" shows Ezekiel's grip on the working of the Indian mind:

**"Pakistan behaving like this
China behaving like that
It is making me very sad,
I am telling you.
Really, most harassing me".**

Ezekiel's deep admiration for Indian spiritual values and also his concern for the perversion of such values and spiritual degradation are highlighted in some of his poems. In his poem "Song of Desolation", he seems to accept the Hindu theology which says "Sansar sab mithya" while confessing that materialism is next to nothing. It can't get you "peace" and "comfort" of mind. If there is anything that can comfort our minds, it is religion:

**"Come, religion, comfort me,
You lifeless moralists prescribe your laws,**

**And make me see
My secret flaws"**

Ezekiel exploits the commonly found Indian use of present progressive tense instead of the simple present tense to create an India aura. In his poem "The Patriot", he uses the progressive tense, reduplication processes modeled after Indian languages, and typical expressions that we employ in our 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 am simply not understanding.
Ancient Indian Wisdom is 100% correct.
I should say even 200% correct."**

Dr. K Pramila in her article "Indian Sense and Sensibility in Nissim Ezekiel's Poems" wrote Ezekiel Poem "Night of the Scorpion", though a narrative poem, offers a positive image of Indian women and mothers – woman as a creator, protector, and educator and as an integrating force. He recalls the painful night in the life of his mother when she was stung by a scorpion.

**"The peasants came like swarms of flies
And buzzed the Name of God a hundred times to paralyze
the Evil one"**

Analyzing his Indianness she further wrote Unity of all religions in India is seen here. Peasants of various faiths, Christians, Hindus, Muslims, and Jews came in large numbers to see her and prayed for her. The lines

**"May the sins of your previous birth
Be burned away tonight"**

Through the voices of the peasants, the poet echoes the Indian belief in washing away their sins of their previous birth by suffering in the present birth.

**"May your suffering decrease
The misfortunes of your next birth"**

The poem like 'Night of the scorpion' and 'Edinburgh Interlude, Lightly', where, the thought and feeling are supported by the surrounding atmosphere and characters in the poems which are purely Indian and they follow the Indian way of life. For instance, in the poem 'Night of the Scorpion' Ezekiel narrates the incident of an Indian village woman stung by a scorpion in the rainy night. The speaker's mother was stung by a scorpion one night. After stinging her, the scorpion had swiftly moved away from her and gone out into the rain, though it was because of the rain that it had come into the house. Then the peasants in the neighbourhood, on learning about a woman having been stung by a scorpion, had come to the woman to express their sympathy. Through the beautiful portrayal of the superstitions and motherly sympathy of particular Indian village, the poet mirrors the credulous nature of the rural behaviors, they say:

**"May he sit still, they said
May the sins of your previous birth
be burned away tonight, they said.
May the poison purify your flesh
of desire and your spirit of ambition".**

And after when it loses it's stung after twenty hours, mother's response is most touching, she says:

**"Thank God the scorpion picked on me and spared
my children".**

Another poem 'Edinburgh Interlude-lightly' is also about a typical Indian situation. It deals with the traditional rivalry of the daughter-in-law and mother-in-law. The poem depicts the situation when the daughter-in-law who has just come from her honey-moon. The following lines describe the typical Indian situation, where mother-in-law says:

**"Don't worry, dear,
I need no help in the kitchen.
Leave it to me, please".**

But then she complains to her own son and her husband (father-in-law) that the girl does not help her in the kitchen.

After this, father-in-law says to daughter-in-law:

**"You must try to understand your Mother-in-law.
She's a very kind woman, you know. There aren't many
who do
all the work in the kitchen". Then the son replies to the
bride,**

"If you quarrel with my mother, you quarrel with me".

Nissim Ezekiel vividly describes the extensive poverty and ugliness of India, especially in big cities. A poem entitled 'The Railway Clerk' reveals the pathetic condition of the a poor railway clerk. He represents the pathetic condition of many middle class people. The railway clerk says:

**"It isn't my fault I do what I'm told but still I am
blamed.**

This year, my leave application was twice refused".

Even though he carries out the orders, yet he is criticized. And that is not his only grievance; his leave application was twice rejected in the course of the year.

The language used in Nissim Ezekiel's poetry reflects the Indianisation of English language. There are, first of all, the poems in which he has ridiculed the manner in which a large number of Indians use the English language, making mistake of grammar, syntax, idiom and tense. Ezekiel has focused upon one of the major grammatical mistakes which a large amount of the Indians most often make; i.e. the use of present continuous tense instead of simple present tense. "I am doing my duty, but who is appreciating?" Use of present continuous tense in place of simple present tense is very common in India. And Ezekiel deliberately uses this language to present a view of the Indian mind.

Conclusion

To conclude, though he dwelled in India, but was apart from Indian culture, philosophy, spirituality, thought and tradition, Indianism did not lure him at all, but instead of it was Indian and he could not banish it. He has skillfully used most of the aspects of Indian life and cultures in his poetry.

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