

## INDIANNES-A MAJOR PREOCCUPATION IN THE POETRY OF NISSIM EZEKIEL

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### Abstract

Ezekiel is one of the post-Independence India's finest poets, and much of the strength of his writing lies in its individuality. While his earliest verse bears the imprint of his European Modernist influences, the more mature Ezekiel is a poet whose verse defies easy categorization. His distinctive poetic practice draws on a range of traditions--Judaic and Hindu, ancient and modern, Western and Eastern – creating a highly personal. Indian landscape, albeit one that also has broader resonances as an embodiment of Post- Independence secularism. Love, city and self are the major pre-occupations of Ezekiel in his early writing. Unrequited love and resultant disappointment dominate the mood of his early poetry. Torment of the flesh and the spirit resulting from the unfulfilled love governs the poet's attitude to life. Various images of 'city' which have become an integral part of modern poetics come out well in Ezekiel's important volumes of early poetry such as *The Unfinished Man* and *The Exact Name*. Ezekiel incorporates the heat and dust, the sun and floods, the sense of poverty and deprivation into the texture of his verse. The images of 'India' pervade all through his poetry.

**Keywords:** post-Independence, individuality, Modernist influences, secularism, Love.

Ezekiel is one of the post-Independence India's finest poets, and much of the strength of his writing lies in its individuality. While his earliest verse bears the imprint of his European Modernist influences, the more mature Ezekiel is a poet whose verse defies easy categorization. His distinctive poetic practice draws on a range of traditions--Judaic and Hindu, ancient and modern, Western and Eastern – creating a highly personal. Indian landscape, albeit one that also has broader resonances as an embodiment of Post- Independence secularism. Ezekiel's thematic range is very wide. He keeps his mind and ear open and tries to be objective in his approach. He accepts life on life's terms. He does not idealize life nor denigrate it either. To use Eliot's phrase, he 'sees life steadily and sees it whole'.

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such a situation, ‘youth runs out of song’ and there is a need ‘to start again’ for ‘love of life can always be renewed’. The desire to come to terms with reality seems to have overwhelmed the poet. Frustration in life resulting out of the failure in achieving one’s goal seems to have made the poet a bitter man. His desire to be a successful poet and lover worried him without end. The title poem of the first volume, A Time to Change, reinforces this view:

Youth runs out of song  
Until one learns to start again-

Love in Ezekiel’s poetry remains largely unrequited. Poem after poem, he underlines the idea of physical union between lovers. But love largely eludes him. He does not idealize love. He lays emphasis on the consummation of love, sex and sensuality are a part of life. In order to accept life, one has to affirm sensuality, Ezekiel seems to say, love knows no law and consummation of it brings peace and happiness. Thus Ezekiel says, ‘the more you love the less you burn away.’

He does not sentimentalize or romanticize love. He faces it squarely and likes to come to terms with it. That is why he refuses to accept the maxim that ‘poverty is the natural language of lovers’; and on the other hand reiterates that ‘the lover’s natural language is prose’. He knows that true lovers are innocent, and therefore, he says that ‘the lamb is not as innocent as lovers in the act of love’. He examines man-woman relationship from various angles and does not idealize either. They are equals, and one is incomplete without the other. Together they make one, like the lovers of John Donne. Nissim Ezekiel is an Yeatsian poet who makes poetry out of his own life and always tries for impersonality. He not only describes the young lovers longing for consummation but reflects on man-woman relationship as husband and wife after marriage. The very first poem of A Time Change registers such a view:

For lovers may be satisfied with love  
or sated with a woman  
But who can say:  
There shall be no more surprises  
Discovery of cities fresh as brides  
Bright legends of a recent birth  
New orchids or unimagined seas?

Ezekiel seems to say like Shakespeare and Milton, “Hail, Wedded Love.” In “Marriage Poem”, he emphasizes the need for married love which is both constant and true. He uses an archaic word ‘nuptial’ for ‘marriage’ to underline the importance of the institution called ‘marriage’, bringing to our mind Bacon’s advice on this subject. Ezekiel seeks both love and happiness in marriage, for it helps life to blossom. Otherwise, life becomes dull, drab and hell. In that case, as Ezekiel states in “Case Study”, ‘marriage was the worst mistake of all’, for ‘a man is damned in that domestic game.’

Love and sex dominate his early poetry bearing the echoes of the poetry of John Donne, W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot and W.H. Auden and some confessional American poets. In his later poetry, Ezekiel overcomes the Anglo-American influence and discovers his own voice. The city plays a vital role in his early poetry. Following Auden, Ezekiel creates a new image of the city in his poetry. In course of an interview to John B. Beston of the University of Hawaii, Ezekiel affirmed--“I regard myself essentially as an Indian poet writing in English. I have a strong sense of belonging not only to India but to this city. I would never leave Bombay; it is a series of commitments” (1977: 3).

Various images of ‘city’ which have become an integral part of modern poetics come out well in Ezekiel’s important volumes of early poetry such as *The Unfinished Man* and *The Exact Name*. Here we find that the city has moved forward to a prominent position in the poet’s consciousness. Let us take Ezekiel’s observations in the following two poems:

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

Always in the sun’s eye  
 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 noise silence  
 Suffering the place and time  
 I ride my elephant of thought  
 A cezanne slung round my neck. (In India)

In course of years gone by, there comes a perceptible change of attitude to this city i.e., Bombay and the poet sees through the outward manifestation of it. Thus, the ‘barbaric city’ has become his beloved city and the sense of belonging to it is absolute and final. The commitment to life in a particular place has brought a whole new dimension to Ezekiel’s poetry. He now sees India through Bombay. His Bombay is located in the present and it lacks the historical dimension. The city is as much within him as without. As J.Birje-Patil has rightly suggested, “Ezekiel’s originality lies in his projection of Bombay as a metaphor which defines the alienation of the modern Indian intellectual, brought up in the Judeo-Christian and Graeco Roman traditions and being forced to come to terms with a culture whose response to life is controlled by a totality of different metaphysics” (1976: 209).

The city becomes the ‘locale’ of most of his poems. It reinforces Ezekiel’s sense of belonging and gives him an identity that makes for the missing link with the past. Ezekiel has clearly shown that a poet can write good poetry on contemporary society without harking back to the tradition. If a poet can successfully come to terms with reality without putting down shutters and putting on blinkers, then he can write good poetry which will transcend the limitations of the time and place. Ezekiel has precisely done that. He has discovered his voice by identifying himself with modern India, and the city of Bombay becomes the nerve-centre of his poetry. As a true modern poet, he creates his poetry out of both ‘slums and skycrappers’ and accepts life as it comes. Thus he writes:

Unsuitable for song as well as sense,  
 the island flowers into slums  
 and skycrappers reflecting

precisely the growth of my mind  
I am here to find my way in it. (Island)

Ezekiel incorporates the heat and dust, the sun and floods, the sense of poverty and deprivation into the texture of his verse. The images of 'India' pervade all through his poetry. The changing reality of love and the human relationship on the one hand and the unchanging contours of Indian landscape on the other, are, as it were, the *spiritus mundi* from where he draws all his images. The commitment to 'self' and the city of his living help him to create central images like those of his hero, the city and the woman. In *The Unfinished Man* and *The Exact Name*, one notices that the city has moved forward to a prominent position in the poet's consciousness.

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