

Socio-Cultural & Linguistic Ethos Represented in the Select Poems of Nissim Ezekiel: From Post-Colonial Perspective

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Abstract:

Indian English Literature has postcolonial background. Gradually but surely, after the independence the English language poetry began to acquire native or Indian sensibilities due to the post-colonial influence. Post-colonial poetry is represented in the form of modernisation which included urbanisation, industrialisation, independence, social change etc. Modern English poetry in India as one of the many new literatures began to emerge at the end of the Second World War. Nissim Ezekiel occupies a unique position among Indo-Anglican poets of post-colonial era. He had developed a unique sense of 'Indian Socio-Cultural and Linguistic representations' in his writing, especially representative in his poems. The Indian post-colonial culture, myths, events, experiences and relationships are the major medium through which Ezekiel tried to represent the Indian sensibility, using local dialect, in his literary work of art.

As there is diversity in Indian culture and languages, various critics interpret such Indian socio-cultural ethos represented in literature as Indianness. But in general 'Indianness' can be described as the author's feeling of being an Indian, whether he lives in India or lives abroad. Ezekiel has developed a tradition and community value that ascribes to him a unique sense of special identity. Those values are deep rooted, represented and find appropriate expression through English in his writings in the form of beliefs, ideologies, and myths. However, Ezekiel has contributed immensely towards Indian poetry through which he tried to look at the realistic side of life, a typical Indian socio-cultural and linguistic situation in the post-colonial times with an Indian attitude, with a novel and dynamic Indian insight.

Key Words: post-colonial, culture, Indianness, attitude, tradition

Introduction:

Nissim Ezekiel (1924-2004) is a unique Indo-Anglican poet position of the post-colonial era. Born in Bombay among the Jewish community, he was popularly known as 'Bene Israel.' Being a poet, an art critic, a dramatist and an editor, of post-colonial times, Ezekiel developed a unique sense of 'Indian Socio-Cultural and Linguistic representations' in his writing, especially representative in his poems. Readers of Ezekiel can understand that as a post-colonial poet he has very close observation and experience of Indian cultural way of life. Ezekiel tried to represent Indian post-colonial culture, myths, events, experiences and relationships through Indian sensibility, using local dialect, in his literary work of art. Some of his important poetic works are – *Sixty poems* (1953), *The Discovery of India* (1956), *The Unfinished Man* (1960), *Hymns in Darkness* (1976), *Latter Day Psalms* (1982), and *Collected Poems* (1989). He was awarded the Sahitya Academy Award in 1983 for his poetry collection, "*Latter-Day Psalms*". He was honoured with the Padmashri award by the President of India in 1988.

Indian English Literature has postcolonial background. Due to post-colonial influence gradually but surely with the advancement of time after the independence the English language poetry began to acquire native or Indian sensibilities. Modern English poetry in India as one of the many new literatures began to emerge at the end of the Second World War. Post-colonial poetry is represented in the form of modernisation which included urbanisation, industrialisation, independence, social change etc. Whatever may be the genre, Indian writing in English reflects the authors' cultural, socio-political and religious background. Some of the writers who made great impact on world literature and made the world take notice of Indian literature in the post-colonial era are Rabindranath Tagore, R.K. Narayanan, Girish Karnad, Nissim Ezekiel and Mulk Raj Anand to mention a few. These writers retain their nativity and yet have a universal appeal, and continue to fascinate the readers with their realistic portrayal of Indian life. However, the name 'Indian English Poetry' came into existence only with the publication of Ezekiel's *A Time to Improve* in 1952 in London. Nissim opposed the idealism and romanticism of the earlier group of Indian writers in English, and tried to look at the realistic side of life, a typical Indian situation with an Indian attitude which can be termed 'Indianness' in the post-colonial era, with a novel and dynamic Indian insight.

It is very difficult to define 'Indianness' as there has been diversity in Indian culture and languages. Indianness has been interpreted differently by various critics. As Pramila quotes Prof. V.K. Gokak who defines Indianness as, "*A composite awareness in the matter of race, milieu, language and religion* (327)." She also Quotes K.R.S. Iyengar who believes that: "*It stands to reason that what makes Indo-Anglian literature an Indian literature is the quality of its "Indianness* (329)." Finally, in respect of Indianness, Pramila quotes James H.

Cousins who says that Indian poetry in English is: “*Indian in thought, Indian in emotion, Indian in imagery and English only in word* (329).” In the words of Nissim Ezekiel:

My poems in Indian English are rightly described as very Indian poems. So they should not be considered as “mere lampoons”. The characters and the situations projected are intended to be genuinely Indian, and the humour is in the English language as it is widely spoken by Indians, to whom it is not funny at all. (130)

But in general ‘Indianness’ can be described as the author’s feeling of being an Indian, whether he lives in India or lives abroad. Indian writers have a tradition and community value that gives them a sense of special identity. They are deeply rooted in Indian contexts. And when they write their beliefs, ideologies, myths, rural and urban societies, their religio-philosophic bonds of mind etc. find fitting expression through English which is a foreign language.

Indianness, being very distinct feature of Modern Indian English poetry, finds its seminal expression through Nissim Ezekiel in his poetry. He explores Indian sensibility in his poetry through history, myths, legends, folklores; all go together to establish a distinct Indian idiom and identity. His poetry is truly Indian which draws artistic material from its heritage. As Pramila agrees with K.N. Daruwalla who rightly says, “*Nissim Ezekiel was the first Indian poet to express modern Indian sensibility in a modern idiom* (328).” His poetry is marked by an ultimate reality without exploring into traditional stereotypes. He exposes the colonised anguish through usage of the English language as a postcolonial tool. His poems highlight the problems of usage of English in India as well as the politics of power that are implicit in Indian culture.

Nissim Ezekiel has given Indian poetry ‘a local habitation and a name.’ He is the poet of postcolonial human situations, about which he often wrote with subtle observations. His language is typical Indian English or hybrid language in post-colonial terms. His construction of idioms and employment of everyday English into Indian English poetry marks him unique. Ezekiel’s poems primarily examine ideas associated with daily life in India, portrayed through the lens of irony and humour but with genuine sympathy. Most of the times, the poet prefers use free verse poetic style and conversational tone with a precise style that suits Indian condition and attitude.

The present study concentrates on the socio-cultural and linguistic elements in the post-colonial poems of Ezekiel. The elements include the post-colonial features like; Ezekiel’s use of hybrid language - ‘Babu Angrezi’ or ‘Pidgin English’ in his poetry and how

he used irony as a weapon to project the growing fashion influenced by western culture and changes in Indian attitude towards Indian culture and religion. His use of Indian English gives life to the characters, episodes and attitudes of individuals and communities and creates humorous situations.

A Study of Select Poems of Nissim Ezekiel:

The study undertakes to demonstrate the above said Ezekiel's poetic qualities in a few of his poems – 'A Very Indian Poem in English', 'Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T. S.', 'The Patriot', 'The Professor', and 'Night of the Scorpion.' One of the most surprising aspects about the speakers in Ezekiel's poems is that his perception of Indian models and intimate relationship they establish with the listeners or readers really deserve an appreciation. The speakers in these poems appear unsophisticated and sometimes even peculiar to the English readers. His use of English language – especially his use of irony and understatement is bounded with a sensibility that has exclusive sense of privacy in social situations.

Ezekiel makes the readers to experience an essence of real Indian flavour while reading his poem *A Very Indian Poem in English* which embodies his unique characteristic feature of Indian writing in English. The poem highlights the Indian attitude towards speaking English depicting syntactic idiosyncrasies or eccentricities in so-called *Swadeshi Angrezi* at particular situations. The poet seems to abuse or mock the Indians habit of uttering present continuous tense rather than using simple present to signify Indian atmosphere which represents the poet's sense of irony and humour:

I am standing for peace and non-violence.

Why world is fighting fighting

Why all people of the world

Are not following Mahatma Gandhi,

I am simply not understanding. (1-5)

However, the poet describes the glory of ancient India and seems to disapprove the attitude of younger or new generation who discard such values and least regards for Mahatma Gandhi. Further the poet curses younger generation for getting attracted towards western culture and their negligence towards Indian customs and heritage that may lead to the invasion of global culture:

Ancient Indian Wisdom is 100% correct

I should say even 200% correct.

But modern generation is neglecting

Too much going for fashion and foreign thing. (6-9)

Ezekiel in his famous poem *Goodbye Party to Miss Pushpa T. S* extensively employs regional touch of Indian English speakers. Perhaps, this regional nuances used seems to

ridicule or mock at the manners of the speakers. This also reminds the readers how English as a language of elite entered into colonised tradition. Nissim Ezekiel as a colonised poet addresses the same issues in his works. *Goodbye Party* is a beautiful poem which incorporates features of Indian English and parodies the craze for ‘foreign fashion and modernity’ among the westernised ladies and their typical way of speaking English. The poem vividly presents the mental status of younger ladies of current generation with their affections and pretensions without any ideal or idea. The poem seems to portray social satire in the form of a farewell speech. It is an anecdote where a party is organised to bid farewell to Miss. Pushpa who has a plan to go abroad shortly seeking better fortune. The event is also reminiscent of any farewell party in Indian Scene. The speakers’ flattery and hypocrisy seems mere eulogy, signifying norms of such conventional farewells. All the speakers just bombast pointless monologues. The below lines from the poem reflect such Indian practices:

Miss Pushpa is coming
 From a very high family
 Her father was a renowned advocate
 In Balsar or Surat
 I’m not remembering now which place.
 Surat? Ah, Yes. (15-20)

The use of simple language and superlatives while praising highlights the colloquialism the poet has employed to signify not only Indianness but also vivid reproduction of Indian way of speaking English. The insincerity and the height of hilariousness while praising Miss. Pushpa in the poem express typical Indian laxity and superficiality signifying a biting satirical comment on the Indian way of speaking.

Readers also notice that the poet employs similar technique of using simple and colloquial language in the poem *The Professor* to represent Indian way of speaking English:

We are keeping up. Our progress is progressing.
 Old values are going, new values are coming.
 Everything is happening with leaps and bounds,
 I am going out rarely, now and then... (18-22)

Ezekiel’s predominant Indian English speakers exemplify many features acquired from second language situation, a bookish or formal style obtained from exclusive exposure to written forms.

The poet appears very Indian when he artistically reflects the Indian attitude towards Indian national integration. The below lines from the poem not only highlight every Indian thought but also their expression in Indian English:

All men are brothers, no?
 In India also
 Gujaratis, Maharashtrians, Hindiwallahas

All brothers...

I tolerate you,

One day, Ram Rajya is surely coming. (34-41)

The poet has emotionally touched every Indian heart through bringing in the concepts of 'Unity in Diversity', the Gandhian thought of 'Ram Rajya', and 'Universal brotherhood' upon which Indian political philosophy stands.

Regarding Indian English used in the poem *The Professor* R. Parthasarathy comments: These poems imitate the idiolect features of English used by Gujarati speakers. Some of these features are also present in other Indian languages: the use of the present progressive tense for the simple present tense, un-English collocation of lexical items, and literal translation of phrases and idioms (Parthasarathy, 1976.)

Night of the Scorpion is another narrative poem where Ezekiel uses rural setting to reflect a positive image of Indian mothers. The women are presented as a creator, protector, educators and as an integrating force. The concept of unity in diversity is highlighted as the peasants of various faiths – Christians, Hindus, Muslims and Jews visited the pain stricken mother in large number.

May the sins of your previous birth

Be burned away tonight.

May your suffering decrease

The misfortunes of your next birth (18-21)

The poet has brought out Indian belief of rebirth echoed in the voice of the peasants. His depiction might appear ridiculing Indian customs and traditions but he seems honest in his portrayal. The poem becomes more dramatic when the sceptic and rationalist father tried to curse at the situation. In the last stanza the poet appears at his peak in his portrayal of a sense of sacrifice and suffering of the Indian mother for her children:

My mother only said

Thank God the scorpion picked on me

And spared my children. (44-46)

The concluding lines highlight Nissim Ezekiel's knowledge of Indian customs and beliefs that represent his authentic flavour for Indianness. However, though his poems appear simple, they are impressive, introspective and analytical.

According to M. K. Naik, "*Night of the Scorpion* is generally taken to be an ironic presentation of the contrast between popular superstition and sceptical rationalism." The poet successfully catches the belief system of various rural people in this poem. The sentence structure deftly reflects the Indian experience and ethos.

Nissim Ezekiel has essentially involved into the Indian scene. As Ezekiel says, “I am conscious of my very special situation in relation to India, as a poet, but as a person and citizen I identify myself completely with the country...I would like that cultural identification to be fully expressed in my poetry but it is perhaps only partially so” (Frank Birbal Singh 57).

Though Nissim Ezekiel is a Jewish he is truly an Indian poet writing in English. He has committed himself to Indian values, culture, people and language, and Indianness has always been in his blood and writing. In an interview with Frank Birbal Singh he says: I am an Indian national I was born in India; my tribe of the Jewish community has lived in India for 2,000 years. If I had rejected my Indianness, which some other writers obviously have done, and if I had decided that I am so much of an outsider that I have to settle down in London or New York... (*Interview* 137).

Conclusion:

So Ezekiel’s very Indian Poems in Indian English are not only for the purpose of creating humour through caricature of Indian people and Indian scenes but representation of Indian ethos, modern Indian sensibilities of the post-colonial set up with a first-hand experience. He may not glorify the Indian custom and culture but instead he sees it as it is. Though the poet looks desperate and discomfort at the deficiencies and defects of the Indian people, the ideas the poet has explored in his poetry are the realistic representation of Indian postcolonial cultural conditions. However, Ezekiel’s poetry is remarkable for the depiction of typical Indian atmosphere. He has committed himself to Indian values, culture, people and language, and Indianness has always been in his blood and writing.

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