

Alienation from Realty and Spirituality

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Nissim Ezekiel pioneered the cause of modernism in Indian English poetry. He made the contrary pulls in the personality of an individual, the theme of his poetry. He takes note of man's instinctive urges, his physical desires, his social aspirations and his spiritual longings and he shows how all these urges in being raised together create an unavoidable tension. Each individual has to work his own way out of it and to seek to blend it into harmony and balance. Modernism in itself as a state of mind incorporating man's allegiance to the totality of his personality. Scores of Ezekiel's poem reflect this creative tension at different levels.

Ezekiel feels drawn to ordinary human and worldly reality. He comes to celebrate the exceptional in the ordinary. A simple incident like the biting of his mother by the scorpion becomes a big philosophic event in *Night of the Scorpion*. The concerned villagers in incantatory rhythms pray that the suffering may ease the life of the mother. Likewise the poet-persona in *The visitor* leaves behind his high expectations to value "The ordinariness of most events". In other poems like *Passion Poems*, we have an unqualified acceptance and celebration of human reality. In *Summer*, even if it is too hot for love-makings caressing and bathing together have been prescribed as desirable substitutes. In *Monsoon*, the different parts of the female anatomy are lovingly talked about. In *Loss*, the poet is secretly thankful that he is not "a meditating Shiva" for he would not like to resist the physical charm of the beloved.

This indulgence in physical passion without the least trace of self-consciousness or guilt complex is typically modern. It goes well with the modern emphasis on rebellious individualism which is one of the causes of man's alienation. In *Marriage Poem*, the poet hails "Earthly Love" and wants indulgence in sexual passion to be a recurrent feature in married life even after the spouses have come to a meeting of the mind and compatibility.

It is not merely the physical which draws Ezekiel. He also feels drawn to the spiritual, the metaphysical and the supernatural. Here the physical appears to be an obstacle, a hindrance to the soul's evolution to a higher conception of reality. *A Time to change* is a typical example of this urge. It is an ambitious poem presenting the pathetic plight of the seekers of change who are "Corrupted by the things imagined"¹. Each image creates the state of spiritual defeat, decay and disillusionment. The recurrence of the line "Secret faults concealed no more" suggests a possible recipe for regeneration.

In *Speech and Silence* also, the poet emphasizes the importance of introspection and seeking the real essence of reality.

Consult again neglected stars
Or Compass, half the gallivanting,
Mind and Heart, resolve and stop dead
In your accustomed ways and ask
Stern questions to your feelings, facts
Which ossify the spirit's bones

(Speech & Silence. 53)

Prayer again is a hankering after the abstract:

To pray is good,
To go the way of dispossession,
To be alone, without desire,
Composed and consciously disposed
Towards the love of things unseen,
In nakedness, simplicity,
Cancelled out in one concern

(Prayer. 101)

He is convinced about the reality of the metaphysical and the transcendental, “Now again I must declare/My faith in things unseen, unheard / The inner music”

(Prayer. 101)

In *Happening* also the poet repeats the same stance, “A man with drawn into himself / May be a man moving forward”.

(Happening. 163)

The poet feels greatly the loss of spiritual awareness:

We have lost
The language of dreams
We have forgotten
Everything but knowledge

(Happening. 163)

Without spiritual awareness, living life purely on the physical level is most unsatisfying and even incomplete in itself:

In making love
Upon this bed
I am dependent on
A fire from heaven

(Happening. 164)

Ezekiel blends the spiritual and the physical in a human bond. *The Egoists Prayers* deflates the purely spiritual and makes the human and the passionate part of the overall integrated reality of life. Human folly has been presented as valuable in itself, as valuable as is wisdom in traditional thought. Man has his own agenda to follow and he can follow God’s agenda only if it “coincides with mine”. Seeking to taste the fruit of action has been presented as but natural. Man may go on committing follies but God must not give up seeking to reform man, for, “Who can rescue Man / If not his maker? / Do thy duty, Lord”.

(*The Egoist's Prayer. 22*)

So much is the poet committed to a balance between human and the spiritual that he consciously deflates the situation if it seems to go out of the bounds of such balance. Such deflation as a strategy is to be seen in poems like *Prayer* where the last line is “This is all I know of prayer”, *Happening* where the last line is. “The Happening is over” etc.

Despite being a Jew, Ezekiel imbibed thoroughly the Indian spiritual thought and that finds authentic representation in his poetry.

In *Happening* the poet expresses the Indian religions belief that the whole cosmos is contained within individual consciousness when he says, “I am near everybody / Being near myself alone”.

(*Happening. 164*)

The reference here seems to be of the Hindu “Advait” philosophy enunciated by Sankara in 6th Century A.D. Where the operative word is “Brahmasmi” or “I am the cosmos”, Ezekiel presents himself as part of the divine spark, there being no dual reality. The following lines portray the sentiments most authentically:

The shock, scandal, outrage of the world

Become a fever in my room.

Withdrawn into myself

I am this fever and the cause of it,

The meaning without a cure for it

(*Happening. 164*)

Another noteworthy poem in this context is *Speech and Silence* where the poet espouses the virtues of silence which in Indian philosophy is highly prized as communication with one's inner self and with God.

Ezekiel says, “If speech is truly speech, silence / A whisper of Eternity”.

(*Speech & Silence. 54*)

He also defines silence as “speech that needs no words” or as “obedience to the word”. “Tribute to the Upanishads” is a poem clearly reflective of Indian philosophy. Ezekiel here would like to approach the real reality. He rejects as a version of his self, “The skin of the fruit” or “The flesh” or “even the seed”. He would like to “shrink to the nothingness within the seed”. He would seek access to the “Eye of the eye”. Here the poet persona perceives himself as the observant part (“Eye”) of the ever-present cosmic reality (Eye).

Man’s alienation from reality is expressed in many poems like *Urban, Island, Nothingness, What frightens me*. This tension between illusion and reality is evident in man’s thought and action. This difference between our desires and achievements results in tension and hence man’s alienation from reality. Man seeks escape from this reality to relieve himself of tensions. He experiences a conflict going on in his mind and soul. There are heard endless silent dialogues between “the self-protective self” and “the-self naked”.

Man wears mask to hide his personality. He bears dual personality one for the public and one for the self. Again there are contraries present between the mask and the secret behind the mask. With this artificiality man is not only deceiving the society but also himself. In *Double Horror*, the poet talks of the world wide corruption, the difference between the illusion and reality of “Newspaper, Cinema, Radio features, speeches” etc. The irony is evident in “Demanding peace by men with grim warlike face”.

Ezekiel is irritated with the show and artificial life. In his poem, *On Meeting a Pedant*, he cries:

To give me touch of men and give me smell of
Fornication, Pregnancy and spices
But spare me words as cold as print, insidious
Words, dressed in evening clothes for drawing rooms

(*On Meeting a Pedant. 9*)

Every creative writer has his own basic urges, instinctive and emotional. He has, as well, a cultivated approach to life with which he observes life and humanity and subsequently creates art.

Nissim Ezekiel has an incessant desire to create his own world, his own value system. He does not want to be “merely a man/visible as dot or smudge in some badly printed/newspaper photograph of mass meeting or procession”². He does not want to be “among the accepted styles.”³ He wants to forge ahead to explore the new and fresh dimensions of life. As in the opening poem of *Hymns in Darkness*, he says his ground is shaking:

That I was on the move, foresaw
The fury of my inner law,
Consoled me as I looked around
And felt, for all, the shaking ground.
Not a stone in the edifice,
Well-loved, is likely to suffice
Everything calls for a new place
A different rage behind my face⁴

(*Subject of Change*. 11)

The urge to rebuild is insistent. In his *Advice to a Painter*, he translates his urge in the following words: ----- don't
forget to change your style

Every year or two, it's the only way to keep up with the times----- Do not be satisfied
with the world

That God created. Create your own.
Be voracious with your eyes and appetites:
The will to see, the passion in the act of love
Or learning lead to brighter prospects
In landscape, still life, nude, abstract,
And also higher prices

According to Ezekiel, the artist must satisfy his creative urges in his own unique ways. He should not be conditioned by established norms and conventions. He must innovate. He should experiment with new ideas and forms. The poet knows that the task to break the set patterns involves risks. He is fully aware that one may even disintegrate in the process. He advises us to use our brains before taking any bold or unconventional decision.

Ezekiel has an urge to go deep unto the accepted truths and to evaluate their validity and feasibility in the modern context. Like Blake he prefers to sing the song of experience. He wants to analyze “hackneyed truths” from his own personal angle. The poet does not want to be a victim of stale wisdom or everything-dated”. He would, instead, sing freely and fresh, “ Let my follies be fresh / As flowers.”

(Poster Prayers. 17)

The poet does not “want the ashes/ of the old fire but the flame itself”⁵. It is man’s desire to explore the new, the unexplored, the unknown that feeds the flame and keeps it burning forever. The poet wants to learn the ‘simplest truths’ of life. He will not mind even if he is kicked around by the Lord in the process. As in *Poster Prayers -1* he says:

Kick me around
A bit more, O Lord,
I see at last
There is no other way
For me to learn
Your simplest truths

The lord remains the first cause of truth and life. He is the original source of sculptures which are believed to be the earliest revelations of truth. Ezekiel’s approach towards Holy Scriptures as well as life at large is un-conventional, bold and humanistic. He finds nothing final, finished and exclusive about the sectarian beliefs of the well-known organized religions of the world. In Letter-Day Psalms, Ezekiel tries to reshape certain Psalms of The Book of Psalms- a constituent of the old Testament in humanistic and modern terms. He does not sing the songs of God’s perfection. His attitude towards God is unorthodox and unadorned. Without challenging

God's glorying powers and providence, Ezekiel has his say-sly, sure, sensible- in accordance with the spirit with in him, moved by his experience of life. He would be the last man to sing and

Praise him with trumpet sound;
Praise him with lute and harp;
Praise him with tumbrel and dance;
Praise him with strings and pipe;
Praise him with sounding cymbals;
Praise him with loud clashing cymbals;
Let everything that breathes praise the lord;
Praise the lord⁶:

In *Latter Day Psalms*- Ezekiel speaks against "the counsel of the conventional"⁷ rather than against "the counsel of the wicked".

He does not accept the idea that:

Blessed is the man
who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor sits in the way of sinners,
nor sits in the seat of scoffers

(Latter Day Psalms.252)

The poet instead, thinks:

Blessed is the man that walketh
not in the counsel of the con-
ventional, and is at home with
sin as with a wife. He shall
listen patiently to the scorn-
ful, and understand the sources
of their scorn.

(Latter Day Psalms. 252)

Ezekiel thus highlights the difference between religion and religiosity. There is no meaning in meditating day and night in the law of the lord. To Ezekiel, simple meditation and no work is a negation of life. Therefore, he says, “He does not meditate day and night on anything / His delight is in action.”

This, however, does not mean that Ezekiel is against meditation. He only wants that faith should not be taken as a substitute for action. Action and meditation should go together. Every object is subject to decay with the passage of time. As the man grows mature, he grows wise, but at the same time he becomes physically weak and fragile. Prosperity at one level is always accompanied by decay at another level. The poet understands this bitter truth of life and therefore, as a wise and rational man rule out the very idea of immortality.

The poet says that man must perform his duties, his role, he can't evade and escape from his responsibilities. Ezekiel is not ready to surrender human identity and human responsibility. Ezekiel does not welcome the idea that “I fear no evil.” He instead acknowledges the reality of evil like a rational human being and sings, “I do fear evil.”

He does not indulge in common religious clichés and presumptions such as ‘God is great’, ‘God is benevolent’, ‘God is kind’, ‘God is merciful’ etc. He alters the tone of the certainty of, “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me / All the days of my life / And I shall dwell in the house of the lord for ever.”

To a modest and yet egoistic one:

I shall not expect goodness
And mercy all the days of
My life, even if dwell
In the house of the lord

(Latter Day Psalms. 255)

The poet underlines the change of human situations, of forms of good and evil and of conflicts of good and evil. He asks:

How long are we to rely
On those marvelous things
In ancient Egypt? Tell me of the
Marvelous things in Nazi Germany

(Latter Day Psalms. 257)

Therefore, we cannot rely on old conventions; old parables to solve modern problems, old texts, scriptures can no longer be treated as ready made solutions to modern international problems.

In *Latter-Day-Psalms*, the poet accepts the Biblical notion of the supremacy of God overall creation:

In his hand are the depths of the earth,
The heights of the mountains are his also,
The sea is his, for he made it,
For his hands formed the dry land

(Latter Day Psalms. 258)

The poet says that psalm praise and extol the God in exaggerated terms.

This means that Ezekiel thinks that the language of the psalms is intensely conceived and passionately expressed but the content is unconvincing, primitive unscientific and irrational. This should not mean that Ezekiel rejects the psalms totally or that he is an atheist. He simply seeks human participation which the psalms seem to overlook in the scheme of things. Thus, *Letter-Day Psalms* clearly illustrates that Ezekiel's constant stress is on humanism as his basic belief.⁸

Ezekiel seems to impart realistic and humanistic colouring to the theory of karma' enunciated in The Bhagwatgita as well. In The Bhagwatgita, the Lord ordains:

[But] work alone is your proper business,
never the fruits [it may produce] let
not, your motive be the fruit of works nor

your attachment to [mere] workless⁹

The fruit is not within the power of the doer, but this should not mean that the doer is denied the fruit. Keeping the concept in view, Ezekiel prays:

No Lord,
Not the fruit of action
Is my motive
But do you really mind
Half a bit of it?
It tastes so sweet,
And I'm so hungry¹⁰

The poem is a prayer, not a denial of The Gita. It is philosophy humanized with a bit of naughty laugh at the enthusiasts. The poet's approach is not idealistic; it has the undertones of a realist. Evidently enough, the poet's attitude towards God is intimate and informal. Satyanaran Singh rightly observes that Ezekiel does not conceive of God in term of His Olympian aloofness, or as an awesome supernatural reality. He conceives of Him as the God of man.

Ezekiel does not accept the conventional myths and attitudes preached in religious traditions or Jewish history. For him the facts of life and the problems and attitudes of the modern man are too real to be either denied or governed by religious and mythical truth. And it is in this light that he ridicules the concept of the 'Chosen' people of God who only can execute His will. Ezekiel adopts a rather casual posture and asks God to spare him from this ordainments, as he has his own problems and aspirations. Accepting the limitations of the human will, he says, that he may, however, 'oblige' God if His will coincides with his own:

Do not choose me , O lord.
To carry out thy purposes.
I'm quite worthy, of course,
But I have my own purposes.
You have plenty of volunteers
To choose from, Lord

Why pick on me, the selfish one?

O well, if you insist,

I'll do your will

Please try to make it coincide with mine.¹¹

The absolute will of God has been translated into the social will in the poem. The poet underlines that the will of man is too real to be governed by the will of God. For him, the human will is real and an average destiny is fine.

Once the focus is shifted from heaven to earth, the material concerns become important; in the following prayer Ezekiel ridicules the Biblical concept of transcending all material concerns:

Let me be, O Lord,

The camel of the higher Income group

Who passes smoothly through

The eye of that needle¹²

In fact, in almost all *Poster Prayers* and *Poster Poem* Ezekiel reveals an unmistakable humanistic concern for man who feels eternally torn between percept and example, ideal and deed.

In another poem *Stance*, Ezekiel is unable to cope with the Buddhist doctrine that virtue lies in the middle path;

Instead he thinks:

Elusive forever

The middle road

Is never

Strictly

In the middle¹³

The poet, in fact, underlines the gap between the ideal and the actual. “Middle road”¹⁴ is the conceptual ideal, ‘never in the middle’¹⁵ is the historical actualization of it. For the Buddhist ‘middle path’ is the moral reference for Ezekiel, the actual is the reference point, the mere doctrinal is unrealistic.

Besides *Latter-Day-Psalms*, *Poster Prayers* and *Poster Poems*, there are many other poems in which Ezekiel’s understanding of the contemporary man with all his inherited and environmental compulsions and his noble as well as ignoble urges seems to be comprehensive, psychological and deeply humanistic. His point of view is essentially conscientious artistic and creative, though not moral and evaluative in the traditional sense.

The poet believes in natural human moral growth through the process of living, not through percepts only.

The attitude of the poet towards man traditionally condemned as immoral, degenerated and fallen is humanistic in the sense that he well understands the demands of life which are not the same as those of organized and traditional morality whereas life is elastic and all pervading, morality is rigid and top-sided. As such, in the loving and imaginative eyes of the poet, the fallen human beings stand regenerated and redeemed. The individual stands redeemed in the sense that each one of us has to be his own Messiah. That one of the body and transition are the heritage of man but it is for man to accept the conflicts of life and resolve them himself. In the words of the poet “Life is not as simple/ as morality”.¹⁶ Echoing the same idea and reaffirming his humanistic stance, Ezekiel says in *A Time to change*:

Flawless doctrines, Certainty of God,
These are merely dreams, but I am human
And must testify to what they mean.¹⁷

Ezekiel is humanistic. In poem after poem, directly or indirectly, through plain statement or metaphor, he keeps on conveying that man himself is the maker of his destiny and as such supernatural power and sanctions do not mean much.

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