

Nissim Ezekiel's Modernity & Urbanity

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Ezekiel as a man was both urban and modern. His poetry is the poetry of urbanity. He was born and brought up in the metropolis of Bombay. He knew life there only. Urbanity is directly correlated to modernity. Urbanity and modernity have a bond of union. In the traditional world, man was not urban. Urbanity is an outcome of industrialization, as a modern trend. Ezekiel's poetry has this urbanity as its base, on this axis it germinated and flourished.

Ezekiel was accused of being 'a poet of a local habitation and a name', of only being restricted to the city of Bombay. He could neither think of India's hoary past nor of the whole of India, which comprised mainly of rural areas. And it is true that he rarely wrote of situations outside Bombay. He depicted the city of Bombay, stripped of its glamour in a realistic manner. He was totally involved in a situation, which he felt to be a hopeless one too. It pervades his poems very fruitfully. The universal darkness is made momentarily bearable. (Gieve Patel in the introduction to *Collected Poems*) Ezekiel was so immersed in the life of his city Bombay, that he knew each and every aspect of life there. He did not have any inhibition in telling about both good and bad aspects of life in the island. It is felt that no other Indian English poet has given a more comprehensive picture of various facets of metropolitan life than Ezekiel. To him Bombay was the metaphor for the urban life in India and he genuinely attempted to balance diverse tensions of urban culture. He identified himself with Bombay, in spite of his being a Jew this was felt to be a correct choice by him. When asked what did he really mean by the often used phrase, "essentially a Bombay poet"? His reply was:

He felt in reality, the city is inhabited by sick people, with its 'sick hurry and divided aims'. The "City like a passion burns" it is full of foul air, it is contagious:

The unplanned city has a death-wish: everybody is in the business, buying cures, ('Healers' C.P: 231)

It is not only the city, that is sick, but also the entire modern civilization, that awaits a healing touch:

All of us are sick, Sir, ('Family, Songs for Nandu Bhende', C.P: 243)

The nature of illness is not just physical, but mental and requires a psychiatrist.

Ezekiel's poetry acquired an unmistakable Indian ethos and local colour. One observes a profound sense of compassion, understanding, acceptance and sympathy generated for the city and by the city. The poet had seen and known the city in all its aspects. Ezekiel was so involved with the city life, the life in Bombay that he gave space for everybody, be it upper class or lower class people, be it a boss or a typist, a drunkard or a dancer.

Barbaric city sick with slums, Deprived of seasons, blessed with rains, 'A Morning Walk' C.P: 119)

The city played a vital role in his early poetry as in his life. It was the epicenter of his being. Most of his poems were set in the city. It was the city of the poet's "Birth and rebirth" having a prominent place in the poet's conscience. His place in it is skillfully balanced against its general description, when asked what living in Bombay was like, he replied:

I feel I am a Bombay city poet, can't imagine living long anywhere else. I lived in London for 3 1/2 yrs, 1948 -53, but never thought of myself as a Londoner, except that the movement was alive then and I had a live contact with it. I am oppressed and sustained by Bombay. ("Wisdom" The Third (Bombay: The Strand Book Shop.1960) p.3)

The outcome of these poems is redemption. He depicted the city of Bombay stripped of its glamour in a realistic manner.

For others the city may be useless, uninspiring but it is his attitude towards the city. Various images of 'city' that have evolved with the modern poetry have become a trademark with Nissim Ezekiel. He observed that city people lead a dull, drab existence. The city of Bombay encompasses the poet both in conscious and in body; he used various city terms in 'The double Horror' to bring about a vivid picture of the city life:

Ezekiel presented 'Bombay' as it is without concealing anything or singing unnecessary praise of the city. It is understood, that, though there is the apparent darkness, engulfing the city, which is not permanent, and is not unredeemable. His choice of land did not prove futile. He was capable of sustaining and flourishing there, therefore, the choice proved correct. "The objective watchfulness, the critical, skeptical tone, give weight and a sense of triumph to the smallest victories of flesh and spirit.

The tortured, torturing environment, irascibly, has become home.” (Gieve Patel, in Ezekiel: 1983: Introduction) The above debate clearly states that Nissim Ezekiel was out and out an urban poet. Specially, a poet of the city, Bombay, his city.

Ezekiel was a modern poet by virtue of the time he was born in and in which he wrote his poetry. Many of his poems from different collections deal with the modern urban life. He wrote about the ‘every man’, individualism being one of the main features of the modern poetry. But the main aspect of his being a modern poet is his representation of certain urban ethos, the environment, thought, sentiments of the essential man behind the modern urban man.

Modern is something, marked by a significant break from traditional values. Words may mean something or may not mean anything, a perceived relationship between two words may be genuine, or may be a false lead. Some literary historians referred to the term “Modernism” as pretentious, but it braved itself and can be described as ‘a rejection of the traditional and conventional alongwith a search for ‘new means of expression’. In literature modern poets experimented with language and form; dealt with new subject matter. It is antimimetic and very frequently self-consciously delves into the inner states of the writer. (Byod: 1983). It emphasizes the return of the arts to their fundamental characteristics, as though beginning from scratch. This dismissal of tradition also involved the rejection of conventional expectations. Modernism often stresses freedom of expression, experimentation, radicalism and even anthropological primitivism. It tends to be surrealistic, trying to seek to release the contents of the unconscious mind, often by combining unrelated images in a strange way. The subject of the modern poetry is the common man’s life, dilemmas, environment, surroundings, daily business of living, carnal irritations, anger and enjoyments etc. suffered by him. Individualism, its loss, is an important aspect of the modern poetry. This phenomenon of change in the form of poetry was observed all over the world in countries like America, Canada and Australia. After independence, there were many changes, both political and social in the Indian society.

Poetry written in a particular period does have influence of the time, Nissim was no exception, and his poetry also shows some influence of poetry of Modern poets like Eliot, Auden and Yeates. Nissim’s use of this modern technique of following modern way of writing can be attributed both to his following these poets or it can also be said that as a

Jew in India. He did not have any classic background. Jews were driven out of their native land and were spread all over the world. Therefore he did not have any tradition as far as his religion was concerned and the other aspect of his life was that he did not know any thing about the life in Indian villages; being brought up and living in the city of Bombay, the modern Indian city.

Nissim was the first Indian poet to catch and voice these trends in his poetry. As a modern poet in India, he started to voice his own thoughts and opinions, his own experiences, which were the experiences of the every man. He felt that it is not fare for Indian poets, for any poets for that matter be caught between the two worlds ‘the one dead, the other powerless to ‘be born’. He told Anees Jung in an interview: “The problems of Indian writers are strange. They have to make a synthesis between the ancient and modern cultures.” (Jung: 1968) He created a beautiful amalgamation of Jewish and Indian, western and Indian and also of ancient and modern. This beautiful amalgamation is his creation: his poetry.

Nissim broke away from the bounds of the tradition and voiced his feelings and experiences in his poetry. As far as India is concerned it was in the hands of Nissim Ezekiel that modern Indo-English poetry scaled great heights. The ‘modern’ poetry portrayed ordinariness of things and events, discovery of self, which was well understood by Ezekiel. Other modern characteristics shown by him were- chiefly, his willingness to be a poet by choice, who continually worked to improve his art; the other characteristics are scepticism restlessness and a feeling of alienation. He continually strove to better his poetry and kept pace with the changing scene of the international trends, he felt that poetry should reflect the time it is written in “relation of the writer to his age.” If beginning of Indian English verse is due to the presence of Britishers in India, the modern Indian English verse is the resultant of awareness of the international happenings, which helped Indian English verse to mature and be at par with the international verse. G.S.Fraser says:

Any poetry can be called modern if it appeals to us, if we can relate ourselves, our time and life with it. (Fraser: 1961:21)

‘Intellectualism’ is another aspect of the modern poetry. Life is seen as a quest for wholeness, for intellectual and spiritual satisfaction, for maturity. The quest essentially concerns how to live happily, calmly, and ethically as an integrated human being. Like other modern poets, Ezekiel also addresses to ‘God’ or used the word very often

without being very religious himself. Though the modern poet is not religious, he does write about God in his poems. 'God' for him would be somebody like another human being, a friend. After reading the poems, one would often wonder if the 'God' mentioned in his poems is Jew, or Hindu or Christian. Nonetheless, he keeps coming up every now and then in his poetry, as if he was somebody very familiar. The poet sometimes praises God, and sometimes accuses him in an angry baffled tone and is even corrected.

Kick me around /a bit more, O Lord./I see at last/there is no other way/for me to learn/your simplest truths.

(*Egoist's Prayers I* C.P: 212)

His 'God' is somebody, who would be common for all; he may be an urban Bombay God, who is familiar to everybody.

**The vices I've always had/I still have./
The virtues I've never had/still do not have./From
this Human Way of life/Who can rescue Man/If not
His Maker?/Do thy duty, Lord.**

(*Egoist's Prayers II* C.P: 212)

It also shows a day to day speech of an urban city-dweller,

**Be drunk, occasionally,/but not with gin/
or whisky./ May the Lord/ use you up for ends/
beyond your means,/so you know what drunkenness
/really means. (C.P: 280)**

'God' is somebody, to whom he communicates all his feelings of anger, praise, frustrations, he even tries to correct 'God' in his dealing of the world. In Latter-Day Psalms he says

Lord, few there are that trouble Me, fewer still that rise up against me. Be thou a shield for them as for me.

And

How can I breathe freely if thou breakest the teeth of the ungodly? (C.P: 253)

The above examples reiterate that as a modern poet,

he had a different attitude towards God. God for him did not belong to any specific religion. He was a friend, giving advice, ready to be rebuked for something. In a modern idiom, God is addressed, even hobnobbed with. God is not outrightly ousted, but finds a place in the scheme of moderation.

Ezekiel wrote to V.A. Sahane about his religious preferences: "I am not a religious or even a moral person in any conventional sense. The gap between these two statements is the existential sphere of my poetry." (Quoted in V.A.Sahane, *Journal of South Asian Literature*, 11, 3-4) He also acknowledged being back into Judaism in a small way later in his life. As he was mellowed with time, like any other human being, he too had this religious bent.

Alienation is another main aspect of modern poetry. The poet remains detached to his surroundings. The modern poet becomes alienated as he might have lost religious anchors, which was very true in Nissim's case. The modern man is again spoiled by secularism, science and technology. Alienation became a code word in European literature since World War II; Ezekiel had the seeds of alienation ingrained in him. He stood alone in the Hindu-Muslim society, because of his Jewish ancestry. As a Jew, he could not co-relate himself to the Indian history nor to the land of origin of the religion; as Jews were forced to move out of their land. Nissim calls it a 'characteristic', which gives the poet a chance to see things in a particular way. In a way we can say that though alienated from the conventional Indian society, on account of his religion and upbringing, as Jews do not believe in paraphernalia, in showing off, in elaborating upon their feelings. Austerity and chastity of religion left an impact on his poetry. Alienation did not seem to bother Ezekiel. He did not think that a writer should be condemned because of his alienation.

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