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AVERSION TO THE MILIEU IN NISSIM EZEKIEL'S POETRY

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ABSTRACT

Nissim Ezekiel is a significant contributor to post-Independence Indian English poetry, focusing on themes of identity, culture, and modern life. His recurring theme is his aversion to the environment he finds himself in, reflecting his disillusionment with societal norms and struggle to find a sense of belonging. Ezekiel's aversion to the milieu can be seen in several of his poems, which explore the conflict between loyalty to India and personal dislocation. His poetry invites readers to confront the complexities of the human experience and the challenges of finding authenticity and meaning in a world that often seems at odds with our inner truth. The current paper investigates how Nissim Ezekiel's depiction of the speaker's troubles with the city's chaos, lack of connection, and superficiality connects with anybody who has ever felt adrift in an uncomfortable setting. The study also looks into his feeling of Indianness, which is under scrutiny. The current study examines Ezekiel's selected poems in order to appreciate the true nature of his hatred for the environment in which he lives.

Keywords: Nissim Ezekiel, Alienation, Aversion to the Milieu, Indian English Poetry, Indianness

Nissim Ezekiel's Indianness has been heavily scrutinised. Several of his poems portray his unmistakable sense of alienation, which appears to be exacerbated to the point of antipathy to the environment in which he lives. His reaction to the environment is replete with dissatisfaction, apathy, and anguish. He looks to be battling an identity crisis in a setting torn between subjective communal ethos and alienating socio-cultural circumstance. Overall, it is his Jewish ancestry that causes him to feel alienated in the Indian context into which he was born by chance. In essence, his familial, social, and religious background or tradition is the underlying reason of his sense of estrangement from the nation he considers to be historically Hindu. Furthermore, it appears to be too difficult for him to conform to the given milieu while surrendering his particular ethos and identity, of which he is acutely aware. He conveys clearly, "I am not a Hindu and my background makes me a

natural outsider: Circumstances and decisions relate me to India.”ⁱ His situation in India is a big paradox for him. In his “Poster Poems:5”, he voices his inner turmoil thus:

I’ve never been a refugee
except of the spirit,
a loved and troubled country
which is my home and enemy
(Ezekiel: 1960)

Ezekiel’s words are fraught with contradictions. The expression “never been a refugee / except of the spirit” bespeaks of his inner discontent and discomfiture, which is bondage to his spirit. And in the subsequent lines, again he uses mutually contradictory words “loved” / “troubled” and “home” / “enemy”, thereby articulating his conflict with the given milieu. He finds himself torn between his Jewish background and ethos and his present social and cultural situation. He finds it hard to correlate with the Indian society and equally hard to link himself with the land of his religious-cultural origin, from where the Jews had had a forced exodus. The trauma of dislocation from the homeland as experienced by his ancestors is ingrained in the poet, which is the cause of alienation, maladjustment and identity conflict in him as in most Jews. Also as M. K. Naik observes: “Ezekiel’s background itself provides a copy-book example of social and cultural alienation.”ⁱⁱ William Walsh remarks: “Nissim Ezekiel in the Indian scene is a permanent expatriate, but one who has freely elected to stay. Displaced by his own spiritual past, he is in place by an act of the will.”ⁱⁱⁱ Walsh’s use of the expression “permanent expatriate” clearly describes the situation of Ezekiel, but his second clause depicting him as “one who has clearly elected to stay” is dubious, as Ezekiel’s sense of alienation is irremediable as obvious in most of his poems.

Ezekiel’s alienation is so strong that he frequently criticises society and expresses hatred to his surroundings. Many of his poems make obvious or indirect references to his upbringing and, most of the time, openly criticise his current location. Despite the fact that India is a cosmopolitan and multiethnic country that has accommodated a variety of religions, races, and cultures, Nissim Ezekiel tends to denigrate it, mostly in order to parody the unsophisticated ways of the average middle-class Indian. He appears to concoct stories of harassment and humiliation, which may or may not be true, but speak of the persecution complex in him, which causes him to be paranoid and autophobic in his surroundings. In its plainspeak, his poetry “Background, Casually” depicts situations of estrangement, discrimination, and aggravation due to his background. He is equally critical of Christians, Muslims, and Hindus for making him feel inferior. In the following lines, he describes how he was mistreated at school because he was Jewish:

I went to Roman Catholic school,
A mugging Jew among the wolves.
They told me I had killed the Christ
That year I won the scripture prize.
A Muslim sportsman boxed my ears...

I grew in terror of the strong
But undernourished Hindu lads,
Their prepositions always wrong,
Repelled me by passivity.
One noisy day I used a knife.

ⁱ Quoted from Nissim Ezekiel’s essay “Naipaul’s India and Mine” by Gieve Patel in “Introduction”, *Collected Poems: 1952 – 1988*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989, p. xxi.

ⁱⁱ M. K. Naik, “Nissim Ezekiel and Alienation”, *Nissim Ezekiel: Dimensions of a Poetic Genius*, ed. Surya Nath Pandey, Delhi: Doaba House, 1999, p. 47.

ⁱⁱⁱ William Walsh, “Small Observations on a Large Subject”, *Aspects of Indian Writing in English*, ed. M. K. Naik, Madras: Macmillan, 1979, pp. 105-106.

(Ezekiel: 1987)

The above lines are filled with acrimony and repressed rancour, as evidenced by the expression "A mugging Jew among the wolves," which, on the one hand, depicts anti-Semitism and, on the other, with its bestial imagery conveyed by the word "wolves," declares the poet's hatred for all non-Jews. He appears to be concocting an image of an innocent youngster who is mocked by everyone for being the "killer of the Christ," but this brief banter among the children cannot be trusted as producing so much resentment in him. In reality, it is a made-up picture to gain compassion for himself and his society as isolated and persecuted by others.

Similarly, Ezekiel's comment "I grew in terror of the strong / But undernourished Hindu lads..." is highly opinionated and conceited, looking down on native Hindus. Ezekiel's vituperative and disparaging language is not appropriate in poetry. Even the subsequent statement "Their prepositions always wrong, / Repelled me by passivity" is derogatory and reeks of prejudice and intolerance, in addition to some sort of superiority complex in him that undermines and mocks the simple ways of average middle or low class Indians. People should not be repulsed by simple solecisms or grammatical faults. Ezekiel's position is rife with racial intolerance and self-conceit, and he should not be relied on such a ridiculous line of reasoning. Instead, such utterances expose his mind's evil, and it is likely that it is this malice in him that causes him to be maladjusted to his surroundings.

Similarly, in the poem "Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T. S.," Ezekiel deliberately mocks the use of English by semi-educated Indians, but he fails to recognise that such linguistic quirks, as well as those of the underprivileged masses, are insignificant enough to include in the subject matter for poetry. Furthermore, English is a non-native or foreign language for most Indians, remains a second language in India, and is in no way indicative of Indian ethos and identity. Ezekiel's criticism of common Indians' English language is unjust and unsustainable. In reality, by addressing such frivolous and petty topics in poetry, Ezekiel has denigrated poetry's hallowed and transcendent rule. Simultaneously, he has disparaged and misrepresented the ethos and identity of the nation that held him in great regard and honour.

In reality, Ezekiel exhibits a strong attachment to the Western audience while being distant from India, Indians, and Indianness. As a staunch Anglophile, he despises all things Indian and places a high importance on English norms. He perceives only the negative in the Indian environment. His pessimism exposes twisted truths of Indian society. He spares no one, including ancient Indian literature, art, culture, and value systems. In "Passion Poems - 3: The Sanskrit Poets," Ezekiel mocks the ancient Sanskrit poets. He praises the Sanskrit poets for their unfettered sensuality, but in his endeavour to write erotic poetry, he falls well short of the canon. Rather, he deviates into the obscene:

How freely they mention
breasts and buttocks.
They are my poetic ancestors.
Why am I so inhibited?
(Ezekiel: 1987)

Ezekiel overlooks the fact that simply stating "breasts and buttocks" does not qualify the poem for inclusion in the canon of erotica. The name "erotic" is derived from Eros, the Greek deity of love (identifiable with the Roman love-god Cupid and the Hindu god Kamadeva), emphasising the importance of love. Eroticism thus includes both the psychological and spiritual components of love, in addition to the bodily. Ezekiel's poetry fall short of the artistic level of the Sanskrit eroticists because they lack the graces of amatory substance and the spiritual dimension of love. His poetry is plagued by hackneyed, apparent, filthy, sensuous, and crass representations of sensuality. As in the following excerpt from his "Nudes 1978: 2," the topic is so tacky and filthy that even the Muse of Poetry would refuse to accept it as her subject:

'I love undressing', she has to say,
as she undresses. The verbal
and the visual join in her.
'Is this a part of you?' she asks,

as she holds it, stares at it.
 Then she laughs . . .
 ' . . . put your fingers there',
 she pleads, as if
 I need instructions. It's only
 impatience, though, becoming frenzy
 as I penetrate. 'Now', she claims,
 'you are within me. Aren't you
 within me? and she makes me say, 'I am'.
 (Ezekiel: 1987)

This description is neither erotic nor even poetic. It expresses the poet's hedonistic, licentious, and wanton emotions. How can such ridiculous and crude utterances be compared to the magnificent lyrics of the Sanskrit poets? Simply put, it is a wicked parody of ancient Indian literature. Even Ezekiel's declaration "They are my poetic ancestors" is degrading, with a sarcastic tone of voice and a sense of repugnance towards the time-honored Indian ethos in his overzealous devotion to the West.

Even Ezekiel's depiction of the Indian city of Bombay is overly negative. He paints Bombay as a "barbaric city sick with slums / Deprived of seasons, blessed with rains..." and "a million purgatorial lanes." (1987, Ezekiel). However, Ezekiel plainly overlooks the fact that Bombay is more than just a city of slums; it is not the city's holistic and representative image. It is almost definitely by purpose that Ezekiel only glances at the city's darker side. And the design is Eurocentric, defying Indian customs and culture. Every country in the world has social and political issues, yet discussing these alone cannot fully portray a country. Every country has its assets, as well as ethnic customs, socio-cultural norms, and religious beliefs that serve as a foundation for its majority population. The majority's common concerns cannot be ignored. Ezekiel, as a member of the minority population, exhibits obvious indications of identity conflict, but the causes for his inner issues cannot be compensated for by embarking on the dismal and off-putting image of the country. Most reviewers have defended Ezekiel's dismal cityscapes as reflecting his commitment to modern societal reality, but they have consciously or unconsciously missed the obvious parallels between the lines.

According to William Walsh: "One is aware of a double impulse in the poet, which on the one hand keeps him at a distance from his environment as he clutches to his private history and aspirations, and which on the other, by means of a free and painful act of will, reconciles him to his environment."^{iv} However, as evidenced by the majority of his rigmaroles, Ezekiel never seems to reconcile. According to M. K. Naik, "it is obvious that as an exclusively urban-based native poet born and bred in Westernised surroundings in his "bitter native city" of Bombay, Ezekiel cannot naturally have the kind of inwardness with the traditional Indian ethos which some of his fellow poets, more fortunate in this respect, can legitimately claim to possess." However, being "urban" and "westernised" does not give one the right to slander other people in society. Ezekiel is a hypocrite, cynic, and slanderer of all things Indian. He appears to be an incurable pessimist.

Many of his writings appear to express his disdain for the Indian setting. In his poem "In India," he depicts India as filthy, muddy, ugly, and disgusting:

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 noisy silence

^{iv} Ibid. p. 106.

Suffering the place and time,
I ride my elephant of thought.
(Ezekiel: 1987)

The imagery strongly conveys Ezekiel's repulsion and detachment from the Indian nation. In his poem "Guru," he criticises Indian gurus (religious lecturers or saints), saying, "If saints are like this, what hope is there for us?" (1987, Ezekiel). In "Cows," he depicts his mother complaining about cows on the pavements, which is another deliberate construction designed to tarnish India's image while also mocking Hindu religious sentiments: "She knows that cows are holy, / worshipped by the parents / of the children in her school. / Even gods ought not to clutter up / the pavements – that's her view. / She's not against beliefs" believe / what you like, she says, / but get out of my way." (1987, Ezekiel). In "Night of the Scorpion," he mocks the simplistic customs of rural Indian peasants, dismissing their beliefs as superstitions and their camaraderie or fraternity as folly.

Most modern poets' common poetic formula is to describe urban milieus, socioeconomic disparities, class strifes, and so on, which, as a result, cannot be depended on as a complete and authentic (re)presentation of a country's social verities. There are numerous other components of observable reality. In his cityscapes, Ezekiel uses the same method, although most of his descriptions are distorted, deceptive, and slanted, and hence unrepresentative of India. Rather, his imprudent portrayal of India in the name of realism is marred by impropriety, as well as ingratitude for the country that has supplied the foundation for nourishment, shelter, livelihood, grace, recognition, liberty, confidence, and selfhood. Ezekiel's poetry lack the vital ideals or values that one should have for one's homeland, or at the very least for the soil that anchors one's roots. Ezekiel's ostensible adaption to Indian society is laden with unhappiness and sorrow. He declares in "The Edinburgh Interlude":

I have become a
part of the scene
which I can neither love nor hate.
(Ezekiel: 1987)

As the line above indicates, the poet's state of mind is fraught with ambiguity, ambivalence, and an obvious lack of sense of adaptation and rising above presuming and egotistical ways of thinking about a nation. In reality, Ezekiel is mired in subjective concepts, assumptions, and apprehensions that have caused him to misinterpret reality. In his descriptions of his birthplace, where he was born, raised, and had all of his basic needs met, he appears to be depressed, dismayed, and always unsure and hesitant. He defines his "commitments" as a forced compromise with the situation because there were no other options. He communicates his ambivalence in "Background, Casually" by using the word "backward" as a pun:

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: 1987)

He articulates how birthing and belonging become binding on him in the poem "Island," which is reminiscent of W. B. Yeats' "The Lake Isle of Innisfree":

I cannot leave the island
I was born here and belong.
(Ezekiel: 1987)

And in "The Egotist's Prayers VII," Ezekiel consciously suppresses his desire to elude his belonging and escape from claustrophobic situations, instead seeking refuge in the place of his birth, rearing, and living:

Confiscate my passport, Lord,

I don't want to go abroad.
 Let me find my song
 Where I belong.
 (Ezekiel: 1987)

Ezekiel's invocation of Lord for passport confiscation appears silly and stupid. If he truly does not want to travel overseas, he invokes the supernatural authority, as if it controls all passport confiscation requirements. Furthermore, the word "confiscate" is inappropriate here because it connotes a punitive action to be conducted against someone accused of a crime and barred from leaving the nation. Such sentiments, however, are prominent in Ezekiel's writings, demonstrating his major concentration in the negative. The usage of contradictions, which is frequently deliberate and purposeful, causes ambiguity, dubiety, and intended irony in the majority of his poetry, causes the poems to be shed all at once. In the poem "After Reading a Prediction," for example, he attempts to minimise the meaning of "home" by comparing it to "hell" without providing any major dialectic to the semantic of the poem:

This is the place
 where I was born. I
 know it
 well. It is home,
 which I recognize at last
 as a kind of hell
 to be made tolerable.
 (Ezekiel: 1987)

In "Enterprise," he surmises from a supposedly futile pilgrimage, contrived around a premeditated ironical context: "Home is where we have to gather grace" (Ezekiel: 1987), but the statement is paradoxical and absurd in the context of the pilgrimage, as Ezekiel has no sense of home anywhere in his poems. Furthermore, it is dismissive of and disrespectful of other religious beliefs and their rites and rituals. His continual homelessness or lack of belonging anywhere makes him a "native alien," as well as mechanistic, devious, and untrustworthy as a poet who, in his Eurocentric zeal, tends to reduce all things Indian to zilch. In all likelihood, it is his Jewish history or background, genuinely, profoundly imbued with an everlasting Diaspora sensibility, to which he frequently refers, that keeps him psychologically and emotionally alienated, dispossessed, and homeless for the rest of his life.

Ezekiel's poems have an invariable tone of irritation, cynicism, revulsion, and aversion, frequently expressed in an equivocating, vile, and even vituperative manner. The coterie poets' and critics' perspectives on Ezekiel's severe estrangement and distaste to the Indian milieu are overly defensive and biased. His depiction of India is only incomplete, contentious, and manufactured by assumptions and weighted preconceptions, making it untrustworthy. In *Waffle of the Toffs*, M. Prabha rightly puts a question mark on his Indianness and on considering him as the starting point of modern Indian poetry in English as his *A Time to Change* (1952) has "not a single reference to India, and, she calls him a "master manipulator."^v His apparent identity crisis borders on lunacy and ethical and moral weakness. Furthermore, the majority of his ostensibly poetic pieces lack even the poetic element. The majority of his poetry are too prosaic, gibberish, bland, and boring, with plainspeak and pointless raillery and sophistry.

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^v M. Prabha, *The Waffle of the Toffs*, Delhi: Oxford University Press & IBH, 2000, p. 184.