

Nissim Ezekiel's 'Background, Casually': Travails of Cultural Marginality

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The year 1965 marks a significant milestone in Ezekiel's evolving poetic sensibility because it witnessed the publication of his two seminal writings, one critical and the other creative, besides his fifth verse-volume *The Exact Name*. He reviewed V.S. Naipaul's much talked about travelogue *An Area of Darkness* under the title 'Naipaul's India and Mine' for the *Imprint* in 1965. Later the same year, his *magnum opus*, the exhaustively discussed 'Background, Casually', invariably treated as an encapsulated autobiography, was published in *Verses and Voice* by the Poetry Book Society, London. These two pieces are central to any serious discourse on Ezekiel's creative credentials because they supplement each other in several respects. It will not be a travesty of truth to regard 'Background, Casually' as a poetic appropriation of the Naipaul-essay, which broadened the poet's canvas by exposing him to the crude realities of his native country, debunked by the Caribbean novelist as 'an area of darkness'. It was obviously left for Ezekiel to scale meticulously the depth of this darkness or otherwise in creative terms and his poetic art acquires a rare poignancy and sharpness hereafter. The present paper attempts to demonstrate that the so-called 'background, casually' is quite consequential as the poet would have us disbelieve.

Ezekiel, while reviewing *An Area of Darkness*, got an opportunity to dilate on his situation vis-a-vis Naipaul's, including the complexities and amplitudes of such a predicament. He begins with questioning the very foundations of the Caribbean writer's premise:

My quarrel is that Mr. Naipaul is often so uninvolved and unconcerned. He writes exclusively from the point of view of his own dilemma, his temperamental alienation from his mixed *background*, his choice, and his escape (emphasis mine).¹

The 'mixed background' of the Trinidad born writer of Indian

origin impels Ezekiel to look at his own grounding and racial history:

I am not a Hindu and my *background* makes me a natural outsider; circumstances and decisions relate me to India. In other country, I am a foreigner. In India I am an Indian (emphasis mine).

(S.P. p. 99)

Despite being 'a natural outsider', the poet realises the specificity of locale in the creative process:

India is simply my environment. A man can do something for and in his environment by being fully what he is, by not withdrawing from it. I have not withdrawn from India... History is behind me. I live on the frontiers of the future that is slowly receding before me, content for *background* impresses me as little as pride in *background* (emphasis mine).

(SP. p. 100)

The word 'background' occurs in each of these extracts in three different contexts and one has reasons to believe that it is not a mere coincidence that his substantial poem is christened 'Background, Casually.' Though written and published in 1965 this piece remained uncollected until the publication of Ezekiel's next volume *Hymns in Darkness* (1976).

That 'Background, Casually' is pivotal to Ezekiel's poetic *oeuvre* is testified to even by one of the rather unfriendly critics, M.K. Naik when he remarks—'All issues/controversies have their roots here.'² Something of a portrait of the artist as a young man, this piece was written for a Commonwealth Arts Festival as an explanation of his return to India, a statement of something 'often thought of but never so well expressed'. Apparently dismissive, as suggested by the modifier 'casually', the title is a misnomer because its content is too consequential to be easily wished away. The poet seems to imply that it is an account of a meaningless past, with nothing to pride over and as such he can afford to be casual about it. Comprising three sections, the poem has a circular structure—it starts with a Roman Catholic school of Bombay and terminates on the very island which is Ezekiel's 'backward place' after a four years' sojourn at London—and moves rather jerkily from one experience to another connected only by the shreds of bitter memories. The opening line—'A poet-rascal-clown was born'—underlines the predicament of the modern poet who walks through a variety of episodes in life and it is his self that gives them some semblance of unity howsoever haphazard

and confusing. Recollecting his childhood experiences and emotions as it were 'in tranquility', Ezekiel begins with the long-standing animosity between the Gentiles and the Jews and the disquietening aspect of the characteristic communal frenzy:

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.³

The context sensitive detail implies that for want of a Judaic institution this 'mugging Jew' was admitted to a Christian school and subjected to all sorts of physical, and emotional humiliations at the hands of his Hindu, Muslim and Christian mates. Being hurled into a den of wolves to be perpetually interrogated and singled out as a murderer of Christ might have been a convulsive experience for the sensitive author during the very formative years. However, and ironically enough, Ezekiel bagged a trophy in a scripture contest much to the amazement and annoyance of his classfellows. This persecution complex kept burgeoning with the poet as a helpless victim of religious discrimination;

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.

(CP, p. 179)

'Boxed' by a Muslim sportsman, hated by Christian fanatics and maturing under the constant fear of 'Hindu lads', Ezekiel's might have been a terribly trying proposition. That the poet's perceptive eye tenaciously observes reality is attested to by the epithet 'undernourished', blatant comment on the physique of the Hindu youths who derived strength to lord over microscopic minorities from their overwhelming majority, rather than physical attributes. Apprehensive of the robust, he is nauseated by the lethargic and chicken-hearted fellows. The early impressions of incorrect prepositions—'Their prepositions always wrong'—resulted later in 'Very Indian Poems in Indian English', a sense of contempt for the context and also a sense of urgency for reconciliation with it. One can look and not unjustly, for an arrogant rather than an apologetic tone in

these lines belying insolence towards natives. Gripped in a strange religious fix the poet tried to identify his spiritual moorings by exposing himself more intimately to his inherited faith Judaism besides Yoga and Zen of Indian soil. At one stage he toyed with the idea of becoming a rabbi-saint and experiencing spiritual illumination for himself. The consciousness of living in an imperfect and unromantic India surfaces in the paradoxical line—'The more I searched the less I found'. Torn by his personal dilemma the protagonist planned for his historic British trip financially helped by Ebrahim Alkazi, his personal friend and admirer. The first section ends with Ezekiel specifically cataloguing his obsessive preoccupations—philosophy, poverty, poetry—in his London basement flat.

The second section narrates how the full-blooded youth in Ezekiel living alone in the freezing winters of London was intermittently taken over by biological urges. In his characteristic ironic way the poet relates his experiences with biblical inputs for mock-serious purposes. Imagining himself as the Son of Man of the Book of Ecclesiasts, the literal Ezekiel, he attributes this infatuation for lust to some Woman understandably Eve, deeply imprinted in his monotheistic psyche as responsible for the Fall. The biblical paradigm has been employed only to underline persona's weaknesses for sex while his counterpart Jesus overcame all temptations. Though planned with high hopes of enriching the personality, the trip failed to deliver the expected goods—'I knew that I had failed/ In everything, a bitter thought'. The implied contrast between the conventional benefits calculated in terms of the acquisition of education and culture through such a stay abroad, and the tawdriness of the outcome in the poet's particular case is upsetting indeed. The anxiety condensed in the phrase 'bitter thought' was only an external manifestation of the emotional turmoil within caused by a strong and persistent strain of alienation of multiple dimensions. With options extremely limited for him, the protagonist decided to return to India in a huff earning his passage by undertaking menial work on an English cargo-ship. This meant simply to revive the bitter memories of unhappy moments in a voluntary bid to 'laugh again at home'.

How to feel at home, was the point.
Some reading had been done, but what
Had I observed, except my own
Exasperation? All Hindus are

Like that, my father used to say,
 When someone talked too loudly, or
 Knocked at the door like the Devil.
 They hawked and spat. They sprawled around.

(CP. p.180)

In the face of spiritual differences of alarming proportions with the mainstream culture, it was humanly impossible to feel at home in the land of his birth. In the unfolding process of growth, an inbuilt prejudice against Hindus as symbolic of all roughness and unsophistication had come to stay. In his Radio talk, 'The Heritage of India: A Personal Statement' broadcast from the A.I.R. Bombay on 12 June 1984, Ezekiel has explicated the 'home' metaphor elaborately:

If you have a house of your own you may keep all the windows open so that the winds of the world may play freely in it. But what happens if your house has no character, no distinctive quality . . . what happens if your house is not really a home in the full sense of the word, intellectually and culturally, but only a stage for rehearsing a play that is never completed and may never be performed?⁴

Howsoever despairing was the situation, Ezekiel prepared himself for the *fait accompli*, hoping that with the passage of time things would get normalised. The process of cultural assimilation got off to a new start with marrying Daisy Jacob in 1952 itself, the very year of the prodigal son's return. The impatient urge to experience some semblance of nativity and rootedness manifested itself in the protagonist's frequent switch-over of jobs only to accentuate his desolation. Unfortunately, the bitterness of the song of innocence was infinitely multiplied and aggravated by the harrowing experiences abroad with the prospects of still worse things in store for him. Ezekiel for the first time outlines his pedigree and racial connections towards the close of the section which shifts the focus from the quest for assimilation to an acceptance of the actualities surrounding him:

My ancestors, among the castes,
 Were aliens crushing seeds for bread
 (The hooded bullock made his rounds).

(CP. p.180)

The image drawn in the last line is as much literal as metaphorical. It refers to the primitive or the traditional method of oil-crushing in which the 'hooded bullock' tied to a machine, *kolhu*, was driven in a circle by his master sitting on a chariot-like contrivance just behind him. The two worked together to survive on an existential plane. While the bullock, with his eyes and face covered, did not realise the physical exhaustion, the master in full awareness of his predicament allowed himself to obliterate his suffering. Ezekiel's powerful image conveys the truth that the concern for 'bread' outweighed every other consideration with his ancestors.

The opening stanza of the third and final section dwells on the meagre contribution of the Ezekiels to the cultural and the historical life of the Indian nation. Adopting a rather defensive posture, the poet regrets that his family of oil-crushers could not add substantially to the native ethos in social, literary and political terms despite their domicile dating back to AD 378. In an interview with Eunice de Souza in 1989, Ezekiel dwelt at length on his impoverishing ancestry:

The Jews in India had their historical weaknesses and the community was not able to produce scholars, poets or musicians—not even a theologian—all the figures one identifies with as representing the vitality of a culture. Compare this with American Jews. It can't be an accident. I'm not blaming the community. The community existed at a peasant level in the early years and must have found it necessary to be isolated for survival. It was small, insignificant, and just about kept the rituals going.⁵

The only exception was one of his forebears who fought in the Boer war on behalf of the British. Even this claim of having shared a racial past has its own pricks of conscience because it was somebody else's war fought bearing British arms, and to that extent a mercenary enterprise. That the racial history cannot absolve him of a reprehensible conscience—'I dreamed that/Fierce men had bound my feet and hands'—compelled him to go in for other options by way of ensuring his active involvement in the native scenario. Ezekiel chose to appropriate his poetic creativity to forge spontaneous links with the soil, howsoever personally unrewarding this proposition might turn out to be. This determination 'to cash in on/The inner and the outer storms' has left its own scars on Ezekiel's poetic personality. This brings one to the celebrated stanza:

The Indian landscape scars my eyes.

I have become a part of it

To be observed by foreigners.

They say that I am singular,

Their letters overstate the case.

(CP, p.181)

The poet asserts that he derives emotional strength from the native landscape, both physical and psychic, because it is very much part of his existence. Here 'foreigners' means the members of the majority community for whom the poet has already employed the third person plural 'they' in the first section—'They hawked and spat. They sprawled around'. Those who allude to his singularity or aloneness exaggerate ('overstate') something, the poet feels, which is ignoble and marginal in his mental make-up. The love-hate relationship takes on a new colour in the closing stanza with the poet accepting his predicament:

I have made my commitment 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.

(CP, p.181)

The adverb of time 'now' recalls all those moments of ambivalence and indecisiveness—'No longer unresolved/But definite as morning . . .' ('Something to Pursue', CP, p. 14); 'I must define myself, the place/And time...' ('December'58', CP, p.112); 'All I want now/is the recognition/of dilemma/and the quickest means/of resolving it/within my limits.' ('Transparently', CP, p. 150)—which have been upsetting him terrifically. The well-calculated and thoroughly debated upon decision—'This is one':—has been arrived at after years of anguish and affliction and as such rules out the possibility of fluctuation any more. In the full know of things shorn of all illusions—'Home is where we have to earn our grace'. ('Enterprise', CP, p.118); 'It is home, /which I recognise at last/as a kind of hell/to be made tolerable.' ('After Reading a Prediction', CP, p. 155)—was the resolution adopted 'to stay where I am'. The sense of urgency to adjust himself to a 'remote and backward place' has an implicit nagging tinge but it stood the test of time and in 'Island' written after seven years, the poet reiterates:

I cannot leave the island,
I was born here and belong.

(*CP*, p. 182)

This 'unending series of adjustments and perceptions' has created nothing short of a persecution complex in Ezekiel's creative personality and times without number, its configurations are pronounced in his poetry. The typical mindset with which he embarked on his literary odyssey enabled him to view the native reality with a dispassionate perspective, both his strength and weakness as an artist. In fact, the poet turned his 'hereditary thinness' to best advantage and restrained himself from parochial flamboyance as well as from the sophistication of the rootless. The Bombayite in Ezekiel finally develops into a humanist in his recent poetry—'to heal/myself and others' (*CP*, p. 274)—overcoming all bounds of colour, caste and creed.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Ezekiel, Nissim, 'Naipaul's India and Mine', in *Selected Prose* (Delhi: Oxford, 1992) p. 86.
2. Naik, M.K., *A History of Indian English Literature* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademy, 1982, rptd. 1995).
3. Ezekiel, Nissim, *Collected Poems* (Delhi: Oxford, 1982) p. 179. Referred to as *CP* in the text.
4. *Setu*, 1, 3 (1985), pp. 71-2.
5. 'Interview with Four Indian English Poets', *The Bombay Review*, 1 (1989) p. 72.