

'I was born here and belong': Cultural Strain in the Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel

SURYA NATH PANDEY
Banaras Hindu University
Varanasi

Nissim Ezekiel has become a living legend in his lifetime and modern Indian poetry in English owes much to him. Besides introducing the modernist element in Indian English poetry with his other two colleagues, A. K. Ramanujan and Dom Moraes, he canonised it as a significant ingredient of Commonwealth poetry. His contribution to Indian poetry far exceeds the number of volumes he has published and in fact he has been the poetic mentor of about a dozen major Indian poets who have immensely benefited from his guidance, advice, coaxing and encouragement. With his unmistakable imprint on post-colonial Indian poetry, Ezekiel has acquired the unenviable status of the grand old man whose attitudes, ideas and perceptions of life have become almost synonymous with authenticity in respect of Indian reality.

Over the years Ezekiel has made significant observations on culture and its various aspects in his writings and interviews and the cross-cultural dimension of his poetry is inescapably related to them. As early as 23 August 1950 while staying in London, he confided with his friend Abraham Solomon in Mumbai about his priorities:

We must relate ourselves to things Indian. India is home for us. It is wrong to think that we shall be at home in Sweden... or Switzerland. In English society we shall never be accepted ... (emphases added, quoted in Raj Rao, 2000: 87)

The whole corpus of Ezekiel's writings, critical as well as creative, hinges on attempts at relating himself to India. Times without number he has endeavoured to affirm his loyalty to the country of his birth. Fully aware of his situation—'I am not a Hindu and my background makes me a natural outsider'—he dwells at

length in his well-known review-essay on V.S. Naipaul 'Naipual's India and Mine', his first affirmation of his predicament:

... circumstances and decisions relate me to India ... 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 I have not withdrawn from India ... Not being Hindu I cannot identify myself with India's past as a comprehensive heritage and reject it as if it were mine to reject ... I can identify myself only with modern India (Ezekiel, 1965:99-100).

Ezekiel believed that 'a writer needs a national or cultural identity, without that you become a series of limitations, echoes, responses but you do not develop because there is nothing at the core to develop' (Ezekiel, 1979:3). In his most important interview with J.B. Beston also Ezekiel asserted, 'I have strong sense of belonging, not only to India, but to this city. I would never leave Bombay - it's a series of commitments' (Ezekiel, 1977: 89). The process of relating himself to India had its own hazards and in his radio talk 'The Heritage of India: A Personal Statement', Ezekiel recapitulates his experiences spanning a period of about four decades:

There is no set formula (to relate to contemporary India and also to the whole Indian heritage), no set pattern but an unending series of adjustments and perceptions ... It is not easy because there is too much to unify, too much that resist integration, conflicts and contradictions for example, between my Jewish racial soul and my Indian choices. I cannot ignore the first nor deny the power of the second (Ezekiel, 1985, 73).

Ezekiel's idea of culture has its intractable roots in his Jewish ancestry known for unique cohesiveness besides its dogmatic credentials in religious matters. 'A nation without a homeland' (prior to the existence of present-day Israel, of course) Jews are known for functioning either as an aggressive majority as in United States or as an embittered minority as in Hitler's Germany. They do not simply recite Psalms—'If I forget thee O, Jerusalem, let me right hand forget its cunning'—they live up to them in their daily conduct and behaviour. However Ezekiel has explained that the atmosphere of his home, unlike other Jewish families' was neither narrow nor parochial:

Much depends really on what sort of Jewish family I belong to. The context of my family's existence was as normal as that of any other

family in Bombay including families in the majority-community. My father was an academic and my mother a school teacher who started her own school in Marathi. Both of them wanted above all to acquire and disseminate knowledge (Ezekiel, 1989: 72).

Ezekiel's creative pilgrimage started with a set of challenges and conflicts. The sense of religious marginality further compounded by his choice of English as his poetic medium (instead of going in for some Indian languages to transcend his peripheral position and force himself on to the centre) has been viewed from various angles. It is a commonplace of critical scholarship on him to employ the word 'alienation' to describe his situation and more often than not this word has been used as an inherent and in built handicap—his Achilles' heel—for a proper appreciation of the native scenario. Ezekiel's critical attitude towards accepted norms of Indian society has been construed as a product of his impoverishing isolation from his milieu. Before one undertakes to examine his poetry from the projected thrust of the work, it is not entirely irrelevant to consider what he set out to do as a poet. Even as a young man below twenty, Ezekiel had clearly designed his poetic mission as he wrote to his friend Abraham Solomon on 20 October 1945:

... by now it is quite obvious to me that my poetry must express a certain totality of human experience; it must move from the purely personal plane to a plane at once intensely individual and universal (quoted in Raj Rao, op. cit.: 63).

This resolve to achieve 'totality of human experience' even at such an age which had fresh memories of 'I grew in terror of the strong/But undernourished Hindu lads' (CP:179) speaks of Ezekiel's broad-mindedness, a knack of overcoming personal impressions. It was not a naïve determination because 'I realize at the very outset (this task) demands an honesty which I do not possess.' To achieve that honesty, he felt 'becomes the need of the hour and 'Everything else ... will be added on to that' (quoted in Raj Rao, *ibid*: 63).

Ezekiel's poetic graph is marked by this pursuit of 'honesty', a pre-requisite to achieve universality of experience. He can be anything, but he cannot put on mask and be dishonest to his experience. This accounts for umpteen references to his initial dilemmas in his poetry which is a witness to the ongoing struggle, 'a continual extinction of personality'. In his interview with Suresh

Kohli he frankly admitted that 'scores of my poems are obviously written for personal therapeutic purposes' (Ezekiel, 1972: 7). In fact, every volume has at least a couple of central pieces which revolve around the avowed resolve of the poet. 'Something to Pursue', the longest poem in *A Time to Change* is dedicated to Ezekiel's elder brother Joe as a token of his gratefulness to him. The opening stanza of its Prelude underlines the urgency—"That I may see myself/No longer unresolved/But definite as morning" (CP: 14)—of the protagonist as he cannot afford to be any more indecisive and faltering in respect of his poetic objectives. The opening piece of his second volume *Sixty Poems* titled 'A Poem of Dedication' presents Ezekiel's poetic manifesto elaborately:

Not to seek release but resolution,
 Not to hanker for a wide, god-like range
 Of thought, nor the matador's dexterity.
 I do not want the yogi's concentration.
 I do not want the perfect charity
 Of saints nor the tyrant's endless power. (CP: 40)

The above extract marked by the abundance of negatives, one each in every line, demonstrates that the poet has deliberated exhaustively and leisurely on the possibilities and avenues open to him. The prescriptive tone betrays a transparent mind, free from doubts and suspicions and determined concertedly to go his ways howsoever insular, eccentric or whimsical they might appear to others. The impelling urge to resolve the conflict cannot compel him to withdraw from his surroundings because he wants to grapple with all odds on his own terms. He announces that his is going to be a very modest and humble approach, lacking in both the weight of 'god-like range of thought' and 'the matador's dexterity'. Ezekiel further explains that his loneliness has nothing to do with the similar activities practised by a saint or a dictator. 'Yogi' and 'tyrant' symbolize the extremity of concerns and values. Both reject the society but while the former knows his isolation, the latter is not aware of it. The poet knows that perfection is not a human quality and he does not want to be a human like the yogi or inhuman like the tyrant. The poem stresses the need for a poetic culture of a sympathetic brand with humanity around:

I want a human balance humanly
 Acquired, fruitful in the common hour. (CP: 40)

Ezekiel is quick to dispel the impression that he is going to adopt a prophetic posture in his writings like Eliot and Yeats who took upon themselves the tremendous responsibility of saving human race by recommending revival of religious faith and restoration of aristocratic values respectively. In 'Lamentation' he underlines his essentially human perspective rooted in 'here and now':

My lips lack prophesy
 My tongue speaketh no great matters
 The words of the wise are wasted on me
 Fugitive am I and far from home
 Vagabond and every part of me is withered ... (CP: 72)

Having embarked on a clear set of goals, Ezekiel reiterates his relation to his surroundings in the last piece for the volume, *The Third* titled 'December '58'.

I must define myself, the place
 And time, the starting line or tape,
 To mirror for the seeking face,
 What love of self distorts its shape. (CP: 112)

This unambiguous resolve to ascertain his association with his milieu came after years of troubled experiences in December 1958. The quest for defining self acquired a new dimension with the determination to relate himself to two things, the place and the time. With this the enrichment of self enters a new phase with a *locus standi*, the city of Bombay which becomes a central metaphor, the source of his artistic imagination, an invisible presence in his creative universe.

Since *The Unfinished Man*, Ezekiel irresistibly dwells on the import of home—'Home is where we have to earn our grace' ('Enterprise', CP: 118)—notwithstanding the fact that it brings one 'To kindred clamour close at hand' ('Urban', CP: 117) He may not be very enthusiastic about the surroundings:

...His native place he could not shun,
 The marsh where things are what they seem?
 ('A Morning Walk', CP: 119)

The very fact that Bombay is his city of birth outweighs all its squalor and disenchantments:

This is the place
 Where I was born, I
 Know it
 Well. It is home,
 Which I recognise at last
 As a kind of hell
 To be made tolerable.

(‘After Reading a Prediction’, CP: 155)

It may be hell but it is unquestionably his which he is not prepared to exchange even with someone’s heaven. The poets sandwiched between two sets of cultural values invariably betray a fixation with their native ethos. Ramanujan demonstrates an equally vehement attitude in ‘Conventions of Despair’:

I must seek and will find
 My particular hell only in my Hindu mind

(Ramanujan, 1995:34)

Now that the poet has struggled to control the Hamlet-streak in his personality—a penchant for ruminating on all-inclusive solutions to life’s varied problems—he is hell bent on exploring ‘the quickest means/Of resolving it/Within my limits’ (CP: 150). He yearns for achieving a synthesis built on a holistic sense of self and place, different with every passing moment but permanent in its changeability.

The determination ‘to cash in on/The inner and the outer storms’ leads to a more vocal declaration in ‘Background, Causally’:

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. (CP: 181)

There is a marked change in the recognition of his situation once the commitments have been affirmed unequivocally. ‘A kind of hell’ has lost its earlier horrid and sickening tinge inasmuch as it has changed into an almost acceptable proposition—‘some remote and backward place’. Hence the obvious assertion becoming ‘a good native’:

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

(‘Island’, CP: 182)

Even in his latest poems, Ezekiel harks back to his early dilemmas—

'I have become/part of the scene,/which I can neither love nor hate' ('Edinburgh Interlude' (CP: 289). However, he gives all credit to his city for his accomplishments:

... but Bombay as the fruit
on which I've lived,
winning and losing
my little life. (CP: 293)

In reality, Bombay is a miniature India, a metropolis inhabited by persons coming from almost all parts of the country. It is this intensity of involvement which prompts Ezekiel to question Naipaul's perspective:

My quarrel is that Mr. Naipaul is so often 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. That temperament is not universal ... the escape for most is not from the community but into it (Ezekiel, 1965:86).

In an otherwise not so important piece titled 'Minority Poem' included in *Latter-Day Psalms* Ezekiel ponders over patiently as to what really separates man from man. The title has an ironic undertone in that it grapples with the constraints of a 'minority' artist, like the poet himself, who is a religious as well as a linguistic minority in the Hindu mainstream culture. Musing over the essential ingredients of divide, the poet feels:

It's the language really
separates, whatever else
is shared. On the other hand,

Everyone, understands
Mother Teresa; her guests
die visibly in her arms. (CP: 236)

The modifier 'really' communicates the gravity of the inference that difference in language is bound to prove an insurmountable hurdle to cultural assimilation. One recalls Ezekiel attempts at translating Marathi poems into English to achieve cultural oneness. In his Beston interview, he frankly confesses:

Part of my reason for translating from Marathi is to belong even more fully to the Indian scene. I've always wanted to translate Indian poetry; one of my service functions in life so to speak (Ezekiel, 1977: 44).

It is not through translations Ezekiel has also generously appropriated commonly used words from other Indian languages—ashram ('Guru' and 'A Different Way'), 'Kundalini', 'mantra' and 'shakti' ('Healers'), 'chapati' and 'pan' ('Ganga') and others—to experience native ethos.

Having identified the really disconnecting determinant Ezekiel turns to what genuinely united people belonging to different castes, colours, creeds and ethnicity. He is struck to mark that it is something beyond language, a meta-language as it were, which forges such links as never to be broken up, a time immemorial cohesive tried and tested by great personalities like Christ, Buddha and Gandhi. It is her quality of love and compassion the seminal mark of identification that 'Everyone understands/Mother Teresa ...', a communication that defies all language skills and functions. The allusion to Michelangelo's Pieta—'her guests/die visibly in her arms'—has also a Christian undertone. The comparison of Mother Teresa with the Virgin Mary becomes more meaningful if one views the 'Annunciation' to symbolise Mary's acceptance of her duty as mother, the creator and protector. Coincidentally enough A.K. Ramanujan also makes similar statement in respect of cultural interaction:

... the encounters begin with emphasis on differences, and end in a moment of communication below the threshold of language—often a recognition of the body's universalities whether it is pregnancy and birth, or a mother's death and a son's mourning, a recognition of oneness, however momentary (Ramanujan, 1982:145).

It is this 'recognition of oneness' that lends an unusual charm to Ezekiel's poetry, read and admired by all the 'Gentile and the Jew'.

The impelling urge of the marginal to meet the mighty is the crux of Ezekiel's cross-cultural perception. Cultural anguish and anxiety which inform a large number of his early poems finally yield to an unusual sense of affirmation and acceptance. By coming to terms with his surroundings the angry individualist in Ezekiel acquires a serenity that inevitably endows him with an enlarged imaginative sympathy. 'Driven to the wall/by age and circumstance', the poet eventually realises that 'holiness matters' (CP: 272). However even to acquire that holiness, he is not planning to isolate himself from his environment, that sustains his creative universe:

I cannot go in search of it
To an ashram, or settle down alone
On the top of a mountain... (CP: 272)

An unflagging humanist by temperament, Ezekiel's cross-cultural preoccupations have achieved a sublimity shorn of all tensions and conflicts, something, indeed, rare for a culturally dislocated artist.

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