

## Nissim Ezekiel's Modern Position: 'A Clean Break with the Romantic Past'

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### Abstract

*Nissim Ezekiel (1924-2004), a pioneering Indian English poet, incorporates both romantic and modern elements into his poetry. Romantic in the early career, he subsequently resolves to redesign his poetic world with the images of urbanity, and so contemporary India takes a leading space in his poetry. This paper is an attempt to demonstrate Ezekiel's position as a modern poet who, breaking attachment with the romantic past, establishes himself as the Indian representative of western modernism.*

**Keywords: Nissim Ezekiel, Indian English Poetry, Romantic, Modern, Western Influences**

Nissim Ezekiel, one of the most acclaimed Indian English poets, takes poetry as a lifelong vocation, and adorns his literary career through humble aspirations. Acknowledged as the father of modern Indian English poetry, he is the master of many forms of art. A prolific dramatist, critic, broadcaster and social commentator, Ezekiel also taught at different universities in India, UK and USA as a professor of literature. He had a poetic being in his inner world. The following comments on Ezekiel are important to note:

Human nature is the fount whence Ezekiel's poetry springs. He has delved deeply into the realms of Indian culture and what his eyes have seized is his poetry. He is a role model for Indian English poetry. With him the vernal breeze of new poetry bursts into the castle of Indian English poetry to sweep the long existed cobwebs away. His poetic corpus is boundless, endless and sublime; the real image of modern India.<sup>1</sup>

Replacing the old tradition, new English poetry appears in Indian

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literary scene as Ezekiel emerges with his poetry. He depicts the real image of modern India in his poetry. He makes India a paradise for poets and rules over the Indian poetic realm as the prince of poets balancing two worlds: morally cultured India and westernized India. As Bruce King claims:

A large proportion of the significant history of modern Indian poetry in English was made by or has some connection to Ezekiel. . . . In a world of increasingly narrow specializations he showed that it is possible to be a poet, a man of letters, and an intellectual actively engaged with culture and politics.<sup>2</sup>

Ezekiel owns a large portion of the history of modern Indian English poetry. He looks for assimilation without abstraction, mystery and philosophy. His first anthology *A Time to Change* (1952) makes an indication to his fresh start in the territory of poetry with the rejection of the past trend. The title itself makes the intent of the poet obvious as it pronounces innovation.

Literature has crossed many roads and undergone innumerable changes with the passage of time. Writers have been influenced by their culture, time, national glory and significant events in the history. Out of many movements in literature, some have enduring mark and universal acceptance. Romantic and modern are the most remarkable literary terms that almost all writers of the world are familiar with, and many of them celebrate. Many writers usually begin their writing career siding with romantic sensibility, and then turn to other streams with the demand of time and place or individual decision. Romanticism is deployed with various labels that also alter as time passes. The most representative romantic literature started in late 18<sup>th</sup> century Britain and continued for the first three decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is relevant to put, 'As the 19th century moved on, the label started to be applied to an identifiable literary "movement" or "school", members of which "wandered lonely as a cloud" in the search for truth, beauty, and visionary experience and valued spontaneity, powerful feeling, and the artist's individual response to the experience of life'.<sup>3</sup> Some important aspects of romantic poetry are pointed out here. Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley and Keats represent the English Romantics, and their individual characteristics are briefly rendered in the above comments.

Romanticism is defined in different ways by critics and poets. It has many features, and the forerunners of romanticism are divided on what makes or does not make romantic poetry. We have a glimpse of romantic literature in the following remarks:

Romantic literature and painting abound in representations of pristine landscapes and scenes of blissful simplicity, of genuinely perceived particular phenomena of the natural world and bold visions of its overall harmony with the world of man. To be sure, there are also the experience of solitude and the adventure or despair of the wilderness, awesome and frightful sceneries symbolizing the abandonment of a soul adrift from the moorings of the familiar world.<sup>4</sup>

Most of the characteristics of romantic literature appear in the above remarks. Romantic literature features beautiful landscapes, nature, ideal world, and romantic poets enjoy solitude and flight with the wings of imagination. Ezekiel's romantic kinship is understandable as he tries to be 'a man speaking to men,'<sup>5</sup> one of the important features of romantic poetry. William Wordsworth is a great romantic poet who is the proponent of this trend in poetry. Opposed to S.T. Coleridge, Wordsworth believes in the simplicity of language in poetry that common people use in their day to day life. Ezekiel also writes poems that represent simple language of the common Indian people. Through these poems, the poet strives to speak to readers who do not find him complex.

Ezekiel is, on the other hand, a representative poet of Indian modernism. King argues that 'Ezekiel showed how to avoid the excesses of romanticism'.<sup>6</sup> He is to a great extent inspired by the ideals of western modernism. Modernism is the name given to a literary movement that rejects old tradition, and proposes new style, theme and technique in literary composition. 'Modernism in the arts,' argues Jean-Francois Lyotard, 'partakes of the universal aims of modernity,'<sup>7</sup> and 'The idea of modernity is closely bound up with this principle that it is possible and necessary to break with tradition and to begin a new way of living and thinking'.<sup>8</sup> Modernism holds what modernity seeks to establish in different forms of art. Lyotard elaborates the aims of modernity: it propounds a new beginning with new modes of living and thinking, seeks changes in society and lifestyle, and denounces tradition of any kind. Modernism makes an impact on all forms of art, and in every nook and corner of the world. Leitch et al puts forward Michel Foucault's argument that 'modern societies intervene from day one to shape, train, and normalize individuals.'<sup>9</sup> Pre-modern societies were mostly in obscurity, but modern people strive to make everything new, question the wrongs, believe in changes, and object to the traditional way of living and thinking.

There are two sites of looking into modernity: style and theme. Modern poets use free verse, take allusions from classics, lay emphasis on different cultures, encourage complexity, write in fragmented language, and employ symbolism, wit, irony and stream of consciousness. As far as the theme is concerned, modern writers deal with alienation, disillusionment, urbanity, restlessness, breakdown of tradition, denial to established norms in society, religion and culture, and the psychological conflict of individuals. Experimentation is also an important feature of modernism. Modernity in Indian poetry begins after independence in 1947, and it continues to develop from that time. Like the twentieth century poets of the west, Indian modern poets also break with tradition, and write in a new style with concrete images from the surroundings. Ezekiel, the most important English language poet in India, leads the school of Modern Indian English poetry. He scrutinizes his place, his country of birth, its people and writes poetry in an innovative form. Themes of modernism prevail in his vast oeuvre of poetic world.

Modernism partially sides with complexity in poetry: the more incomprehensible, the better it is as a work of art. Modern poetry is complex, and the poets are difficult to understand because of the variety they bring forth into their work. Among the modernists, T.S. Eliot believes that modern poets should make poetic language indirect. He deliberately makes his work difficult for readers who, he believes, should struggle to understand poetry. As Eliot asserts:

. . . poets in our civilization . . . must be difficult. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity . . . must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning.<sup>10</sup>

Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), the most important poetic work of modernism, is written after his own assertion that modern poetry must be difficult. He argues that people's complex and varied life in society should be reflected in poetry as well. Unlike Eliot, Ezekiel does not make his poetry complex though other strands of modernism attract him. Without diminishing an iota of poetic value, Ezekiel makes the language of his poetry lucid. But some of his poems are also deceptively simple as the poem 'Night of the Scorpion' is not about scorpion, but traditional life of ordinary people in India.

Sudesh Mishra's famous line 'a clean break with the Romantic past'<sup>11</sup> stresses on Ezekiel's absolute denial to mystic and romantic association of the past history of Indian English poetry. Ezekiel, however, writes romantic poems in the early phase of his poetic career, but his romantic poems are markedly different from the types of Sri Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore and many others. His poems do not have any influence of mysticism which has been the long standing element for Indian poetry. Ezekiel's 'clean break with the Romantic past' refers to two points: his rejection to the past trend of romantic poetry in India, and his shift from the early phase of romantic poetry writing.

Though Ezekiel's early poems are replete with romantic idiom, he revolts against the old tradition of poetry in India. King claims, 'The earliest poems sound romantic and a bit clumsy.'<sup>12</sup> King here refers to Ezekiel's early phase of poetic career when some of his poems were thematically romantic. The following lines reveal his romantic sensibility:

It is the task  
of love  
and imagination  
to hear what can't be heard  
when everybody speaks<sup>13</sup>

Only a romantic poet can render such words of love and imagination. Imagination, the hallmark of romanticism, is the most powerful tool of the romantic poets, and Ezekiel grants the task of imagination in this poem. At the same time, love makes, as the poet suggests, one to hear what no one else does. It is the function of love to explore the unknown and the unseen.

There is, however, fusion of romantic and modern elements in Ezekiel's poetry. He writes, '... Wisdom/is of little use to tired men'.<sup>14</sup> An image of 'tired men' in need of food and rest more than wisdom is a realist image. Love and imagination beat tiredness of the lover and the beloved – it is a usual sketch of a romantic poem. But a modern poet reveals that a hungry person cannot think of wise words. Ezekiel's modern position is highlighted in these lines. The same poet writes, 'I wish I was bird'.<sup>15</sup> The romantic persona of the poet wishes to be a bird to flee from the pangs of reality. Romantic poets have strong desires to go to the unknown flying like a bird. The persona of Keats also travels to the land of the nightingale with the wings of imagination. Mishra claims that Ezekiel's 'Romantic phase begins with the composition of his "Early Poems" in 1945 and ends in 1958'<sup>16</sup>

and in this time, he publishes a few of his anthologies. In terms of poetic output, his next phases are mature, and defining poetry appears during these phases. 'His "Early Poems" amply testify,' stresses Mishra, 'to the poet's confession in respect of the treatment of love and sex in his poetry'.<sup>17</sup> Critics discover his fondness for romantic poems with the themes of love and sex during this time.

If we analyze some of his early poems, we may locate words, phrases or lines that mark his romantic inclination. One of the most important themes of romantic poetry is love that Ezekiel incorporates widely into his early poems. As the poet treats love:

This secretive and modest love  
Is best, raining peace  
Into the troubled night,  
Mellow in the melody of light<sup>18</sup>

The words and phrases like 'secretive,' 'modest,' 'raining,' 'troubled night' and 'mellow' in connection with love certainly makes 'The Recluse' a romantic poem. Readers remember Keats when they come across words or phrases like them. The poet creates an atmosphere of love-making in the poem treating love the most romantic way.

The poem 'Dualism,' an early poem composed in between 1945 and 1948, contains love as its dominant theme. The poet talks about dream and distant world:

Somewhere among my dreams  
The essential you is lost,  
Playing hide and seek between our kisses.  
.....  
The silent moments of our love  
Pose questions to  
The regions far beyond our eyes:  
Strangeness of a strange love!  
Beauty of a distant world!<sup>19</sup>

The speaker in the poem feels sad because he does not find his beloved with her essence in his dream. He seeks his essential beloved without any 'hide and seek' while kissing. This is an example of a fine romantic poem. Romantic poets create such an image of a lover who dreams and imagines his beloved to completely surrender to him. There is also a reference to "silent moments" that reminds us of romantic solitude. To the romantic poets,

solitude is significant, and they seek solitary places for rendezvous with the beloved. Through their imaginary eyes, they see the distant world, and search for 'strange love' and 'beauty'. The poet also invokes like a romantic poet 'Be myself whom I seek'.<sup>20</sup> Subjectivity is a feature of romantic poetry, and Ezekiel reveals his subjective stance here.

Ezekiel directly mentions 'romantic loneliness' in another poem titled 'Situation'. The speaker of the poem describes how his beloved prepares to convince him for love:

She tried her best to make me understand.  
Her voice was intimately soft; . . .  
.....  
Suggest a fine, romantic loneliness.<sup>21</sup>

The beloved is shy, so she does not speak loudly about love. She rather communicates to her lover softly suggesting love and beautiful moments of 'romantic loneliness'. This is a finer example of a romantic love poem. In 'At the Party,' there is a reference to distant beauty, 'Ethereal beauties, may you always be/Dedicate to love . . .'.<sup>22</sup> The speaker of the poem feels that his beloved will be a distinct beauty that exists somewhere distant, and she should be devoted to love. The poem 'For Her' is suffused with romantic elements – it may be called a love poem as the poet writes:

Love breaks the incendiary laws,  
Blazing in a high wind  
But staying good. The more you love  
The less you burn away.<sup>23</sup>

Love does not follow any law when it flows like the torrent. The poet believes that love stays good, and one who loves burns less. In a few lines later, the poet lays emphasis on the idea of love, ' . . . We cannot love/Without the idea of love . . .'.<sup>24</sup> It is the proper understanding of the significance of love that makes perfect love possible. In 'Episode,' the poet writes, 'We sought romantic restfulness'.<sup>25</sup> These poems are, without any doubt, highly charged with romantic traits.

One of the defining characteristics of Romanticism is fondness for the strange and the unknown. S.T. Coleridge's poems are replete with strangeness blended with beauty. Coleridge adds strangeness to beauty that he presents in his poetry. Ezekiel also shows his affinity with this sort of beauty, 'Life can be kept alive/By contact with the unknown and the strange./

A feeling for the mystery'.<sup>26</sup> Romantic poets create images of beauty in which there is a tinge of mystery and strangeness. Ezekiel also reveals his romantic sensibility with his love for the unknown. Like the Romantics, he is inspired by nature and childhood memory. As we find the description of nature:

Out of doors, lightly clad on beaches,  
Easily amused in parks and places,  
Full length in siestas by a river, roused  
To crescendos in sunshine or the long shadows  
Of persistent summer days . . .<sup>27</sup>

In the above lines, words like beach, park, river, sunshine justify Ezekiel's love for nature. It is true that he remains close to his place though urban landscapes are more familiar to him than the countryside. Indian landscapes with the description of sea, hill, river, rain, birds, water, and breeze appear frequently in many of his poems. In the poem 'The Child,' Ezekiel portrays his own childhood world, 'Once I was a child/And knew the certain joy of mud and toys,/The destiny of fairy princes, magic birds'.<sup>28</sup> Words and phrases employed in the lines bear strong romantic atmosphere. The Romantics sing the song of innocence and draw attention to childhood as a heavenly stage in human life. So it may be ascribed that Ezekiel's early poetic career is invested with romantic associations.

Pre-independence Indian English poets including Toru Dutt (1856-1877), Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950), Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949), Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) and many others were inspired by conventional romantic themes and style, and mysticism. Sanjit Mishra claims, ' . . . in the initial stage, the Indian poets in English were imitators of the British Romantics in their style'.<sup>29</sup> Most of the Indian English poets of the time wrote romantic poems though their styles were different, and they dealt with various themes. Modern English poetry in India begins after independence, and Ezekiel is considered to lead the way. Mishra points out that 'The poets of this phase – Nissim Ezekiel, Jayanta Mahapatra, A.K. Ramanujan et al . . . turned their backs on the existing Romantic tradition and wrote poetry suited to the general temper of the times. These poets also tried to naturalise the modernistic elements propounded by Pound, Yeats and Eliot.'<sup>30</sup> Repudiating all ties with the romantic past of Indian English poetry, they begin to refashion the style, language and themes. Among the moderns of Indian English poetry, Ezekiel works as a role model for later poets of the subcontinent. Modern poets write 'realistic poetry, reflecting

poetically and pleasingly the din and hubbub, the confusion and indecision, flashes of beauty and goodness . . .'.<sup>31</sup> Suffused with new imagery and idiom, Indian English poetry goes through phases of innovation in the fifties and sixties. During these times, poets stress more on individual crises of humans, their everyday life, urban pictures, contemporary issues and concrete images. They also strive to map the inner world of the people as they suffer conflict within themselves.

World War II and Indian Independence are significant events for new literature in India. Modern Indian English poetry is highly influenced by these two remarkable events. But the history of writing English poetry in India is rooted in the colonial period. During the pre-independence period, critics, foreign readers and intellectuals looked down upon Indian writing in English as English was not their native language. Post independent Indian poets take the challenge and spread Indian English poetry to world readers. They consider English as the language of union, modernity and international relation. When Indian English poets employ their sense of Indianness to write about Indian life and condition, it becomes part of world literature. Ezekiel, Ramanujan, Kamala Das, Agha Shahid Ali and Vikram Seth bring new dimension in the history of modern Indian English writing.

Ezekiel imitates, though not blindly, twentieth century famous poets of modernism. His poems show the influences of T.S. Eliot (1888-1965), W.B. Yeats (1865-1939), Ezra Pound (1885-1972), Philip Larkin (1920-1985), Williams Carlos Williams (1883-1963), and Jean Nicolas Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891). Though the great modern poets of the west are formative influences in his poetic career, Ezekiel never sacrifices his own individuality as he continually strives to make poetry widely accessible to readers eschewing ambiguity, complexity and obscurity, and that is why 'Ezekiel is a Modernist poet with a difference'.<sup>32</sup> As a modernist Indian English poet, Ezekiel emphasizes on innovation in both structure and content. Mishra points out that 'Ezekiel attempted to introduce contemporary idiom in poetry'.<sup>33</sup> Ezekiel is critical about the poets obsessed with mysticism and traditional romantic ideals. Instead of looking at the world, they take inspiration from abstract ideas and make poetry a storehouse of knowledge. Ezekiel considers that this kind of practice has marred the whole picture of Indian poetry. He believes that poetry should have contemporary sounds and scenes with fresh idiom.

Later phases of Ezekiel's poetic career are markedly distinct. Twentieth century, a period of globalization, is remarkable for the development of modern Indian English poetry. In a hundred years, the Indians encountered two periods – colonial and postcolonial. Ezekiel occupies an enviable position among contemporary Indian poets for writing in English on Indian tradition and culture with western impact. He elevates Indian English poetry into a new height with materials from Indian life and culture. We also discover confrontation and assimilation between Indianization and westernization in his poetry. Kaiser Haq, the most prominent English language poet of Bangladesh, remarks, 'Ezekiel was undoubtedly the first major figure in Indian English poetry who found a resonant, authentic Indian voice. This would not have been possible without his essential commitment to the place of his birth'.<sup>34</sup> Ezekiel is one of those artists whose creative sensibility is molded by his sense of belonging to India and his education in the west.

Ezekiel's modern position in Indian English poetry is secure – he for the first time criticizes the mystic and romantic legacies. Many contemporary poets as well as the poets of later generations welcome his stance on change. King claims, 'Ezekiel's focus had shifted from the quest for integration to an acceptance of the actualities and the ordinariness of life'.<sup>35</sup> King aptly identifies the poet's earlier position, his shift and then acceptance of actualities in Indian setting. Ezekiel as a 'poet of great relevance and significance'<sup>36</sup> does not relegate from roots, but he has all the rights to claim the modern position in Indian English poetry. Dwivedi writes further, 'The modernity of Ezekiel's poetry is also found in his skilful use of wit and irony. All modern poets are prone to it . . .'<sup>37</sup> Modern poets use wit and irony as important vehicles for their poetry. Without wit and irony, poetry seems to tie with the tradition of mysticism. 'Ezekiel is,' remarks Dwivedi, 'quite modern from the viewpoint of his treatment of current subjects and immediate surroundings.'<sup>38</sup> Ezekiel remains close to contemporary issues and events as he treats them with seriousness. He focuses on what happens around him, and the burning issues that affect the country and its people. He also remains conscious about the significant events of the world.

Ezekiel's sense of contemporariness is widely acknowledged as he values and uses what he observes around him as objects for his poetry. King argues that Ezekiel 'aimed at a contemporary manner which would voice modern concerns. . . . He constantly renewed himself in his work and kept

up with the times.’<sup>39</sup> His poetry reflects his observation, examines and expresses the condition of the Indians. Ezekiel always tries to renew himself as a poet and experiment with poetry. R. Parthasarthy points out:

An important characteristic of Indian verse in English in the mid-twentieth century has been its emergence from the mainstream of English literature and its appearance as part of Indian literature. It has been said that it is Indian in sensibility and content, and English in language. It is rooted in and stems from the Indian environment, and reflects its mores, often ironically.<sup>40</sup>

Parthasarthy’s argument shows that the Indian modern poetry is influenced by contemporary western literary trends, but Indian poets remain tied to their roots in terms of sensibility and materials for poetry. Ezekiel is, no doubt, rooted in Indian sensibility as he stresses on belonging to where he is born. His awareness about Indian urban life is evident as he sketches the life of a city dweller:

I am corrupted by the world, continually  
Reduced to something less than human by the crowd,  
Newspapers, cinemas, radio features, speeches  
Demanding peace by men with grim warlike faces,<sup>41</sup>

Modern cities attract people with many kinds of allurements, and they cannot but stoop to them. This is a picture of dehumanization which is prevalent in modern cities, but in Ezekiel’s poetry, a city is found as both vibrant and self-destructive.

Ezekiel’s concern for decadence of urban life is acute as Iyenger points out, ‘The recurring note in Ezekiel’s recent poems is the hurt that urban civilization inflicts on modern man, dehumanizing him, and subjecting his verities to pollution and devaluation.’<sup>42</sup> Current urban pictures are bleak, and they deaden citizens’ sensibilities, finally turning them dehumanized. Ezekiel’s verse is sometimes deep-rooted in tradition of Indian moral values and yet strikingly modern in expression. Urban civilization results in wreaking havoc on human life, shifting quietness to chaos. He depicts his own city, ‘. . . the squalid, crude/city of my birth and rebirth.’<sup>43</sup> The poet is well aware of this city as his birthplace, and knows well that this city has made him what he is, but does not relegate from the reality that is grimy and cruel. Modern poets criticize the squalors and stench of city life. Like western modernists, Ezekiel observes the city:

The hills are always far away.  
 He knows the broken roads, and moves  
 In circles tracked within his head.  
 Before he wakes and has his say,  
 The river which he claims he loves  
 Is dry, and all the winds lie dead.  
 At dawn he never sees the skies  
 .....  
 He welcomes neither sun nor rain.  
 His landscape has no depth or height.<sup>44</sup>

There is a hint of an image analogous to T.S. Eliot's waste land in this poem. The poet paints a city that has lost its look with natural beauty. The city-dwellers cannot see the sky at dawn, but they see broken roads, dry rivers and dead winds. Neither sun nor rain brings them hope, and the landscape appears blurry without any meaning to them. And then the poet writes, 'The city like a passion burns'.<sup>45</sup> It is a kind of city that compares to the one that Eliot depicts in his seminal book *The Wasteland*, a valuable work of modernism. Ezekiel expresses his anguish more about the city:

Barbaric city sick with slums,  
 Deprived of seasons, blessed with rains,  
 Its hawkers, beggars, iron-lunged,  
 Processions led by frantic drums,<sup>46</sup>

The image of a city here is squalid as it does not have beauty because of slums here and there, and beggars and hawkers live on the pavements. People in the city suffer as seasons do not synchronize with the weather. The city has become barbaric as it is imbued with disgusting drains and dustbins. Ezekiel this way incorporates love, loneliness, lust, political pomposity, human foibles and the 'kindred clamour'<sup>47</sup> of urban dissonance in his poetry. Ezekiel sketches Indian city life acutely, and he presents cities in his poetry with his keen observation. His modern position is accentuated in 'Indianness in Nissim Ezekiel's Poetry' published in *Triveni*, a journal of literature and culture:

Unlike the earlier poets, he is a poet of urban landscape employing irony and wit to expose the various ugly aspects of city life with its squalid surroundings, slums, loneliness, neurosis and frustration. . . . Unlike Baudelaire's dry self-lacerating despair, Ezekiel is sympathetic but scrutinizing. He loves the city despite its ugliness and thus adopts a paradoxical approach bringing together contrary attitudes and harmonizing them.<sup>48</sup>

‘Ezekiel makes his city visible with all its beauty and ugliness without showing extreme disgust to the surroundings. He remains deep-rooted with his love-and-hate relationship with the city in which he is born. He scrutinizes each and every aspect of the city, exhibits its sordid images along with the beauty, looks at it with a sympathetic eye, tries to harmonize, but does not disown. It is argued that ‘The Modernist in him criticizes the urban landscape and contemporary life’.<sup>49</sup> The poet finds that the city and its people are stained with corruptions. People are tempted to corruptions as they spread like infectious diseases, and so he often takes the city to task. With his modern outlook, he identifies superstitions in Indian setting even in the age of science. In ‘Night of the Scorpion,’ a scorpion stings a woman, so neighbors offer advice and help. They say that sins of her previous birth will ‘be burned away’<sup>50</sup> along with pain, and she will suffer less in her next birth. Critical to this kind of unscientific acts, Ezekiel proves his modern position.

Many of Ezekiel’s poems on city refer to Mumbai which is most of the time compared to Baudelaire’s Paris and Eliot’s London. He often presents Mumbai with its beauty and ugliness, sonority and cacophony in his poetry. His poetry correlates with the parameters of modernism including the depiction of urban life. The following is a relevant argument:

Ezekiel’s poetry shows all the typical features of a modern Indian poet in thematic variety, use of symbolism, awareness of social and human problems, depiction of common people, portrayal of colorful and varied cultures, religions and professions, sense of alienation and search for identity along with satirical and witty remarks on drawbacks in society with sincere presentation of urban problems and views on human relationships and interests with a sympathetic and harmonizing outlook.<sup>51</sup>

Ezekiel treats contemporary issues and posits them in poetry with subtlety. In many cases, he presents the issues using his modern poetic tools like wit and irony that he usually employs to detect drawbacks in individuals and society. In the above argument, Seshu identifies the characteristics of modern poets who express their dissatisfaction with the time and place they live in. Ezekiel also finds faults with his time and place, but his distinctiveness lies in his sympathetic and harmonizing outlook.

Ezekiel reveals follies, foibles, weaknesses and deficiencies of the Indians, and writes what he observes, knows, feels and experiences from the surroundings. Much is talked about his use of Indian English, albeit he uses it for satirical purposes. He uses Indian English to give life to the

characters, episodes and attitudes of individuals and communities. Through 'Very Indian Poems in Indian English,' the poet ridicules the endeavor of the Indians to use English, 'How one goonda fellow/Throw stone at Indirabehn'<sup>52</sup> or 'You want one glass lassi?'<sup>53</sup> Ezekiel consciously chooses Indian words and expressions to use in his poems. Iyenger quotes William Walsh saying, 'Ezekiel's delivery is mild and unemphatic, a matter of cool diction, moderate metaphor, of syntax rather than music.'<sup>54</sup> These remarks add to the justification of Ezekiel's modern position as a representative Indian English poet. Rather than making poetry highly philosophical and mystic, he employs simple diction and common expression to present the actualities of Indian life.

Ezekiel satirizes Indian traditional mindset of parents about their daughters. The parents are concerned about their daughters' marriage, and if they are married off to established bridegrooms, the parents are happy. This issue is raised in the poem 'The Professor,' 'Sarala and Tarala are married,/Their husbands are very nice boys.'<sup>55</sup> If bridegrooms are well established, the parents feel proud of the social status. Here the poet also satirizes the Indian tradition of naming the children with rhyming words. In 'Boss,' the mechanical life of a high official is described in terms of mechanical objects, 'No fire burns but bells ring,/Hours move on small routines/Around the bent and busy head.'<sup>56</sup> Life of high officials in India is marked by busy schedule. They have little time to think about things outside of their official matters. It seems they live a mechanical life from which they do not have any respite.

Modern Indian English poets explore tradition to discover the roots of their Indian identity, and search for identity is important in modern life. They deal with 'A number of social issues like rituals, love, marriage, family affairs, communal riots, corruption, black marketing, political acrobatics'<sup>57</sup> and many others alike. Ezekiel also treats these aspects in his poetry. He writes about different kinds of people including upper class and lower class, boss or typist, drunkard or dancer. He presents them with their both normal and weird everyday life. 'In India' is a poem in which the poet presents poverty, filth, wretchedness, heat and ugliness and other discomforts that the Indians encounter in the city:

Always, in the sun's eye,  
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  
 Suffering the place and time,<sup>58</sup>

In order to show his Indianness, Ezekiel chooses to portray some familiar Indian urban pictures. Here the poet brings problems and different forms of ugliness in Indian metropolis. The land seems to be wasted, and the people have lost vigor of life. They suffer as both time and place appear unbearable to them, and they continue to survive in silence. The poet questions this kind of life in the city where people suffer.

Modern poetry abounds in the issue of sexuality, and Ezekiel treats sex in a bold manner in his poetry. In the last part of the poem 'In India,' there is a conflict between Indian and western cultures. The English boss tries to seduce his Indian secretary in contrast to the standards of Indian morality:

At the second meeting  
 In the large apartment  
 After cold beer and the music on,  
 She sat in disarray.  
 The struggle had been hard  
 And not altogether successful.  
 Certainly the blouse  
 Would not be used again.  
 But with true British courtesy  
 He lent her a safety pin  
 Before she took the elevator down.<sup>59</sup>

The poem brings forth tension to the girl who encounters her English boss's boorish lust. This is certainly exposed in the lines, 'The struggle had been hard' and '. . . the blouse / Would not be used again.' The girl thinks that the Englishman will offer her all the attractions of western culture. Here the poet uses irony to highlight cultural contrasts which are such a glaring fact in Indian city life. The first part of the poem presents the suffering of humanity whereas the second part presents the pseudo-modern Indians leading fashionable lives in a city like Bombay. Linda Hess comments about Ezekiel, 'He is a poet of the body . . . who has explored sexual love in all its myriad forms and varieties. . .'<sup>60</sup> This argument is fitting as many of his

poems reveal sexuality in Indian cities. He traverses the sublime and the lustful with ease, confessing to carnal instincts and physical love: After a night of love I turned to love,

The threshing thighs, the singing breasts,  
Exhausted by the act, desiring it again  
Within a freedom old as earth<sup>61</sup>

The persona in the poem enjoys excessive sex life as cities offer all prospects of carnal gratifications. The line 'Exhausted by the act, desiring it again' suggests ample scopes of sex and people's preoccupation with sexual activities, and they frequently indulge in carnal desires. This poem justifies Ezekiel as an urban poet who deals with different pictures of cities including people's boundless freedom.

Ezekiel reveals his frustration at the loss of faith and human relationship in modern India as Eliot detects Europeans' derailment from ethics, morality or social values. Ezekiel discovers collapse of harmonious relationships among people, as the sense of alienation strongly works among them. In 'Background, Casually,' the poet ironically assesses his lack of strong religious and regional identity, 'The more I searched, the less I found.'<sup>62</sup> The speaker in the poem feels frustrated and alienated. The poet is enthusiastic about a solution to depression, sadness, anxiety, and agony of the modern Indians. In this respect, he takes refuge under the shade of Gandhism. He actually wants to establish peace through non-violence. There is also an Eliotian approach in Ezekiel when he seeks the way to bring back moral values in human life:

Like Eliot he is a religious humanist deeply involved with moral concerns rather than outward show of orthodox devotion. Ezekiel thinks that spiritual growth comes only when man has liberated himself from all falsities, shams and pretensions. In this aspect he is one of the modern Indian poets who view religion in broader moral perspective.<sup>63</sup>

Ezekiel tries to focus on Indian values and ideals, and he is intensely and painfully conscious of the deficiencies and defects of modern Indian people. He has honestly portrayed the picture of India with its culture, people, social norms, belief, religion, myth and so forth. He has no intention to glorify India with false images.

Like eminent writers of the world, Ezekiel transcends all borders with the characteristics of universality, and a modern poet in him seeks reformation through essential ethos of Indian values, peace and nonviolence. Aware of

the fact that modern India has lost its line with moral values, Ezekiel makes a call for transformation. There is nothing exaggerative in him as he paints the portrait of India in his poetry. He presents concrete particulars and actualities of life that he observes around him, but he ensures that his poetry is new. Revolting against Indian tradition of romantic and mystic association in poetry, writing distinct romantic poems himself, being a follower of western modernism, and beginning a new canon of Indian English poetry, Ezekiel certainly remains a true representative of modern Indian English poets.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> VK Sharma, and MK Sharma, *Nissim Ezekiel: The Mechanics of Poetry*, web. 15 June 2015 <<http://www.ebay.ca/itm/Nissim-Ezekiel-Mechanics-of-Poetry-Vishnu-K-Sharma-Mahesh-K-Sharma-LAP-Lambert-/181091464734>>
- <sup>2</sup> Bruce King, *Three Indian Poets: Ezekiel, Moraes, and Ramanujan* (New Delhi: OUP, 2005) 4.
- <sup>3</sup> Andrew Maunder, introduction to *Encyclopedia of Literary Romanticism*, by Andrew Maunder (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2010) vi.
- <sup>4</sup> Helmut J Schneider, 'Nature', in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism: Romanticism*, vol. 5, edited by Marshall Brown (Cambridge: CUP, 2000) 92.
- <sup>5</sup> William Wordsworth, 'Preface to Lyrical Ballads', in *English Critical Texts*, 1962, edited by DJ Enright and Ernst De Chickera (London: OUP, 1971) 171.
- <sup>6</sup> Bruce King, *Modern Indian Poetry in English* (New Delhi: OUP, 2001) 98.
- <sup>7</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, 'Defining the Postmodern' (1986), quoted in Vincent B Leitch et al, eds, *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York: Norton & Company, 2001) 1610.
- <sup>8</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, 'Defining the Postmodern' (1986), in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, edited by Vincent B Leitch et al (New York: Norton & Company, 2001) 1613.
- <sup>9</sup> *ibid*, 1618.
- <sup>10</sup> TS Eliot, 'The Metaphysical Poets', in *English Critical Texts*, 1962, edited by DJ Enright and Ernest De Chickera (London: OUP, 1971) 309.
- <sup>11</sup> Sudesh Mishra, *Preparing Faces: Modernism and Indian Poetry in English* (1995), quoted in John Thieme, introduction to *Nissim Ezekiel: Collected Poems*, 1989, 2nd ed, by Nissim Ezekiel (New Delhi: OUP, 2005) xix.

- <sup>12</sup> Bruce King, *Three Indian Poets*, 36.
- <sup>13</sup> Nissim Ezekiel, 'For Satish Gujral', in *Nissim Ezekiel: Collected Poems*, 1989, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (New Delhi: OUP, 2005) lines 19-23.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid, "A Small Summit" 26-27.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid, "The Railway Clerk" 13.
- <sup>16</sup> Sanjit Mishra, *The Poetic Art of Nissim Ezekiel*, 2001 (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2011) 36.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid, 37.
- <sup>18</sup> Nissim Ezekiel, 'The Recluse', 8-11.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid, 'Dualism', 1-3, 8-12.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid, 'Invocation', 15.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid, "Situation", 1-2, 8.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid, 'At the Party', 5-6.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid, 'For Her', 6-9.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid, 'For Her', 15-16.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid, 'In Episode', 23.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid, 'To a Certain Lady', 17-19.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid, 'Something to Pursue', 27-31.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid, 'The Child', 5-7.
- <sup>29</sup> Sanjit Mishra, *The Poetic Art of Nissim Ezekiel*, 5.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid, 5-6.
- <sup>31</sup> P Lal and K Raghavendra Rao, eds, in *Modern Indo-Anglian Poetry* (1958), quoted in Sanjit Mishra, *The Poetic Art of Nissim Ezekiel*, 5.
- <sup>32</sup> Sanjit Mishra, *The Poetic Art of Nissim Ezekiel*, 26.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid, 22.
- <sup>34</sup> Kaiser Haq, 'Placing Ezekiel', *The Daily Star* 24 Jan 2004, web. 20 June 2015 <<http://archive.thedailystar.net/2004/01/24/d401242101107.htm>>
- <sup>35</sup> Bruce King, *Modern Indian Poetry*, 101.
- <sup>36</sup> AN Dwivedi, 'Modernity in Nissim Ezekiel's Poetry', in *Nissim Ezekiel: A Critical Companion*, edited by GS Balarama Gupta (New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2010) 87.

- <sup>37</sup> Ibid, 90.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid, 91.
- <sup>39</sup> Bruce King, *Modern Indian Poetry*, 91.
- <sup>40</sup> R Parthasarathy, introduction, in *Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets*, 1976 (New Delhi: OUP, 2012) 5.
- <sup>41</sup> Nissim Ezekiel, 'The Double Horror', 1-4.
- <sup>42</sup> KR Srinivasa Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English*, 1962, (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 2015) 660.
- <sup>43</sup> Nissim Ezekiel, 'Poem of the Separation', 32-33.
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid, 'Urban', 1-7, 11-12.
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid, 13.
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid, 'A Morning Walk', 15-18.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid, 'Urban', 18.
- <sup>48</sup> G Soma Seshu, 'Indianness in Nissim Ezekiel's Poetry', in *Triveni* 73.1 (2004), web. 15 June 2015 <<http://www.trivenijournalindia.com/indiannessinnissimezekielspoetryjan2004.htm>>
- <sup>49</sup> Trivikrama Kumari Jamwal, 'Nissim Ezekiel – The Good Native', in *The Postcolonial Web*, web 16 June 2015 <<http://www.postcolonialweb.org/india/ezekiel/kumari1.html>>
- <sup>50</sup> Nissim Ezekiel, 'Night of the Scorpion', 20.
- <sup>51</sup> G Soma Seshu, 'Indianness in Nissim Ezekiel's Poetry'
- <sup>52</sup> Nissim Ezekiel, 'The Patriot', 13-14.
- <sup>53</sup> Ibid, 21.
- <sup>54</sup> William Walsh, quoted in KR Srinivasa Iyenger, *Indian Writing in English*, 711.
- <sup>55</sup> Nissim Ezekiel, 'The Professor', 12-13.
- <sup>56</sup> Ibid, 'Boss', 4-6.
- <sup>57</sup> Shrawan K Sharma, 'Modern Indian Poetry in English: A Note', in *New Perspectives on Indian English Writings*, edited by Malti Agarwal (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2007) 15.
- <sup>58</sup> Nissim Ezekiel, 'In India', 1-10.
- <sup>59</sup> Ibid, 58-68.
- <sup>60</sup> Linda Hess, quoted in G Soma Seshu.

<sup>61</sup>Nissim Ezekiel, 'Two Nights of Love', 7-10.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 'In Background, Casually', 20.

<sup>63</sup> G Soma Seshu, 'Indianness in Nissim Ezekiel's Poetry'.

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