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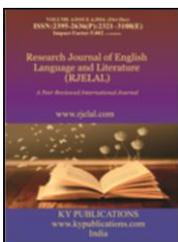
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Contesting Identities: Negotiating the State of Being in a Cosmopolitan Space in Nissim Ezekiel's Poems

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to travail the trajectory of Ezekiel's poems, in particular those works which deftly deals with issues like alienation, minority experience, and marginalisation. Through, his modernist sense and poetic oeuvre; he depicts alienating existence of modern man. The precedence of collective identity over that of an individual hinders the very sense of cosmopolitanism. Although, urban spaces and cities might have inhabitants from different communities yet their assimilation remains fragmented due to prevalent social and internal ghettoization. Being an Indian Jew, he along with others in his community had a disjointed sense of cultural heredity. In his youth, he saw political turmoil and displacement with partition and formation of Independent India. Due to his own unique background and twist of fate he also had a choice to leave India to become a citizen of Israel. He chose to stay despite an opportunity to establish forgone ethno-cultural connection. His poems encapsulate the personal angst and spirit of a cosmopolitan man who has existential traits, often musing upon idea of belongingness. He absorbed the idea of displacement as a natural state of being in modern times. He constantly seems to be in quest, despite the elusiveness of the answer. The paper tries to discuss it in comprehensive manner.

Keywords – Indian Jews, Otherness, Formation of Identity, Alienation, Cosmopolitanism

INTRODUCTION

Nissim Ezekiel, a pioneer in Indian English poetry, adeptly experimented with content and form, with a keen mixing of colloquial verbiage. His poems are lucid and rhythmical without any superfluous addition. Yet, it's philosophical, derived and soaked with urban rationale', ironical and aphoristic wisdom that has distinctive impact on the minds of readers. Nissim Ezekiel successfully captures diversity and complexity of Bombay through his work of art. His sensibilities and style has shades of similarity that is acquired in urban gentry of metropolis through experiences which baffles as well as ignites their artistic imagination. He deftly captures fissures of the society that is so

very evident in metropolis where people from different communities and classes, sustain and thrive. His work neither endorses nor rejects specific view points; he is objective despite generating dollop of humour from diverse ethnicity of metropolis.

Ezekiel seems at his best when describing the city and its people. K D Verma writes,

"As man strives to exist in a modern urban society, to search for truth and to realize identity with the self and the community, his struggles, failures and frustrations reveal not only his own inward nature, but also the insufficiency and frailty of the fallen city, an image of which we may find both in Eliot and Auden. He has streaks of

social determinism as well as romantic nostalgia ingrained in him; he views life and art as a continuous journey of self." (Verma 229)

Ezekiel in broadest sense remains a city poet with urban scepticism and cynicism of things that exists around. His take on subjects are both witty and sardonic that seems logical to urban gentry. Bombay being one of most cosmopolitan cities of India has a diverse ethnography and classes that thrives and survives there. As with most post colonial writers and poets the issue of identity and its contours becomes important to him. Being an Indian Jew and that too, a poet makes his position quite complex and introspective one which certainly comes out in few of his poems such as, "*Background, Casually*" and "*The Minority*".

Indian Jews have an interesting history in the subcontinent and they came to the subcontinent for trading and escaping persecution in their native lands which goes as back as 2000 years ago, slowly other groups also migrated with time so they can hardly be called as foreigners as they adapted to Indian customs and way of life. There are three major Jewish communities in India - Cochin Jews, Bene Israel and Baghdadi Jews. According to R Raj Rao, the official author of Nissim Ezekiel's biography, the words "Bene Israel" would translate into English as 'Children Of Israel'. They are regarded as one of the lost tribes of Israel who landed in southern Maharashtra, off the Konkan coast anywhere between 1600-2000 years ago. (Rao 4)

He further mentions how Jews took to business of oil pressing for living and so they were nicknamed the *Shanivārtelī* ("Saturday oil-pressers"), the sect to which Ezekiel also belongs by the local Hindu population as they abstained from work on Saturdays, due to Jewish custom of Shabbat which is considered to be a holy day by them. Thus under Caste Hindu majority they were lowest in the totem pole of social classification. As traditionally Hindus placed all other religious groups as *Mleccha* i.e. lower in category. Since oil pressing was considered menial job therefore *Shanwar Telis* were no better off than lower castes in Hindu hierarchy but with missionary intervention of Christians and Jews in the

19th century they started getting perks of modern education and progressives from the community shifted to cities like Mumbai in search of better livelihood.

In post colonial era identities have become much more crucial for all kinds of associations and rights. Thus minority groups are in greater pressure of assimilating and identifying themselves under the fabric of nationalism. A Jew born and living in India for centuries shouldn't be different from any average Indian yet some identities supersedes national and cultural boundaries thus making things more ambiguous and fluid. With formation of Israel in the year 1948 many Indian Jews also have migrated there, thus Jewish population in India is rapidly dwindling, although they still have a sizeable population. Ezekiel however was quite comfortable with his identity and chose to stay in Bombay itself. On a direct question about his identity in an interview, Ezekiel said,

"I feel I am a Bombay city poet... I am oppressed and sustained by Bombay". (Chindhade 32)

In an interview he also admitted being drawn to his cultural appendage. He says,

"I'm aware of identity problems among non - Hindus; Muslims; Parsis and Christians. I think the problem of identity is important in all literary and cultural activity. I don't think it's possible to be universal man without some specific roots which are strengthened, accepted or revolted against...Of late I've found myself more deliberately turning to Jewish sources and themes as though some inner movement has required it". (Rao 245)

The subliminal issue of identity is an enigma that cannot be completely demystified as its concealed and gets expression only through art. A poet or an artist doesn't essentially or only belongs to community he or she comes from rather they supersede these classification, yet the natural affinity to lived and experienced reality does shape up perspective. So, a poet inadvertently becomes representative of the unrest of self cumulatively acquired from the background, one comes from. Having been born in a cosmopolitan city like

Mumbai may make his identity more assimilative and safe-guarded, yet consciousness can also be fragmented and ghettoized by issues of religious and linguistic identities which always lurks around the corner as social strata self reflexively invoke in individuals a quest for ascertaining one's place. Thus the hegemonic dictates' prevalent in the society moulds as well negotiates one's existentialist and analytic role.

Despite his Jewish heritage and calling himself a city poet he wasn't wary of taking up themes like that of traditionally collective wisdom of Upanishads. Nissim Ezekiel's "*Tribute to Upanishads*" is an elaboration of a parable which is an Upanishadic idea, where essence of life is correlated to that of a seed. The idea, being that essence of life is very subtle, complex and incomprehensible to human understanding. More we try to analyse life and its truth, it baffles and eludes us by presenting myriad shades of occurrence and operation.

'The secret locked within the seed
Becomes my need, and so
I shrink to the nothingness
Within the seed.' (205)

The poem encapsulates Upanishad's ideal of self exploration and quest for finding immutable and immortal self that is the closest metaphysical reality one could reach to. Although he was known for sardonic humour, this poem seems an avid affirmation to Indian past, which the poet inevitably shares.

His poem, "*Background, Casually*" elaborately talks about uniqueness and ambivalence of poet's relation with this country:

'I went to Roman Catholic school,
A mugging Jew among the wolves.' (179)

Here, Ezekiel chalks out his experience pointing towards formative years as a young Indian Jew. Being a child from minority community makes him vulnerable, not only from majority Hindus but also other groups. An undercurrent of anxiety as well pain is clearly visible in the stanza. Ezekiel seems to be pointing out to double alienation between the communities thus leaving a looming

sense of distrust, disregard and ambivalent relation with the other. Here he identifies human dilemma of subjectivity of experience which acts in accordance to social milieu and modalities of behaviour and action.

'My ancestors, among the castes,
Were aliens crushing seed for bread'. (180)

These lines are direct reference to Bene Israel communities' occupation of oil pressing due to which they were nicknamed as "Shanwar Telis". Interestingly Judaism doesn't have caste system but they have become part and parcel of Indian hierarchical system which classifies as well as marginalises them likewise. Thus Indian Jews become a kind of hybrid between their Indian as well as Jewish Identity. They neither are Jewish in purist sense nor are Indian in traditional conception. This duality leads to sense of misplaced identity and insecurity of not being able to assimilate into the existing social order.

'The Indian landscape sears my eyes.
I have become a part of it.....
My backward place is where I am'. (181)

Ezekiel comes to a solemn resolve towards his allegiance and association with this country which he poetically describes as becoming a part of him and to further give credence to his Indian identity. Similarly in, "*Minority Poem*" we see a bitter-sweet camaraderie with the majority communities, mainly Hindus of this country. The poet cannot decode or demystify customs and tradition of his fellow countrymen although he does appreciate this alternate culture but still he cannot assimilate.

'It's not the mythology
Or the marriage customs
That you need to know,

It's the will to pass
Through the eye of a needle
To self-forgetfulness.' (237)

Here, Ezekiel talks about the problem of alienation and otherness of being, where merely knowing about the customs and mythology of majority doesn't makes a minority acceptable,

rather it's total transformation of self which cuts asunder all previous ties. It's almost impossible to be assimilated with the majority as it leads to, a loss of, sense of identity.

'The guests depart, dissatisfied;
They will never give up
Their mantras, old or new.

And you, uneasy
Orphan of their racial
Memories, merely

Polish up your alien
Techniques of observation,
While the city burns'. (237-238)

It talks about constant state of dissimilarity that exists racially which cannot be but altered to something else. Therefore to survive in this space, minorities will have to polish their Indian-ness so as to exist in the intolerant times that seems to be coming forth. The poem is bit pessimistic in tone with an undercurrent of sarcasm as well as helplessness that comes bundled in everyday existence. Marginalisation and differences are so acute that it cannot be ever resolved, it exists naturally. His poems try to capture, essence of the metropolis with all its myriad qualities and aspect from living and working conditions to social life. His work is a social commentary that imparts greater value to social perspective with his depiction of multiple things, including men, mind and matter. Ezekiel maybe ironic at times but largely his humour is free from malice and seems to be largely derived from critique of modern times. He projects people as incomplete beings whose individuality is subverted by various socio-political forces governing their psyche' and action.

Conclusion

Ezekiel's work deftly deals with issue of identity, alienation and marginalisation and through his poetry he has been able to bring forth diverging views and good insight in complex issues. His work, ironically is interspersed with streak of pragmatism as well as visceral emotions leading to a very disjointed sense of belonging and approach towards nationhood. It is aligned with his idea of modern

man; who is fragmented being full of contradiction and imperfection. As a poet, his immense contribution to English Poetry added to diverse fabric of cultural history, enriched through work of art. Issues raised by him also posits question to society at large, regarding the prejudices, rigidity and hierarchies that stagnates and stratifies relation between communities. Thus, Ezekiel's humanism seems to have evolved on contradictions and irony that modern world places us in. His approach towards life and humanity, in general seems to indicate an urge to seek and find an elusive balance of being humane. He aptly expresses it in his poem, "A Poem of Dedication"

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

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