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HOME AS 'IDENTITY': A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF NISSIM EZEKIEL'S POETRY

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ABSTRACT

Ezekiel tends to investigate the relation between home and identity and how home contributes in forming one's identity through his poetic corpus. His interrogation of home and identity in the backdrop of postcolonial theories throws enough light on his problem of alienation. Needless to say that an individual is attributed with a primary identity in relation to own native place. The home, parents and other inhabitants of home, are the agents that provide a child the actual identity. Therefore, home leaves an eternal memory in the life of an individual without which one cannot live. During the long journey of life, the memory of home and the identity attributed by home are borne by an individual. The journey of making identity continues beyond home also, but the living identity conferred by home haunts an individual throughout his/her living tenure. However, identity formation is dynamic, not static as it can be established in relation to society, position, socio-political situation and cultural condition. The present paper interrogates Ezekiel's notion of home and identity reflected in his poetry in the backdrop of postcolonial theory propagated by Several postcolonial thinkers and critics like Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, Jhumpa Lahiri, Frantz Fanon, Stuart Hall have conceptualized identity contesting the colonial notion of identity.

Keywords: home, identity, alienation.

"Home and Identity" tends to investigate Ezekiel's demonstration of the relation between home and identity and how home contributes in forming one's identity. His interrogation of home and identity in the backdrop of postcolonial theories throws enough light on his problem of alienation. Whereas the essentialists view identity as a 'fixed construct', the postcolonial concept of identity becomes at once political, cultural or social. Stuart Hall relates culture to identity and contradicts traditionalists view that identity is root or given from the past.

John McLeod in his book *Beginning Postcolonialism* (2000), argues that home can act as a valuable means of orientation by giving us a sense

of our place in the world with emphasis on 'belongingness' and 'original root' (210). Certainly, this traditional idea implies that people define their identity to their roots. But a paradoxical notion is propagated by the postcolonial thinkers while contextualizing the immigrants and their home and identity. Many people are compelled to leave their homelands in the course of colonialization, continuing up to present time. Though they adopt other's land as home, they somehow feel committed to their old country in spite of the assimilation. In this context postcolonial writers like McLeod, Rushdie, Jhumpa Lahiri, Brah conceptualize home as 'Mythic Place' or an 'Imaginary Homeland'. Consequently, facing discrimination in new country, a sense of

alienation evokes resulting a sense of identity crisis as they cannot identify their real home. Their home of origin and home of settlement juxtapose and shape a sense of unhomeliness. In the seminal essay of Stuart Hall '*Cultural Identity and Diaspora*', he maintains that identity is not a static or stagnant construct but a dynamic process. Cultural identity is a matter of 'becoming' as well as 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past (225).

In the light of the above discussion on home and identity, Nissim Ezekiel's poems can be scrutinised from the said postcolonial perspectives. The encounter, confrontation or tension between his desire to assimilate and his need for ethnic identity tore Nissim Ezekiel from inside. Many of his poems deal with the postcolonial concept of home and identity. Among various issues raised in his poetry, identity issue shapes many poems which are milestones in Indian English poetry. The poem *Speech and Silence* (cp-53) portrays a man as alienated individual, rootless and helpless uttering 'Man is alone from his inner world'. M.K.Naik in his book *A History of Indian English Literature* (1995), maintains while talking about Ezekiel's alienation, "A refugee of the spirit' in search of his 'dim identity' which in different mood appears to him to be either a 'one man lunatic asylum' or 'a small deserted holy place' (164).

Ezekiel was a victim of different discriminations and some his poems surface the struggle of the poet for identity in a country where he as well as his community is castigated as alien. The concept of 'hybrid' migrant as problematized by Bhabha and Rushdie is reflected by Ezekiel's conceptualization of home and identity in his poetry. The fact that Ezekiel suffered from a sense of loneliness or not belonging is demonstrated by the critic A.K. Raghu also. He, in his book *The Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel* comments aptly, "Whether or not this generalization is correct, the author of the statement has always been alone. (148)". Ezekiel vehemently substantiates his identity crisis in his essay '*Naipaul's India and Mine*', "I am not a Hindu and my background makes me a natural outsider. Circumstances and decisions relate me to India. In other countries I am a foreigner. In India I am an Indian. (99)"

Ezekiel's conceptualization of home and identity finds best expression in his poem '*Background Casually*' where he encompasses various experiences of his life lived in Bombay. Being a descendant of Bene Israel Jewish community, he lacks Indian root and adheres a marginal position in the society. He describes the predicaments of living in the hostile environment throughout the poem and reflects his sense of alienation. A brief trajectory into the poem reveals how the issue of home and identity occupies his poetry. In the poem, his sense of alienation and his consequent identity crisis find vivid expression. Not that he felt alienated from Indian ethos, but also from his own Jewish ethos. He appears a helpless victim of religious and racial discrimination and he found it difficult to feel at home. Being nostalgic, he recalls childhood experience and the humiliation met by him at school for being a Jew. He expresses his spiritual differences with the main stream culture which made it humanly impossible to feel at home in the land of his birth. He further focuses on his alienation from his Jewish ethos expressing that his morals declined during Friday night prayer out home. He longs for his home which he adopts through reconciliation and naturally he cannot identify himself as an Indian. Here, he acknowledges his crisis of identity. He writes in a tone of terror in the 1st segment of the poem:

I went to Roman Catholic school,
A mugging Jew among the wolves.
They told me I had killed the Christ,
That year I won the scripture prize.
A Muslim sportsman boxed my ears.
I grew in terror of the strong
But undernourished Hindu lad, (cp-179)

Here, the poet expresses his marginalisation and highlights his terror-stricken school days so vividly that the readers find enough reason to realise his identity crisis. He depicts how he was like a helpless prey among the wolves in his school. By the metaphor of wolves, he refers to the majority of students belonging to Hindu, Muslim and Christian community. The Christian students accused him of killing Christ and the strange thing is that he won the

scripture prize that year. Despite his devotion to scriptures, he was blamed that Jews were responsible for killing Christ. Again, the Muslims bullied him and he had to live in terror among the strong Hindu students. The total unfriendly atmosphere of the school left a scar in his heart and he had to live in a panic. He hardly could belong to such a place and it fuels to make him suffer from identity crisis and unhomeliness.

The poet's exasperation and distrusts find expression in the 2nd segment of the poem also. He reveals how he endeavours to negotiate with his native space but meets with heart break. His inner conflict finds a telling expression in the following lines:

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, (cp-180)

Ezekiel transparently reveals his problem of belonging here when he says that to feel at home in his native city is his main issue. He recalls his father's comment about Hindus. His father also held negative impression about the Hindus as their community had to suffer at the hand of them and told the poet that all Hindus were annoying. Despite his keen awareness of the fact that his native city bears negative dimensions, he has to adapt himself to the city and to identify himself as an Indian. He reveals how he becomes the part of his native city with the passage of time. He writes:

The Indian landscape sears 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-181)

The poet very vehemently expresses that Indian landscape burns or pains his eyes as he finds it uncongenial. But yet he becomes an unavoidable part of his native city to draw the impression of the foreigners. They hold the opinion that the poet is

lonely looking at his secluded existence. It is noticed here that he fails to assimilate with the landscape and hence fails to feel homely in India. At the same time, he suffers from identity crisis as he misses his home in Bombay. The traditional notion that 'home' provides a man with primary identity seems to be applicable here. Prior to this realisation, the poet expresses how his surrounding environ leads him to feel unhomey. He recounts the hostile environ in which he grows up and how he feels rootless. He writes in the 2nd segment of the poem. "How to feel at home, was the point", and it establishes his dilemma of adopting his native city as home. This ultimately gives him a sense of identity crises owing to the inner turmoil he experiences relating to his home.

In the final stanza of the poem, Ezekiel acknowledges that he has negotiated with his native space and tries to identify himself as an Indian accepting his backward place as his place of belonging. Notwithstanding the adverse situation of living, he considers his native place to be his home as he has to stay there. It can be interpreted that he realizes that one should acquire an identity from one's home and so he tends to negotiate. He avers:

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)

The said lines focus on Ezekiel's sense of belonging to India, specially to Bombay. Despite bearing a label of being a Bene Israel, he expresses that he is deeply rooted in India and committed to his native land. It is observed that he has to negotiate his home and identity as he realizes that he has to stay in his native space though it is backward. Though he digs at the 'barbaric city' and finds it unsuitable to accept as home, he tends to submit his acceptance. Notwithstanding his disgust for the city with its futilities, he makes his commitment to stay in Bombay. He asserts his sense of belonging in an interview with John Beston, "I have a strong sense of belonging ,not only to India but to this city.(85)" His

ambivalence regarding his native land and city find telling expression here.

'Island' is another topical poem which unveils Ezekiel's close attachment to his native city and his attempts to negotiate his home with the city despite its unfriendly and barbaric environ. His effort to seek his identity as a native of the city finds expression in the poem. The opening lines reveal Ezekiel's attitude towards the city that provides him his way of living and hence an identity. He candidly expresses 'I am here to find my way in it' (L-5, cp-182). He further throws light on the negative dimensions of the city referring human voice to be 'dragon's like'. However, with all its negativity, Ezekiel clings to the city as his home space that identifies him as a native of city of Bombay. His sense of negotiation with urban landscape that offers him home and consequent identity, finds a telling expression in the following stanza-

How delight the soul with absolute

Sense of salvation, how

Hold to single willed direction?

I cannot leave the island

I was born and belong. (cp-182)

It can be understood here that Ezekiel admits his incapability to leave his place of birth which implies that his birth place provides him an identity for which he wants to stay there. Despite the uncongenial environ of his native city full of slum, his soul attains a sense of delight here as he can dream of salvation in this native city, and leaves behind the negative aspects of the city. Consequently, he develops a sense of belonging to the island i.e., his native city. He further expresses that he cannot scrap the bonds of attachment with the city where miracles take place that leads him to his daily work. He behaves like a good native and assimilates to the ways of itself accepting both weal and woes rendered by the city.

Ezekiel makes a great revelation in segment V of the poem 'Poster poems' that he has been a refugee of spirit searching for his 'dim identity'. He is quite candid here and showcases his submissive mood to belong to his native place. Here, he calls his

native country 'a loved and troubled country' which he regards as both home and enemy. The barbaric environment of the city and his marginalization as a member of small Jew community convert him to a state individual lacking any spirit to live in the country but his desire for identity compels him to consider his hostile country as his native country. It is quite pristine here that he negotiates home and identity as a homeless cannot identify oneself as a native of that space. M.K.Naik (1995), maintains while talking about Ezekiel's alienation, "A refugee of the spirit' in search of his 'dim identity' which in different mood appears to him to be either a 'one man lunatic asylum' or 'a small deserted holy place'" (164) He reveals his submissive mood and ambivalence as he writes:

I have never been a refuge

Except of the spirit,

A loved and troubled country

Which is my home and enemy. (cp-209)

The lines evoke the solitude of a modern man who is in quest of home and identity, despite his immense dislikes, he has to consider his native city as home. Dr. Shalia Mohan (1977) relates in this context, "The modern city has its humanizing effect. The place is not necessarily Bombay, but any place where man loses identity...The city emerges as an image of inferno where the modern city dweller is placed to suffer and crave his way out. (55)"

The poem 'The Egoist's Prayers' demonstrates how Ezekiel is spiritually damned and feels unworthy to receive God's command. He expresses how he is 'cut off' from his land and from God's mercy owing to his vices. But in spite of his sense of alienation, he does not want to leave his native place and wants to reconcile with his place of belonging. His Bene Israeli background hardly seals his sense of belonging to India, rather he desires to make his living place his home. He searches for his self, vis-à-vis India and prays God to seal his way to go abroad. His efforts to negotiate home and identity, is marked in the following lines depicted in the concluding stanza:

Confiscate my passport, Lord,

I don't want to go abroad.

Let me find my song

Where I belong. (cp-213)

It is crystal clear here that he accepts his place of belonging as his home which identifies him as an Indian. His close attachment to his native city Bombay leads him cling to the city despite all oddities of the city space. His desire to identify himself as an Indian is reflected here. His identity and for that he does not want to leave his place of belonging through foreign country is more allusive. Shrish Chindhale's remark about Ezekiel authenticates his said idea and commitments towards his native land. He maintains "He has made his commitments, chosen his islands, found his people and identified five elements of sky, earth, air water and fire. It is quite gratifying that God has granted him the human metaphor also to make his song good. This is not a mood of submission, or resignation, or of alienation. It is rather the epiphanic moment of reconciliation, identification, discovery and achievement. (50)"

It is quite interesting to notice that Bombay becomes an indispensable part of Ezekiel life notwithstanding his odd experiences associated with the city. Even when he visits Edinburgh, the memory of Bombay haunts him and his knot with the city stay everlasting, such attachment is possible if a person is too occupied with certain things both mentally and emotionally. Such is the situation with Ezekiel as Bombay crept into his soul. He carries Bombay in his heart in a foreign strand even that finds expression in segment XXI of 'from Edinburgh Interlude' titled 'Mangoes'. He avers:

I have not come

To Edinburgh

To remember

Bombay mangoes

But I remember them (cp-293)

His statement here reveals how he carries the memory of his native land while busy in foreign land. Even the tiny thing like mango also peeps through his memory lane. This shows his affinity towards his

native city to which he affiliates. He maintains in an interview, "A writer needs a national or cultural identity, without that you become a series of imitation, echoes, responses, but you do not develop because there is nothing at the core to develop. (Ezekiel, 89)" This is obviously Ezekiel's postcolonial notion that establishes how identity is necessary and how a rootless fellow turns a hollow man having nothing to capitalize on in order to develop. Therefore, he, time and again, attempts to establish his national identity despite being disillusioned by his native city and home. Postcolonialism partakes landscape, history, national identity which is well reflected in the poetry of Ezekiel. The poem *Mangoes* quoted above authenticates the notion. Despite bearing a Bene Israel heredity, Ezekiel is deeply rooted in India and his attachment to the city finds best expression here.

Colonization essentially marginalizes people culturally making it hard for the colonized people to adapt in the new world after independence. Thus, people in postcolonial era feel rootless and the issue of loss of identity evoked. Ezekiel captures this issue of quest for identity in postcolonial period very meticulously in many of his poems as discussed above. A sort of dilemma of Ezekiel is realised through his poems that leads him to negotiate home and identity.

His poem 'Transparently' demonstrates the same dilemma which he desires to resolve. He expresses how he feels at a loss and rushes in every direction in search of his identity and home but fails to achieve. It leads him to a state of rootlessness. Finally, he perceives that it is meaningless to undergo a mental strain by wandering. There is a clear tone of submission in the poem as he makes an attempt to recognize his dilemma relating to his home and identity feeling utter lonely and to resolve the issue. This makes it transparent that he wants to accept his native city as home and his identity pushing his sense of rootlessness behind. He writes:

All I want now

is the recognition of dilemma

and the quickest means

of resolving it

within my limits. (cp-150)

His poem 'Enterprise' is a master piece, a gem of poetry which demonstrates poet's postcolonial attitude through the focus on modern man's search for identity. By the metaphoric journey in search of peace and spirituality, the poet highlights postcolonial quest for self and identity. The poem displays how the enthusiastic spiritual journey to achieve peace and identity ends with disillusionment as the members of the group attain nothing but a spiritual bankruptcy. Closing lines of the poem steal the show as these lines reveal deep thoughts of the poet. He writes:

"When finally, we reached the place

We hardly knew why were there

The trip had darkened every face

Our deeds were neither great nor rare

Home is where we have to earn our grace.
(cp-118)

The poem is an allegory of the condition of modern human beings. The group of pilgrims continue their journey with a hope of exploring something different from their hectic lives and to find peace and spiritual contentment overcoming all hurdles. So many distractions, diversions and obstacles are witnessed by the members but still they continue their enterprise. But all end in a heartbreak as they fail to find any significance of the tiresome journey and their disillusionment is total. They end their journey with the realisation that 'Home is where we have to earn our grace.' They learn it that home is the best place to attain peace and grace and home can identify an individual the last line reveals that the effort to escape from reality of life is futile. We have to accept 'home' as the ultimate reality which can provide us peace, security and identity. Ezekiel's stance here is in the line of Uma Parameswaran's (2003) notion that 'home is there where our feet are. (118)' It means where we put our feet, that place becomes our home. Home can render identity to us and we need not wander to seek it outside.

While concluding, it may be conceded that home could not provide Ezekiel with an identity though it is believed that a primary identity is

attributed to an individual by home. He maintains a love-hate relationship with native city and hence his acceptance of it as home and his identity as an Indian are often put into question. Again, it is observed that Ezekiel's existence in India was like the condition of the immigrants who face unhomeliness in his land of settlement. He has to negotiate his home and identity. His Jewish ancestry made him to stand alone amidst Hindus and Muslims. Ezekiel succinctly pinpoints at the agency and anguish of loneliness and consequent identity crisis and unhomeliness. It is unfurled here that Ezekiel felt like an exile at home and Ramanujan, another great Indian modern poet, felt at home in exile. Ezekiel had the inevitable choice to stay in India, which unsettled him. Not that his choice or reconciliation or negotiation to settle in India provided him an anchor for his dreams and hopes, but it launches the poet into an unending search for home, identity and repose instead. The paper explores how the poet digs at the mechanical and artificial life of modern man and how he suffers from home and identity crisis.

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