



INFLUENCE OF INDIAN ETHOS IN THE POETRY OF NISSIM EZEKIEL

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Article Received: 22/02/2020

Article Accepted: 11/03/2020

Published online: 16/03/2020

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.8.1.459](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.8.1.459)

Abstract

Nissim Ezekiel (December 16, 1924- January 09, 2004) was an Indian Jewish poet. He was proficient playwright, critic, editor as well as an actor also. He is one of the most eminent Indian poets in English writings in the present scenario. He has deep knowledge and minute observation about Indian culture, social belief, human relationship, merits and demerits of different professions. He describes about Professor Sheth and shopkeeper both in his poems. This shows that Indian philosophy, poverty, politics, ancient Indian morality, Spirituality, love, sex, passion, myth and even globalization are the main themes in the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel.

Keywords- Culture, corruption, philosophy, passion, morality, globalization, proficient, spirituality, sex, poverty and love.

“If wealth is lost nothing is lost; if health is lost something is lost; if character is lost everything is lost.”

Nissim Ezekiel (December 16, 1924-January 9, 2004) was an Indian Jewish poet and literary giant. He was not only a poet but also a playwright, editor, critic and an actor. He was a proficient scholar. He was fundamental figure in Postcolonial literary history of India. He was awarded Sahitya Academy award in 1923 for his poetry collection, *Latter –Day Psalms*. Moreover for his contribution to the Indian English writing he was honored with Padma Shri award in 1988. He was considered the father of modern Indian English Poetry. As a poet he was doubtlessly highly influenced with feeling, custom, tradition, emotion, culture and belief of India.

In fact the word ‘ethos’ is Greek word which means ‘character’ or the set of beliefs or ideas about social behavior and relationships of a person or group. It is used to illustrate the guiding belief or

ideas that constitute a community, nation or ideology. Forby ethos forms the root of ‘ethikos’ which means ‘moral showing, moral character.’

Indian ‘ethos’ is an overreaching concept of culture. So ancient Indian ethos is essential for ‘global mindset’ in business leadership and business management also. In the present scenario scriptures like Vedanta and Bhagwad Geeta are relevant to global mindset or *vasudhev kutumbakam*. Some noteworthy characteristics and element of Indian ethos are “If you do well, the whole universe will be good to you.” The basic doctrines of the ethos are derived from the Purans, Upanishad and Bhagwad Geeta. So one must perfectly equivalence secular values and spiritual values. As we know that Indian culture has a rich spiritual sentiment and heritage. And it is deep rooted spirituality which is signifying ethical values.

The main difference between ethics and ethos is that ethics refers a set of moral principle

while ethos refers to the character or custom or a set of attitudes and values. The future of Indian ethos is based on two universal truths. Firstly every Indian has faith in the God or the supreme power is in everybody. And secondly everything is deeply connected at a deeper level. So the basic unity of life cannot be broken. Therefore, the divine element in the individual is only a portion of the Universal or cosmic consciousness.

Indian ethos is almost everywhere in the Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel. His poetry describes love, loneliness, lust, creativity, political pomposity, human follies and the dissonance. He began embracing Indian's English vernacular, and teased its idiosyncrasies in his Poster Poems. He was mentor to many younger poets. In the last phase of his life he was deeply involved in helping younger poets.

His poem 'Night of the Scorpion' is in the narrative mode. He says –

My father, sceptic, rationalist,
Trying every curse and blessing,
Powder, mixture, herb and hybrid.
He even poured a little paraffin
Upon the bitten toe and put a match to it.
I watched the flame feeding on my mother.
I watched the holy man perform his rites to
tame the poison with an incantation.

After twenty hours
It lost its sting.
My mother only said
Thank God the scorpion picked on me
And spared my children.

The format of the poem 'Night of the Scorpion' is not rhymed. The poem is written in free verse. In the first part of the poem the scorpion stung to the mother of the poet and several villagers came like swarms of flies.

Ezekiel does not depict the scorpion as a villain. It was driven to shelter 'beneath a sack of rice after ten hours of rain. The poison is considered as making the poet's mother better in her life and in the next birth also. So, theme of the poem is about belief and culture of India. The peasants believe so much

in God. They drone the name of God hundred times. They also consider that the evil one all the poison will stop and not spread. The poem is written in free verse with varying line lengths. The poem starts off in the first person. He does not give his own view or reaction. Ezekiel lumps the neighbour together. Ezekiel's father neither believes in superstitions nor religion. He is skeptic by temperament.

Nissim Ezekiel is one of the most proficient poets of the Postcolonial period. He says in his poem 'The Professor' –

Remember me? I am Professor Sheth.
Once I taught you geography. Now
I am retired, though my health is good. My
wife died some years back.

By God's grace, all my children
Are well settled in life.
One is Sales Manager,
One is Bank manager,
Both have cars.
Other also doing well, though not so well.
Every family must have black sheep.

In his poem 'The Professor' Nissim Ezekiel is mocking of the typical professors of India. In this poem a professor, namely Professor Seth meets a person who has seen his students before a long time. The professor is exaggerating his sons and sons in law both. He is not pronouncing several words and phrases correctly. There are thirty-five lines in this poem. The language of the poem is satirical, direct and simple. He tells his student that his children are well-settled now. They are rich. They have car also. But his third son, who is not so well. And he considered that 'Every family must have black sheep.' It means that there is always spoilt person in every family and in his family his third son is just like a black sheep. It is also in Indian tradition in society to abuse our own children.

In the poem 'Enterprise' Nissim Ezekiel says –
It started as a pilgrimage
Exalting minds and making all
The burdens light, The second stage
Explored but did not test the call.
The sun beat down to match our rage.

We stood it very well, I thought,
Observed and put down copious notes
On things, the peasants sold and bought
The way of serpents and of goats.

All the poems of Nissim Ezekiel are based on different motives or themes. So in the poem 'Enterprise' we can see his intellectual thirst for the way of God through the pilgrimage. His poem 'Enterprise' is allegorical with all means. This poem is very similar like, 'The Journey of the Magi?' By T. S. Eliot. Because the theme of the poem is about the journey of three wise men in quest of spiritual gratification. Similarly in the poem 'Enterprise' there is a group of people. They are going on a holy place. Now their minds are full of only one intense idea to reach at their destination. So they started their journey with much ecstasy.

In his poem 'Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher' Nissim Ezekiel says -

To force the pace and never to be still
Is not the way of those who study birds
Or women. The best poets wait for words.
The hunt is not an exercise of will
But patient love relaxing on a hill
To note the movement of a timid wing;
Until the one who knows that she is loved
No longer waits but risks surrendering –
In this the poet finds his moral proved
Who never spoke before his spirit moved.

In the above lines the speaker narrates the process to write down poetry. He compares it to being a lover or a birdwatcher. It is considered one of the most serious poems by the form and content both. Ezekiel does not use an ironic tone. The poem is full of perfection by symmetry for the readers. The theme of the poem is self-reliance or self-examination which is the chief characteristic of Ezekiel's work. The bird in the poem is symbolic for the quest for self-knowledge. In the same way, female image is also implying a fruitful and creative notion.

In his another poem namely 'Philosophy' Nissim Ezekiel says -

There is a place to which I often go,
Not by planning to, but by a flow
Away from all existence, to a cold
Lucidity, whose will is uncontrolled.
Here, the mills of God are never slow.
The landscape in its geological prime
Dissolves to show its quintessential slime.
A million stars are blotted out. I think
Of each historic passion as a blink
That happened to the sad eye of time.

So, if we observed minutely, we can see that the poem 'Philosophy' by Nissim Ezekiel elaborates about not only philosophy but poetry also. He thinks that Philosophy and science both have certain limitations. But he believes that poetry essentially surpassed both of them. Because poetry is spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling. So it is most powerful than philosophy and science. He himself considers that there is no place to which he often goes. It means that without any effort he is driven by the flow of his thoughts and imagination. The place described by the poet is his own imagination. The poet cannot control his own flow of thoughts. He believes that the creator of ideas is never slow. His mind is creator of new ideas all the time. These ideas can never control or checked by the poet himself. In the poem 'The Patriot' Nissim Ezekiel says -

I am standing for peace and non-violence.
Why world is fighting fighting
Why all people of world
Are not following Mahatma Gandhi,
I am simply not understanding.
Ancient Indian Wisdom is 100% correct,
I should say even 200% correct,
But modern generation is neglecting –
Too much going for fashion and foreign thing.
Other day I'm reading newspaper
(Every day I'm reading Times of India
To improve my English Language)
How one goonda fellow
Threw stone at Indirabehn.

Must be student unrest fellow, I am thinking.

Friends, Romans, Countrymen, I am saying
(to myself)

Lend me the ears.
Everything is coming –
Regeneration, Remuneration, Contraception.
Be patiently, brothers and sisters.
You want one glass lassi?

Here, in this poem 'The Patriot' the speaker is a generous person. He is describing honestly about the important of truth and non-violence. He depicted that in ancient time the people of India must had patience, charity, spiritual power, honesty, truth and non-violence. But in the present scenario, modern generation is going for fashion and foreign thing. The poet also considered that he is reading newspaper daily to improve his own English diction and language for Excellency. There are a lot of Hindustani words used in the poem to give a native and humorous taste. He is in support of Gandhian principle of peace and non-violence. He never likes any kind of fight or war in the world. He is always in the favour of the, 'Ancient Indian Wisdom.' He indicates to contemporary political controversies through regeneration, remuneration, contraception. He is offering lassi to make us cool.

Likewise in the poem 'The Worm' Nissim Ezekiel says –

I saw a worm the other day, after rain,
Crawling with astounding strength, directed
By an inner eye, towards a dryer place.
It moved so straight! Oh God! To think that I
By such absurd and devious routes should
reach

My destination. Is there anywhere
A worm blinder than I have been or proved
So monstrously incapable of being
Just itself, enduring rain, moving on,
Secure in dust's ingrained vitality,
Strategic as a worm and therefore free?

Thus in his poem 'The Worm' also Nissim Ezekiel says that the worm is moving with astounding strength. Although the worm is blind but its 'inner eye' is guiding it to move where it wants to

go. So the speaker compare himself to the worm. This poem is ruled by oppositions and paradoxes. The speaker is neither free nor has inner-strength as the worm. This poem expresses a wish to return to the animalistic. The speaker wants to understand himself and escape from society. Because self-knowledge is the innermost theme throughout 'Nissim Ezekiel's' poetry. We know that 'The Worm' is one of the early poems of Ezekiel. It does not contain strict metre or rhyme scheme.

In the poem 'Soap' Nissim Ezekiel says –
Some people are not having manners,
This I am always observing,
For example other day I find
I am needing Soap
For ordinary washing myself purposes.
So I'm going to small soap
Nearby in my lane and I'm asking
For well known brand soap.
That shopman he's giving me soap
But I'm finding it defecting version
So I'm saying it very politely –
Though in Hindi I'm saying it,
And my Hindi is not so good as my English,
Please to excuse me

But this is defective version of well-known brand soap.

Here in this Nissim Ezekiel Portrays that people have no manners to talk with each other. He addresses the shop keeper who is selling him 'defective' soap. When he is talking with shopkeeper, his own English is better than his Hindi. The man provides an opportunity to admit that he is selling defective soap. He does not lose his temper at first. There is smile on his face, that shows that he is friendly and sincere. But the shopkeeper does not accept the truth. So, the man warned the shopkeeper that he will not forgive him for the next time.

In the poem 'The Hill' Nissim Ezekiel says –
This normative hill
Like all others
Is transparently accessible,
Out there
And in the mind,

Not to be missed
Except in peril of one's life.
Do not muse on it
From a distance:
It's not remote
For the view only,
It's for the sport
Of climbing
What the hill demands
Is a man
With forces flowing
As from the crevices
Of rocks and rough surface
Wild flowers
Force themselves towards the sun
And burn
For a moment.

We can observe in the poem 'The Hill' that Nissim Ezekiel has described very wonderful images of hill and wild flowers which are going upward to Sun. The flowers that burst out of the rock crevice to burn. The hill is for the support of climbing. The poet emphasises that we should forgive ourselves or others. Because charity is essential for the human being. The Metaphor of hill runs throughout the poem.

In his poem 'Island' Nissim Ezekiel says –
Unsuitable for song as well as sense
The island flowers into slums
And skyscrapers, reflecting
Precisely the growth of my mind.
I am here to find my way in it.
Sometimes I cry for help
But mostly keep my own counsel,
I here distorted echoes
Of my own ambiguous voice
And of dragons claiming to be human.

In the poem 'Island' the poet describes about his own feelings and experiences of Mumbai where he was born. The poem 'Island' describes the harsh realities of urban life. Infact, the 'Island' of the title refers to the isolation which we feel, when trying to make a living in any crowded city. The city offers 'bright an tempting breezes' it means that there is

opportunities to earn money, better employment, treatment, smooth and healthy life in the city.

In this way, we can see that in the every poem of Nissim Ezekiel, there is the glimpse of culture, custom, belief, faith, truth and non-violence, moreover ancient wisdom of India. There is his own innovation and heartrending feelings and emotion. We find the idea of Indianness in his literary works. Nissim Ezekiel returns to the theme of memory again and again in his collected poems. Poetry is a major theme in his poem 'Poet, Lover and Birdwatcher,' in which he compares writing poetry is like a watching birds or women. It is considered that the bird is the quest for self knowledge but woman symbolises muse like inspiration. In the poems of Ezekiel religion is also essential theme. So, doubtlessly the English writings of Nissim Ezekiel is full of Indianness as truth and non-violence, brotherhood, natural sight, discipline in language, empowerment and offer for future, patience, truthfulness and all that is required to live on the earth as a human being for the human kind.

So Nissim Ezekiel has faith like John Keats –

'Heard melodies are sweet not those
unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play
on.'
(Ode on a Grecian Urn)
And –
'Beauty is truth, truth beauty; that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.'
(Ode on a Grecian Urn)

So, Nissim Ezekiel's poems are full of the warm soul of India and Indianness both. He is unsurpassed in the context of theme, philosophy and naturalness. So doubtlessly Nissim Ezekiel is the father of modern Indian English poetry.

Nissim Ezekiel himself says-

"I am not Hindu, and my background makes me natural outsider circumstances to a conscious decision relate me to India.

Further he says-

“I cannot leave this Island, I was born here and belong.”

Thus in conclusion we can say that Nissim Ezekiel is Indian by heart, liver and brain. He is deeply rooted in Indian soil and ethos. He depicted minutely about religion, myth, history, politics, culture, love, sex and all contemporary essential issues. He is the poet all of masses and classes. He depicts about the pain and poverty of Indian society. His literary works are full of irony, compassion, prosperity and enthusiasm.

Just like W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden Ezekiel also understands the sense of self knowledge, soul and belongingness. He seems to perform his role on the stage like an actor of William Shakespeare. He is a social realist at all. So he has evolved his own voice everywhere. He is deeply influenced by ancient Indian philosophy, scriptures, Upanishads and Bhagvad Geeta. He is earnest supporter of Mahatma Gandhi and his Ram Rajya.

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