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UNSUNG SONGS: REMEMBERING NISSIM EZEKIEL

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Abstract

To fully appreciate the achievements of Nissim Ezekiel, the 'father of Indian English Poetry', who gently faded away into the good night on January 9, 2004 aged 79 in Bombay, we should not remember the honours and awards he received in the 1980s, but the lonely environment in which he started writing in the early 1950s. The mood in India at that time was largely anti-colonial; some politicians even wanted to abolish English, the language in which Ezekiel wrote. A Jew in cosmopolitan Bombay, in India prone to sectarian violence, Ezekiel could have been more of an outsider. But he 'cannot leave the island' as he 'was born here and belong'. He was, for his time, the public face of the literary and academic establishment in India. His generosity and courteousness complemented his efforts to advance the cause of Indian English literature and arts. In the present article I would endorse Ezekiel's perennial poetic sensibility through a reading of his uncollected poems which were found by Anklesaria among his much precious papers.

KEY WORDS: Indian Tradition, rootedness, conflict, concord, pluralistic culture.

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Dom Moraes discloses that Ezekiel lent him books and tutored him on the importance of punctuation. Havovi Anklesari admits:

Ezekiel was brought up in an age of great causes where all was to be sacrificed for the big idea. He aspired to make everything subservient to his need to be a poet. The writing of poetry was more than just ambition and vocation, it was a crusade, to do something for India. In his early work Ezekiel believed himself to be forging a new tradition, evolving a new idiom appropriate to the spirit of free, secular, more self-reflective modern India. (xxvi)

Nissim Ezekiel was one those writers who became legends in their life-time. Born in Bene-Israel Jewish Community on December 16, 1924, Ezekiel's immense contribution to Indian Literature in English took shape in the number of poems he had written or the volumes he had published. *A Time To Change* (1952), *Sixty Poems* (1953), *The Third* (1958), *The Unfinished Man* (1960), *The Exact Name* (1965), *Hymns in Darkness* (1976) and *Latter-Day Psalms* (1982) are the volumes of poetry by Ezekiel in which all 238 poems are collected. The poem 'The Second Candle' has been found among the late poet's paper is included in the *Collected Poems* (2004). Macmillan published his play *Don't Call It Suicide* in 1989 and his essays *Selected Essays*

appeared in 1992. 'No reader on Nissim Ezekiel can accommodate the huge extent of his work'.

"A poet of belonging as well as longing, perhaps a poet longing to belong, Ezekiel's poetry has always been part of the journey towards complete poise, aware of and accepting all inadequacies".

To view the progress of this Indian pilgrim we need to reconsider the heard and unfold the unheard poems as well by Ezekiel as it would enable us to grasp his earlier concerns his enforcement on consistent self-evaluation in his poetic odyssey. The article thus would attempt to discern his art, politics and his own process of self-analysis, sense of modernity and his life-long preoccupation with a need for a home. *A Time to Change*, the first volume by this poet-pilgrim charts out his path for his pilgrimage and determines his destination. What we hear is Ezekiel's original voice here despite discernible influence of Eliot.

Obedience to a comprehend law is freedom, peace and Power. Creation moves in submission timelessly. Unyielding men are broken by the hours. (CP, 34)

Sixty Poems was dedicated to Elizabeth, one of his basement-room girlfriends in London. The volume contains all metaphysical, moral, philosophical and religious poems. But the poet declares in 'A Poem of Dedication':

I do not want the yogi's concentration,
I do not want the perfect charity
Of saints nor the tyrant's endless power
I want a human balance humanly
Acquired, fruitful in common hour. (CP, 40)

Nissim also presents his Judeo-Christian religiosity in these and other poems like 'Psalm151', 'Nocturne', 'Cain', and 'Creation'.

The Third is dedicated to some Krishnanath whose identity is mystical. Here again the cycle of reflective, self-analytical poems is repeated.

Come, religion, comfort me.
You lifeless moralists prescribe your laws,
And make me see
My secret flaws. (CP, 103)

The Unfinished Man is dedicated to Laeq and Zafar, was published by Kolkata based publishers in 1960 which contains 10 poems. The epigraph of *The Unfinished Man* is adopted from a poem by W.B.Yeats. The poems in the volume can be seen as expressions of the kind of Modernist city angst that one finds in Eliot's 'Wasteland' and Ezra Pound 'Cantos'. In his Bombay poems Nissim puts forward the radical view that in India rooted ness need not be only to one's native village; one can find one's root in the city as well. In his famous poem 'Enterprise' poet confesses:

When, finally, we reached the place,
We hardly knew why we were there.
The trip has darkened every face,
Our deeds were neither great nor rare.
Home is where we have to gather grace. (CP, 118)

Though the city is 'Barbaric' and 'sick with slums' yet it is 'His native place he could not shun'. Moreover, Ezekiel's persona had virtually always been a personality in process.

The Exact Name is dedicated to R.Parthasarthy and Adil Jussawalla which emerged in 1965 with some of the best poems viz. 'Philosophy', 'Night of the Scorpion', 'Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher', 'The Visitor' etc. 'Night of the Scorpion' contrasts the superstitious ness of the Indian masses with the rationality of Nissim's father. The poem is based on an incident that actually took place in poet's grandfather's house in the village of Tal. The narrator is neither on the side of the villagers nor on the side of his father-he merely reports what he remembers to have seen with a kind of photographic accuracy. This is what gives the poem its depth.

I remember the night my mother
was stung by a scorpion...(130)

The depiction of mother as a passive, sacrificing goddess, who must be worshipped for allowing things to happen to her instead of taking the reins of her life into her own hands and her very natural love for her children is unique.

my mother only said:
Thank God the scorpion picked on me

and spared my children. (131)

The poem is a celebration of maternal love rooted in the biological instinct and also of the harmony that exists between one individual and other members of a rustic society. 'The Visitor' is another poem based on popular superstition in India that a cawing crow indicates the arrival of a visitor. A visitor does reach but-

His hands were empty, his need:
Only to kill a little time
Between his good intentions
And my sympathy the cigarette smoke
Was more substantial than our talk. (138)

This leads the poet to reaffirm his faith in 'ordinariness of most events, when the visitor turns out to be a common man and not an 'angel in disguise'.

In 1976, Nissim entered into the world of mainstream- publishing with his sixth book of poems *Hymns in Darkness*, dedicated to Keku and Khorshed Gandhi. One of the most memorable poems of the volume is 'Background Casually'. The autobiographical poem was written for a Commonwealth Arts Festival as an explanation of his return to India. Ezekiel's background itself provides the story which is told in the poem. Born in Bene-Israel family that migrated to India generation ago the boy went to a Roman Catholic school where 'he grew in terror of the strong but undernourished Hindu boys'. At the same time the poet's alienation from his own minority religious ethos also appeared to have begun quite early as his confession comes in following manner:

At home on Friday nights the prayers
Were said. My morals had declined.
I heard of Yoga and of Zen.
Could I, perhaps, be rabbi-saint?
The more I searched, the less I found. (CP,
179)

The restlessness, generated by these circumstances, led to a career of quick changes and numerous experiments. A brief stint abroad (1948-1952) and after his return followed attempts at journalism, publishing and advertising failed to give him peace in life before he settled down to teaching.

In June 1961 Ezekiel shifted back to academics by accepting lectureship as well as headship of English department in Mithibai College of Arts, Bombay. He moved on to the University of Bombay as Reader in American Literature in 1972 and was subsequently elevated to Professorship in 1978, a position he held until his superannuation in 1985. Perhaps the poet had by then realized that "I cannot leave the island/ I was born here and belong." (CP, 182)

His Sahitya Akademi award winning volume *Latter-Day Psalms* appeared in 1982 and was dedicated to his wife and children-Daisy, Kavita, Kalpana and Elkana. In the volume poems like 'Jewish Wedding in Bombay', 'Minority Poem', 'Very Indian Poems in Indian English' and 'Latter-Day Psalms' are notable. Bruce King tellingly observes:

"The 'Latter-Day Psalms' demolish claims by those in authority to know the good from the bad, to be just or to represent the divine...The 'Latter-Day Psalms' reflect Ezekiel's struggle with his own Jewish heritage and end with an ironic 'Jamini Roy' conclusion in which the art of the Psalms provides a model for his own work."

The volume appropriately ends with rendering an Indian poet- pilgrim's undeniable expression of his humanistic apprehensions. He played an important role in putting Indian Writing on the world map. He thought, he acted and he write like 'Everyman'.

I want my hands
to learn how to heal
myself and others,
before I hear
my last song. (CP, 274)

After Ezekiel's demise while talking about his 'uncollected poetry' Havovi Anklesaria marks in his edited book *Nissim Ezekiel Remembered* (2008):

Compiling a selection was uncollected poetry and prose in the absence of an archive was never going to be easy. I was not allowed to use Bombay University Library facilities and the Asiatic Society's holdings are not organized enough to be consulted. Most editors of the little magazines that Ezekiel wrote for, have not preserved past issues of

the journals they edited. Anil Dharker, former editor of *Debonair* had discarded the issues he had edited and the present staff of *Debonair* was unable to help. (xxxix)

In his 'unsung songs' one could feel Ezekiel's pathos, the tenderness, the will to co-operate and the will to acclimatize hence these casual compositions bring the readers joy within their limits of suggestiveness.

Wherever I go
I hear the same song
Laughter and wisdom
Folly and disaster
Wherever I go
I lose my way
But find my way
Before I go home. (107 NER))

One may be distracted on similarly dissimilar paths but whenever its about homecoming or its about settling down in one's culture the paths become clear and unimpeded. The Hyderabad Poems are a set of ten short songs wherein the poet seems 'fulfilled' in an air-conditioned room, even when 'there is nothing to do so much'.

The last part of journey
Is the hardest or the easiest.
You only have to lie down and wait
With remembrances
Of the earlier part of the journey. (100 NER)

A longing to live life on many frontiers on his own terms with the courage of his own convictions rather than on received wisdom had emerged in his life in the very beginning of his life. He believed in 'I can rise when I please' and he admits that he never belonged to any literary family, nevertheless he preferred poetry and he was never interested in 'scoring subjects'.

Two birds or five
on the table-lamp.
The sound of a leaking tap.
Suddenly, rainbow-colours
On the mind.
The door-bell rings
But it's only an owl. (101. NER)

Nissim Ezekiel tells Saleem Peeradina in an interview about the passionate force behind his writing poetry, "I have always written prodigiously. Whether what I wrote was good or bad or indifferent never mattered at the time of writing. I wrote because I enjoyed it. Sometimes, a bad poem can lead to a good one. Since that was my method, I never really had what can be called a total 'block'." (57, NER) He never wanted to leave Bombay as he had told Peeradina as

All my writing comes out of staying here. I am happy to be unhappy here rather than somewhere else. If I stay anywhere else, I will only be unhappy. Here, at least the unhappiness makes sense, unhappiness leads to critical perceptions. One can take a positive approach to frustration or a negative one. I certainly take the positive approach. It is more creative. (58, NER)

'Singapore Sequence' one of his unsung songs was found among his papers.

I choose to sleep
on the drawing-room sofa.
My choices are all likely
To be of that kind.
My greatest need now
is to get off the ground
with my feet on the ground. (104-05, NER)

The poet would like to be composed amidst the complexities of the world so that he may create verses that would tend to assure accordance among all. He felt that he must take all the responsibility and he believed in doing his best in his 'circumstances'.

No, not for me that perfect equilibrium, but li
And ren suggest a possible Journey. One step
in that direction may help me dress better!
And handle money sensibly, relate with less
obliqueness
To my family, relatives, friends, colleagues
and strangers.
It may remove the chips on my shoulders,
And make more room for the burdens that
matter. (106 NER)

The poetry of cultural contact on global scale has become increasingly important for qualitative and quantitative reasons. At this point, a new and better beginning would be made in the study of intercultural literature as a means for promotion of global literature. Ezekiel's 'unsung songs' certainly pave the way for commencement of global literature. In another poem uncollected 'For Angas Lam' the poet promises to 'write you a poem in my gigantic gratitude'.

When the voice is raised,
angelic, diabolic,
often a mixture of both,
whether to say, "I love you"
or assert a political conviction,
it means one has moved
from the foggy truth
of a harmless landscape
into the sea-depths of human needs. (109,
NER)

The poet realizes that such connections are not easily made yet we must keep looking for such connections so that we may revel with differences and enjoy the connectedness and keep exploring each other's minds more fully and thoroughly.

Between the self-destructive world
and the plain truth,
there are wandering gods
whose voices are heard
perpetually whispering to all of us-
willing to listen
with or without faith.
Let us listen to them. (109, NER)

The implication is that when there are differences between others and us on crucial issues we need to be broad-minded and rely on our basic-beliefs of freedom of opinion and expression. In the article "Censorship and the Writer" Ezekiel clarifies that "the writer not only lives in society but is partially a product of it. He may share consciously or subconsciously...he may side with society against the individual...because he genuinely believes that society is right". (210, NER) in 'Singapore Notebook' he suggest:

I join the crowd, and hear a voice

Reminding me I'm still alone.
Then someone smiles, and I rejoice,
Rush up to buy an icecream-cone.
The music in this place resounds,
And people walking seem to dance.
My darker thoughts are out of bounds,
I'm free to love the gifts of chance. (113, NER)

The poet waits for his destined course and thinks that such a mind claims an atmosphere for the maximum creative output and then looks forward to be supported so that the message is fully communicated. Nissim always emphasized on creativity and then only a new spirit of co-operative thought and action will be born. He also brings out the significance of an 'organic growth, a new flowering without loss of identity and roots'.

I see again what I know
is there to be seen,
always alive, substantial,
with a renewed promise
of words and melodies. (114, NER)

In his essay on Nissim Ezekiel "Perched on Hyphens, Between Poetry and Prayer, Soul and Flesh" Keki N. Daruwala says that he "hungers for the golden mean, he is not destined to find it, not in life, and certainly not in his early verse...Journey is crucial metaphor in his books, a journey fraught with uncertainty." (403, NER) This view by Daruwala can be endorsed with an uncollected poem 'a new song':

Let me learn
to live without teaching,
until I find my soul-
or even lose it
on that different road. (128, NER)

Nissim Ezekiel is essentially a poet of inner conflict, of love and passion, the constricting role of the mind, social inhibitions and mental states. Nissim's poetry is no cryptic exercise with words, nor an avenue of unrestrained emotional purgation. Poetry to him is a communicative art, even if we go through his unsung/uncollected poems. This has made him the most readable and consistent of the modern Indian English poets. Makarand Paranjape tributes Nissim Ezekiel in "A Poetry of Proportions: Nissim Ezekiel's Quest for the Exact Name", "Rather than

being a 'new poet' Nissim may be seen as a bridge between the old and the new, as a poet who carried forward the 'best' of what he inherited to a new generation". More an insider than an outsider, more a part of majority than minority...he embodies and carries forward the themes of love, love of God, virtuous life, rootedness, identity and at the same time he is part of the larger world of people, ideas and art to be national and also cosmopolitan, in brief to a modern Indian without entirely losing one's sense of one's tradition.

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