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# Research maGma

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### INDIANNESS IN THE SELECTED POEMS OF NISSIM EZEKIEL

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#### ABSTRACT

Prof. V.K. Gokak defines Indianness as, "A composite awareness in the matter of race, milieu, language and religion." But Indianness has been interpreted differently by different critics. It can be described as the author's feeling of being an Indian, whether he lives in India or lives abroad Indian writing in English reflects the authors' cultural, socio-political and religious background. Whatever the genre; poetry, drama, fiction or even essays, this unique identity of the Indian author is mirrored. K.N.Daruwala rightly says; "Nissim Ezekiel was the first Indian poet to express modern Indian sensibility in a modern idiom." Ezekiel has experimented with the use of typical Indian English. The poems reveal the common Indian mistakes of using present progressive tense in place of the simple present. Indianness is a vital element in Ezekiel's thoughts and feeling and imagery. Indianness has become one of the major themes of Ezekiel which he treats as an intensely personal exploration. Ezekiel's poetry is noticeable for the depiction of typical Indian atmosphere. He has committed himself to Indian values, culture, people and language, and Indianness has always been in his blood and writing.

#### KEYWORDS:

Indianness, Eastern identity

#### INTRODUCTION

Nissim Ezekiel is one of the foremost Indian poets writing in English and has attracted considerable critical attention from the scholars both in India and abroad. Ezekiel belongs to a immigrant Jewish family although he himself was born in Mumbai in 1924 and brought up there. He got his education in Mumbai and made India his home. Nissim Ezekiel is one of the foremost Indian poets writing in English and has attracted considerable critical attention from the scholars both in India and abroad. Besides, some trips to various foreign countries, he has lived, worked and earned his livelihood in Mumbai. As a man and as a poet, he has observed and experienced much of Indian Life very closely. He is rightly considered to be the father of post-independence Indian verse in English. He was a prolific poet, playwright, critic, broadcaster and social commentator. But as a poet in Indian English writing,

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Ezekiel's contribution is outstanding.

The Indianness in Nissim Ezekiel's poetry is nothing but a perpetual quest for Identity and commitment. Caught in the vortex of a soulless world of eroding individuality and purposefulness, he gives vent to his dilemma in poetic terms. Indianness lays his commitment to this country and in his earnest and sincere desire to bring about some improvement in the conditions of life through his poetry. His poetry reflects his desire to depict the depressing, degrading and disgusting conditions of life in India. When we study W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot, we talk about the reflection of Indian sensibility in Indian English poetry, the first name that comes to our mind is that of Nissim Ezekiel. He has not only been a good poet himself, but also a cause of good poetry in others.

Ezekiel's poetry seems to be a comment on the Indian social scenario where he tries to present 'what', 'how' and 'why' of the various aspects of Indian society. He not only tries to highlight the social facts and problems which Indians face because of their poverty, superstitions, squalor etc but also expresses his deep admiration for the Indian spiritual values. But the admiration does not mean that he is not aware of the degradation or perversion of the social, moral and spiritual values in the Indian society. He is equally attentive to them as they lead the society to the way of spiritual hypocrisy.

It is generally believed that Indian poetry in English, having passed the phase of imitation and national self-consciousness has attained maturity through independence and individuality. This self-consciousness and awareness played an important role in the writing of modern Indian poetry in English. Much of the critical commentary on Ezekiel's poetry is centered on a study of his craftsmanship and his treatment of modern urban life. Ezekiel, unlike Jayanta Mahapatra, R.Parthasarathy, A.K.Ramanujan and Kamala Das, does not make an effort to acclimatize the indigenous tradition of English language. Instead, he seeks to relate himself to the contemporary India. Especially, he is a poet of ordinary human situations and common human relationships and human interest comes to the fore in a host of lyrics. Typical Indian beliefs, situations and contemporary society attract him the most and he creates a new kind of poetry in Indian English idiom. For instance, his wellknown poem, *Night of the Scorpion* is typically Indian in its theme.

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Ten hours  
of steady rain had driven him  
To crawl beneath the sack of rice.  
Parting with his poison- flash

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Of diabolic tail in the dark room-  
He risked the rain again.(2-7)

Ezekiel portrays the lives of the extremes in the society. *Night of the Scorpion* is one of Ezekiel's poems which is very favorite to the Westerners. It is about a typical incident in an Indian village. The poet describes Indian social situation. The speaker's mother is bitten by a scorpion and he offers a positive image of Indian women and mothers – woman as a creator, protector, and educator and as an integrating force. He recalls the painful night in the life of his mother when she was stung by a scorpion.

The peasants came like swarms of flies  
And buzzed the name of God a hundred time  
To paralyze the Evil one.(8-10)

V.M. Madge writes on the poem, "The Metropolitan contempt for the rural population is reflected in the image of peasant coming "like swarms of files" and "buzzing the name of God a hundred times". Pests they are, they cannot come any other way, and they cannot rush to the scene of the tragedy like brothers in a family but only as "swarms of flies." Unity of all religions in India is seen here. Peasants of various faiths, Christians, Hindus, Muslims, and Jews came in large numbers to see her and prayed for her. Ezekiel copies the incident in this poem which is practiced even today in several villages of India. Holy men performing rites and incantations as to cure diseases are usual sights in many parts of the country. Majority of the villagers are superstitious and they believe that prayers and incantations are the only solution for diseases. Through the voices of the peasants, the poet echoes the Indian belief in washing away the sins of their previous birth by suffering in the present birth.

May the sins of your previous birth  
Be burned away tonight.  
May your suffering decrease  
The misfortunes of your next birth(19-22)

The speaker's father in the poem is representative of a few educated people who are rationalists and skeptic. The lines,

My father, skeptic, rationalist,  
Trying every curse and blessings,  
Powder, mixture, herb and hybrid.(36-38)

The tension between two clashing attitudes is also brought out effectively: the attitude of traditional world of superstition and the modern scientific scepticism and rationalism.

Though he may appear to be ridiculous, he does not ridicule the Indian customs and traditions but depicts popular Indian believes are truthfully. The poem is indeed, rich in many aspects; stylistically, structurally and thematically.

The final lines,

My mother only said:  
Thank God the Scorpion picked on me  
And spared my children.(46-48)

are very beautiful and a befitting portrayal of a typical Indian mother. The concluding lines mesmerize and define the Indianness impressively in Nissim Ezekiel as it brings out the authentic flavor of India, though his poems are simple, introspective and analytical.

Nissim Ezekiel though born in a Jewish family is an Indian poet writing in English. He has

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committed himself to Indian values, culture, people and language, and Indianness has always been in his blood and writing. In an interview with Frank Birbal Singh he says

I am an Indian national I was born in India; my tribe of the Jewish community has lived in India for 2,000 years. If I had rejected my Indianness, which some other writers obviously have done, and if I had decided that I am so much of an outsider that I have to settle down in London or New York, and then, even if I did write about India, I don't know if I could be regarded as an Indo-English Writer. There would be some problems in that situation, though there are marginal cases.

As far as Ezekiel is concerned, the concept of Indianness is quite controversial because of his foreign origin. He has accepted the fact in his poetry that being a "natural foreigner", he himself felt alienated from the Hindu culture but his desire "to turn the situation" to the positive made him committed and dedicated to Indian society and culture. That's why, in *Background Casually* he says:

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. (21-25)

Besides epitomizing the soul of India in his poetry, Nissim Ezekiel ushered into the age of one-world-ness. But his works do not reflect the India which appeals to the West, but the India in to which he can, and does, merely belong to which he can really relate to. He does not glorify the Indian custom and culture but instead he sees it as it is. Even he is acutely and painfully conscious of the deficiencies and defects of the Indian people. In Ezekiel's poem *Background Casually* the Indian customs are reflected. It is generally believed that Indians talk loudly and knock at the doors heavily and this is portrayed very picturesquely

When someone talked too loudly, or  
knocked at the door like the Devil,  
They hawked and spat. They sprawled around (16-18).

In this autobiographical essay, he himself being a Jew a minority in India he depicts the trouble and traumas that he underwent throughout his life. He says "I am not a Hindu and my background makes me a natural outsider"

Casteism is another factor which is deep-rooted in the Indian soil and which is very much there in his poems as well. As he records painfully, "My ancestors, among the castes, were aliens."

Though he writes about losing his national identity, his poems give expression to his love of the soil. He affirms that he is very much an Indian and his roots lie deep in India. In *Island* he says,

I cannot leave the island,  
I was born here and belong. (19-20)

But he has learnt the way of the world from his multi-faceted experiences

I look about me now and try  
To formulate a plainer view  
The wise survive and serve – to play  
The fool, to cash in on  
The inner and outer storms. (11-15)

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Ezekiel always felt a sense of belonging to India though by birth he was an outsider by race. Even though he had to face bitter realities of alienation and discrimination from his own compatriots, India always was his motherland to which he was very much attached. Even in his writings from London, India never seemed to him just a land of his ancestors. Though belonging to Jewish community, Ezekiel was primarily an Indian.

Nissim Ezekiel is one of the most significant poets who has enriched our contribution to English poetry. He was a gifted Bombay intellectual, poured out his feelings to come to terms with himself, scornfully, and sorrowfully with overtones of mocking cynicism.

It stands to reason that what makes Indo-Anglian literature an Indian literature is the quality of its Indianness". In the words of Nissim Ezekiel, "My poems in Indian English are rightly described as very Indian poems. So they should not be considered as "mere lampoons". The characters and the situations projected are intended to be genuinely Indian, and the humour is in the English language as it is widely spoken by Indians, to whom it is not funny at all. (Iyengar)

Ezekiel has endeavored to identify himself with his environment and he has proved that the roots and stems of great poetry are found in the native soil. But the poet with the immaculate perfection of his art universalizes his environmental ethos. All great Indian English poets during the Post-Independence era - K.N.Daruwalla, Arun Kolatkar, Kamala Das, Shashi Deshpande, and O. P. Bhatnagar have followed the Ezekiel's tradition of urbanity, identification with environment, art and irony and the importance of flawless form.

In the beginning he had an impression of Yeats, Eliot, Auden, Rilke, Ezra Pound etc. but later he established his originality. At first he was a romantic, then became a realist and finally he appeared to be a humanist. With matchless techniques his poems become the masterpieces. About his contribution to the Indian English poetry as mentioned by Bruce King,

With Ezekiel Indian English poetry started on a new basis rooted in what were felt to be the traditions of modern poetry as reformed by W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and W. H. Auden using contemporary urban images, language and concerns. The feelings were personal, unsentimental, expressed in tonal ironies and with a complexity of emotions and consciousness. Ezekiel aimed at preciseness of image, conciseness and exactness of language, feeling and poetic form (King).

Ezekiel uses both blank verse and rhymed verse with perfection. He has given brilliance to Indian English Poetry. He has also refreshed its soul. He is a prolific poet. His language is polished. His poetic framework includes the whole sphere of life. His journey as a poet not only establishes him as an Indian English Poet but it has also given new heights to Indian English poetry.

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