



## Image of India in Nissim Ezekiel's select Poems

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### *Abstract*

*This research paper aims at studying Image of India reflected in the poems of Nissim Ezekiel (14 December 1924 – 9 January 2004). I propose to study what way Nissim Ezekiel has depicted the picture of India as it is with her culture, People, system, belief, myth superstitions etc. As he prefers to live in India, his loyalty and love always remain with India. I have been very much fascinated by his genuine affection towards India and decided to explore the image of India described by him. I also wish to propose to study diction used by him in his poems. In a jovial tone the poet has deliberately used the typical Indian English, for instance swadeshi English or Babu Angrezi. The poet is also aware about the common mistake of Indian people in common English usage. How Indian people are habituated to speak in present progressive tense frequently. Myth making nature is an essential aspect of the Indian psyche and it is better described in the select poems of Ezekiel.*

*In this paper I have used the word image for reflection of Indianness. As peace and non-violence are essential ethos of Indian value system, Ezekiel somehow touched upon this area which also manifests his love towards India. So this study of peace and non-violence in Ezekiel's poems, in Indian context, would also come under my research area. With the purpose of emphasizing Indianness, he chooses to depict some common Indian scenes. Conceptually Ezekiel is a writer who does not glorify the image of India but wants improvement in the existing condition to bring the "Ram Rajya" in the Nation; rather he is very hopeful about the India. He prefers to live in India. It also shows his genuine love for India.*

**Key Words:** Nissim Ezekiel, Indianness, Babu Angrezi, Indian English, Love for India.

Indian English literature, essentially, is a significant product of Indian culture and ethos on one hand and western language especially English on the other hand. The Britishers who came to India in 17th century, brought their culture and religion with them. These two social forces shook the very foundation of Indian culture and exercised a deep influence on Indian

literature as well. As a result Indian literature witnesses a great impact of foreign cult in itself. Vilas Sarang<sup>1</sup>, prominent personality, claims that the pre-independence writings were very limited in output because the Indian English poets were too derivative and tried to be "English" poets instead of letting the Indianness to take care of it. Before Ezekiel and After Ezekiel there are many poets and writers but they are quite philosophical of Vedic or they cannot reach up to the mass of common people. For instance Swami Vivekananda, Tagor, Naidu etc. In such hour of need to depict the Indianness or Indian sensibility, Nissim Ezekiel is one of the last notable poets of the last 50s and 60s, who grapples towards a new poetry that reveals the genuine Indian temperament, Indian sensibility that can be considered as the true Indianness as Prof. V.K. Gokak<sup>2</sup> defines Indianness as-

"A composite awareness in the matter  
of race, Milieu, language and religion"

Considering this quote if we examine Ezekiel's poetry, he is a true Indian Poet by all means. Nissim Ezekiel is among the writers, though very few in numbers, who are Indian by both ideologically and linguistically. He does not glorify the Indian custom and culture, instead he sees it as it is. Even he is acutely and painfully conscious of the deficiencies and defects of the Indian people. In an autobiographical poem 'Background Casually' he himself being Jew-a minority in India depicts the trouble and traumas that he underwent throughout his life. He ridicules the caste barriers that make people confine in to the narrow domestic wall of caste consciousness that prevents the world from being a global prospective. Nissim Ezekiel writes;

"I am not a Hindu and my background  
Makes me a natural outsider"

But even in such 'unwelcomed' condition he prefers to live in India. It shows genuine love for India. In the next lines poet expresses-

"I have made my commitments now  
This is one; to say where I am,  
...My backward place is where I am"

By depicting the class consciousness Ezekiel criticizes it and ultimately being an Indian, Ezekiel advocates the importance of "Vasudev kutumbkam" or what we call 'Sera dharma sambhav'. Here, the poet considers India to be his own country and using the personal pronoun 'I' the poet indicates his existence and relates it with the existence of India and thus becomes the part of it.

"the Indian landscape sears my eyes.  
I have become a part of it"

In order to state his Indianness, he chooses to portray some familiar Indian scene. In the poem 'In India', he portrays the squalor, heat and ugliness of an Indian Metropolis. "The barbaric city sick with slums"-

"Always in the sun's eye,  
here among the beggars,  
Hawkers, pavement sleepers,  
Hutment dwellers, slums etc"

He has always seen India as a deep rooted person of India. Even when Ezekiel tries to portray the Indian milieu somatically. Ezekiel tries to depict the suffering of flood affected people in some part of Bihar. Ezekiel's Indianness can be seen from the way he has described the flood in Bihar. Here the matter is rare or occasional but the treatment is universal in its evocative of the pangs of human suffering. In the following lines, Ezekiel is able to bring to mind a dark picture of the Indian poverty:

"the villagers ran to them

they slapped their bellies  
and whined;  
“I have not eaten for three days”  
“my husband has been washed away”  
“my parents have abandoned me,”  
“my son is dying,”  
“I cannot find my daughter.””

Ezekiel’s India is not the country of mind like Narayan’s *Malgudi* or Hardy’s *Wessex* but the country outside the mind. Ezekiel’s attempt is to use the typical Indian thought process. The speaker in the poem is an average Indian, peace loving, patriotic and sentimental. Here the poet stands for the spokesman of Mahatma Gandhi and advocates the necessity of peace and non-violence, in his Naivety. The poet asks,

“I am standing for peace and non-violence.  
Why world is fighting and fighting  
Why all people of world  
Are not following Mahatma Gandhi,  
I am simply not understand”

Nissim Ezekiel fully allows the Indian beliefs, superstitions, and sentiments to be shaped in his some of the poems. In India society there is a belief that if a crow speaks near one’s house, it is an indication of someone’s arrival and the poet depicts this phenomenon Quite nicely. But suddenly turns his mood to the ordinariness of the metro life as he says “The ordinariness of most events”.

“Night of the scorpion”, a simple narrative poem in which the superstitious Beliefs have been posited against the rational in an utterly neutral tone. The poem is an anecdotal depiction of Indian thinking and becomes the epitome of Nissim Ezekiel’s use of poetry to reflect the true Indianness. Myth making nature is an essential aspect of the Indian psyche and it is to be found in rural background. The poem is centered round a crisis of the scorpion bits of which the poet’s mother is victimized. typical villagers go in flocks to the poet’s house to suggest whatever remedies they can .as it is the typical nature of Indian peasants they regard it with the theory of previous birth while some with theory of Karma.

“may he still, they said.  
May the sins of your previous birth  
Be burned away, they said,  
May your suffering decrease,  
The misfortune of your next birth, they said”

It is in this way that Ezekiel reflects the Indian way of thinking .the motherly love has received considerable notice in Indian literature. Mother’s affection for her children gives her relaxation as scorpion picks on her and spares her children.

“my mother only said;  
Thank God the scorpion picked on me and spared my children.”

Even the expression like “thank God” is typically Indian. We are accustomed to give credit or blame of good or bad things to the God. So that too is typically Indian habit. Kirpil Singh<sup>3</sup> points out about the poem;

“it is a brilliant narrative poem which recalls a typically Indian situation –the mother’s stinging by a scorpion, and the gathering of a large group of sympathizing peasants. The responds of several persons, superstitious and rational Have been juxtaposed .and the mother’s response at the end ... is characteristically Indian. it reveals the self sacrificing love of the mother for her children”

In poems like “very Indian in Indian English”, “the railway clerk” and “goodbye party for Miss Pushpa T.S.” Ezekiel has experimented with the use of typical Indian English. The poems reveals the common Indian mistakes of using present progressive tense in place of the simple present. The suffix, ‘-ing’ is used in a wrong manner unnecessarily; this is very typical for Indian users of English. It also brings out the random pour of Indian speech. Clever use of Indian English as a means to explore the Indian mind and sensibility. The speech oddities in the poem are noteworthy. The speaker uses several variants which are glaring mistakes in Standard English usage. For instance,

“we are meeting” for “we have met”  
“I am not remembering” for “I don’t remember”  
“My wife is always asking for money.  
Money, money, where to get money? ”

Such kind of expression and relationship are only possible in India, thus it shows the Indian situation very clearly and bears the quality of Indianness. In the expression “that was long time ago’ -time is superfluous, as ‘also’ is superfluous in “with men also and ladies also” in the latter expression is also typically Indian. The weakness of the common Indian users of English has been depicted by the poet in some of his other poems namely “the Railway clerk”. Being a believer and follower of ‘Babu Angrezi’ the poet simply amuse the reader by the use of typical use of latter. Reader also finds them true to themselves and feels as if they are the person depicted in the poem. The use of typical Indian words like-

“one goonda fellow”  
“Indiraben”  
“a glass of lassi”  
“pan”  
“burkha”

So by using such words the poet remains successful in creating the very Indian atmosphere and sensibility, even through the foreign language, and creates Indian feeling in his speech pattern. Chetan Karnani points out,

“He is a firm believer in national integration and Ram Rajya. It is to the credit of Ezekiel that in one poem, he has reflected not only what many Indians think but also the way they think in English”

“how one goonda fellow\throw stone on Inderabehn” and “Pakistan behaving like this\China behaves like that” is characteristically Indian, captured in a typical Indian manner and tone. The poet has honestly depicted the sincere picture of India as it is with her culture, People, system, belief, myth etc. the poet never tries to super glorify the condition of India .even he is aware and conscious about the condition. As a matter of fact Ezekiel’s Indian ness lies in His earnest and sincere endeavor to bring about some improvement in the condition of people’s Life socially and morally. His overtone is always a moral which makes the poet a preacher. Nissim Ezekiel transcended all borders and spoke the voice of love and sanity .So in a way Ezekiel is a reformer who wants reformation through spirituality essential ethos of Indian value system like peace and nonviolence. Aurobindo Ghosh also claims, “Spirituality is the key factor of India.”

In the Poem ‘the Patriot’ he spreads the importance of peace and non-violence. In the poem “Background casually’ the poet hinges the importance of equality and brotherhood. The poet Hopes ideal India in his poems but he never allows dreamy concepts of ideal India to enter in the Poems .he thinks of the improvement in to the present condition. He wants to bring “Ram Rajya” Back. In the poem, ‘the patriot’ the poet.

“Gujaratis, Maharashtrians, Hindiwallahs  
All brothers  
Though some are having funny habits.  
Still, you tolerate me

I tolerate you,  
One day Ram Rajya is surely coming.”

So it is in this way that Nissim Ezekiel is a true Indian poet in sense and diction both. According to Chetan Karnani<sup>4</sup>,

“Nissim Ezekiel has been consciously Indian in his sensibility. he has not only tried to describe Indian culture but he has made good use of ‘babu Angrei”

Nissim Ezekiel is among the writers, though very few in numbers, who are Indian by both ideologically and linguistically. That is why Dr.M.S.Thirunalai writes in Language in Indian that Nissim Ezekiel will be remembered “for the clever use of Indian English as a means to explore the Indian mind and sensibility”. In nut shell Nissim Ezekiel has made a sincere and honest attempt to establish Indian culture, civilization and spirituality at her best realistic image. Along with Dom Moraes, Kamala Das, A.K.Ramanujan, P.Lal, Nissim Ezekiel has blazed the new trail in modern Indian poetry in English and made it Indian first and last. By using Indian subject matter and diction Ezekiel remains successful in creating Indian set-up. And through poetry Ezekiel has revealed his increased awareness of the Indian social milieu and that is why Ezekiel is read and seen as a very Indian poet in Indian English.

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