

THE JOURNEY OF A BYSTANDER FROM KNOWN TO THE UNKNOWN: AN INSIGHT INTO THE POEMS OF NISSIM EZEKIEL

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ABSTRACT

Nissim Ezekiel, a poet of Bene Israel origin, has been famous for his materialistic descriptions and understanding of the temporal and ethereal aspects of the world. He explores the world and discerns his concerns for the temporary facets of life and gradually moves to the unknown realm of the philosophy and spirituality. Unlike most other poets and philosophers who believe in one extreme either materialism or spiritualism, Ezekiel displays his faith in various aspects of life and treats spiritual aspect as one of the aspects of the world helping a man find his identity. This paper is an attempt to display the same strain of Ezekiel's beliefs. Several examples from his poems have been selected to throw light on the same.

The Journey of a bystander from known to the unknown: An insight into the poems of Nissim Ezekiel

The quest of Nissim Ezekiel, a Bene Israel poet of Indian writing in English, to seek the identity of self and God is an amalgamation of the core philosophies of various religions. As a spiritualist and philosopher, Ezekiel finds it difficult to negate the matter reality of the materialistic world as according to him the torments and tortures of the ethereal world only can stimulate a human mind to contemplate the anguishes and pleasures of the world and due to disharmony in these aspects, a human mind tends to seek for the abode of God for everlasting pleasure and truth of the life. One of the most famous critics, Chako (1999) says "Nissim Ezekiel is basically a quester, creating and recreating. In his poetry, his own ambiguous, unsatisfied, questing self." Ezekiel seems to be delving deep into the temptations of the world which reflects his inclination of knowing all ins and outs of each known object which he does to understand the trivialities of life rather than finding pleasures of this world as an ordinary human. In that sense he is a true spiritualist as described in Hindu Vedic philosophy of life which discerns man to transcend and convert into a sanyasi towards the last phase of his life. As according to John Thieme (2005), "His work is centrally concerned with perception and his poetic persona is both that of an observer who regards his social world and his own behaviour with a degree of amused detachment, and that of a complete insider."

Getting into known to delve deep into the unknown is a peculiar trait of his poetry. In this aspect he resembles an Indian poet, though born in a Jewish family, he is an Indian poet writing in English language. He has established himself as a poet committed to Indian values, culture, philosophies and religious beliefs (Pramila, 2015). Like an ordinary man, he seems to be enjoying the benefits of earthly objects. It is in his early phase where his poems manifest materialism and in his later phase he reflects the true philosophy of life in his poems and discerns the ways to move to the abode of God. In the words of Rehman, A. (1981), "Nissim Ezekiel's poetic pilgrimage may precisely be interpreted as a pilgrimage from sex to super consciousness." Like most of the spiritualists who agree generally on the basic ideals of spirituality, but they are free to reject any of them according to his own lights. Ezekiel shows a deeper religious-philosophical awareness of the world, he can be considered a mediocre in a sense that he is neither a saint negating sensual pleasures nor a yogi wandering in the thick forest to obtain a beam of light. He accepts that he is very categorical and if he writes a religious poem, the next poem is most likely to be secular, little sceptical. He is a staunch realist and thorough spiritualist. His poems show his persona as a person who gives importance to the true essence of life, those peculiar traits of human life and existence which is the base of all religious beliefs. He uttered about a common source, a common experience and a common destiny which is the underlying reality of spiritualism.

Human form or body is our interface to connect us with the environment around us. Ezekiel believes ardently in the concept of 'Ethereal double' alike so many other spiritualists, one aspect of our body is physical and the other one is spiritual. Each cell of this physical body is a carrier of physical sensation which acts as a bridge between the physical being and the more subtle aspect of our being, 'the vital body.' According to the believers of this genre of philosophy, these two aspects of the body can be separated temporarily only, both these bodies are connected with a thread which breaks eventually and the vital body submerges into the unknown when death ensues. Ezekiel's poems show the same shift from physical body to the vital body. In 'Time to Change', his earliest collection of poems, he starts with his concentration and faith on mundane relations, torments and ailments of the world which are integral part of human life as human beings are part and parcel of these materialistic aspects of the world. The perturbed state of human mind is not described in this collection rather he discerns with a confirmation that requirements of man of God are very earthly:

'To own a singing voice and a talking voice,
A bit of land, a woman and a child or two,
Accommodated to their needs and changing moods
And patiently to build a life with these

Practicing a singing and a talking voice
Is all the creed a man of God requires.'

Source: Ezekiel, N., Collected Poems,4.

In the same poem later, he describes how God walks occasionally on alien lands and according to him God does this in order to know the lives and dreams of men. God also shows His deep affection for the human beings which emerge from His contrite heart. Michael German has rightly put about Ezekiel, 'Poet's religion sympathetically assumes a double aspect-the introspective-contemplative and outward active.' (Michael German, 1976). He ponders into the realities of life as an observer, as someone who probes into the deeper realities as an inquisitive man who is scrutinizing life and its various aspects to know the actual realities of this world to move into the unknown territory of religion, philosophy and spirituality. Ezekiel's poems depict the quibbles and trivialities of life in wonderful manner. His overindulgence is clearly visible but he appears as a Utopian. In his poem 'A poem of dedication', he tried to formulate his manifesto for the days to follow. His thoughtful opinion is that there is time for everything:

'Both poetry and living illustrate
Each season brings its own peculiar fruits,
Ultimate to act, a time to contemplate.'

Source: Ezekiel, N., Collected Poems,39.

The poet doesn't yearn for religious renunciation or superhuman powers:

I don't 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 the common hour.'

Source: Ezekiel, N., Collected Poems,40.

The most common experiences of the earthly world like love, romance, marriage, sex and conjugal bliss find a prominent place in his poems. 'And God revealed' is a poem written in praise of love.

We were not made for love alone, my love,
Although our flesh and bones would have it so,
A thousand small intricacies of brain
Hold my blood streams captive, which will not flow
Freely to serve the ends of love, until
They know the various ways of men,'

Source: Ezekiel, N., Collected Poems,25.

Description of physical love intensifies in one of his poems, 'Delighted by love', where the desires of lovers doesn't abstain here and they long to get an unknown world:

Delighted by love, these stripped
Bodies dared the Everest,
By rituals holy in the temple
Where life creates and is created,
All kinships here are consummated,
By thrust of lust
When all that burns in breasts or lips is sated.'

Source: Ezekiel, N., Collected Poems, 82.

The description of love in his poem is more akin to that of an earthly love wherein physical pleasures are more important; his love is not platonic like most metaphysical poets. His poems vividly describe his belief in the world and its various aspects, a close look of his poems astonishes his readers as the next minute after such deep description he shows his inclination in the abode of God and related philosophies, in this aspect he is really unique and resembles the great mystics like T.S Eliot whose Waste Land discerns matter reality by throwing light on physical aspects of love in the typist episode while his three Da, Da, Da move us to the shelter of the true essence of life by having faith in compassion, charity and self-control. Ezekiel's poems reflect on physical, mental, and emotional body. When physical body sleep emotional and mental bodies are awake to give way to the philosophies of this world. The emotional body is concentrated within the limits of the physical circumference which makes the emotional form recognizable. The mental and emotional bodies act as vehicles for consciousness. Mental body increases with the use of thought power and prolonged thinking acts as a cause for permanent increase for mental body. As a man of intellect and strong will power, Ezekiel gives value to logics and reasoning even in his journey of life and poetic world by shifting gradually from the materialistic and temporal world to the abode of God. Along with his strong viewpoints on personality, he also has staunch faith in Karma. He is greatly influenced by Hindu mythology especially the ideas promulgated by Lord Krishna in Mahabharata. Chance doesn't play a vital role in this universe for number of things to happen, it is rather Karma according to him which governs natural law.

Ezekiel's strong reasoning power makes the world futile for him, everything which he depicted in his earlier poems seem to be monotonous for him. His mind tantamount to a boiling caldron which caused great frustration and mental fatigue. The tension is apparent in the lines from, 'On meeting a Pedant:'

‘Words, looks, gestures, everything betrays,
The unique unquiet mind, the emptiness within.’

Source: Ezekiel, N., Collected Poems,8.

His nature to probe into life and its various aspects, to observe things minutely paved him a different direction. He realized that there is dearth of honest and true feelings, the very essence of life so he started searching for the truth. His poem ‘the Double Horror’ starts with such a cry:

‘I am corrupted by the world. Continually
Reduced to something less than human by the crowd
Newspapers, cinemas, radio features, speeches
Demanding peach by men with grim warlike faces.’

Source: Ezekiel, N., Collected Poems,7.

In the same poem later, he clearly exhibits his agony and grief over his directionless life for overinvolvement into the mundane trivialities of life:

‘The jungle growth of what so obviously intends
To suck life from life, leaving you and me corrupted.’

Source: Ezekiel, N., Collected Poems,7.

Ezekiel’s perturbed self is reflected in so many of his poems, his predicament and confused self raises questions on human existence, human commitment:

‘Tell us: Are you self possessed?
Self -propelled upon a single track.’

Source: Ezekiel, N., Collected Poems, 16.

The process of exploring life and its several facets forces him to move to self-exploration. Ezekiel appears to be a great thinker and a believer of moral philosophies who renders emphasis on the prominence of thought. His understanding of life is not limited which is due to his being a voracious reader also this same notion of his poems places him as a unique poet of his genre.

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