

# Modernist Aesthetics and Existential Anxiety in Nissim Ezekiel's Poetic Oeuvre

Samapti Banerjee

University of Burdwan, Department of English, Burdwan. West Bengal

**Abstract-** Nissim Ezekiel is the pioneering figure of post-colonial Indian poetry. He is a versatile genius. He works as an editor, dramatist, critic of art and Literature etc. For his enormous contribution in Literature he is awarded both the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1983 and Padma Shri award in the year 1988. "Latter-Day Psalms", is the poetry collection for which he is awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award and received the prestigious prize from G. K. Gokak. He belongs to the Bene Israel Jewish family. He comes from an educated and erudite family. His father is the professor of Botany of Wilson College and his mother is the Principal of her school. Nissim Ezekiel has studied English from Wilson College, Bombay and Philosophy from London. He is brought up with embracing the Maharastrian tradition and culture and has accepted the Marathi language wholeheartedly. He has served as the Head of the Department of English in Bombay University and as a guest faculty and visiting Professor in the Leeds University. Nissim Ezekiel is the prominently post-colonial Indian English poet. Not only the Indian culture but also his family tradition has impacted his writings. Nissim Ezekiel bridges between Romanticism and Modernism in Indian English poetry.

**Key Words:** Jewish, modernism, alienation, colloquial, poetry, Indian, English, relationship, society, existential crisis.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Methodology: The study follows close reading of all the texts. The textual, analytical and interpretative study helps in the deeper understanding of the poetry of the celebrated Indian English poet Nissim Ezekiel. The theoretical approaches Existential, Modernism, Psychoanalytic theory, New Criticism, Ecocriticism, Postcolonialism, Marxism and New Historicism help in the deeper analysis of the topic. The secondary sources like critical essays and scholarly writings on the World Wars add more enrichment and profundity of this research work.

## II. NISSIM EZEKIEL: UNIQUE WRITING STYLE

- He uses simple, direct, and lucid language.
- Satire often takes place in his poetry.
- Colloquial language is used in his poetry.

- Modern life, marriage and modern relationships come within his writing oeuvre.
- There is a perfect blend of tight structure and free verse, rhyme, meter and spontaneous natural rhythm in his poetry.
- Due to his Bene Israel Jewish origin he feels alienated in India although he possesses a profound longing for Bombay. So both the themes of alienation and connection are present there in his writing oeuvre.
- His writing expresses the everyday modern and mundane reality.
- He rejects romanticism.
- The complexities of modern relations are vividly portrayed in his writing.
- His writing shows the tension between faith and real life situation.

His notable poetic collections are A Time to Change (1952), Sixty Poems (1953), The Third (1959), The Unfinished Man (1960), The Exact Name (1965) and Latter-Day Psalms (1982) the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1983.

### III. MAJOR POEMS OF NISSIM EZEKIEL

- "Night of the Scorpion" (1965): The poem is published in the anthology The Exact Name. The poem is vivid portrayal of rural India. In this poem the mother is unfortunately stung by a scorpion in the night. The reactions are varied. There is a conflict between rationalism and superstition. The ambience is rainy, chaotic and worried. While the neighbors are assuming that the scorpion sting has reduced the baggage of sins of her previous and next birth and have tried their utmost to kill the scorpion which has already escaped from the room. They are completely superstitious fellows. The father is a 'sceptic, rationalist', who experiments with several herbs and powder, mixture and paraffin to calm down the pain of her mother. Lastly after ten long hours, the mother gets relieved and shows gratitude to God for protecting the children from this sharp pain of the scorpion sting and choosing herself instead. The poem shows the unconditional love of the mother.

I remember the night my mother  
was stung by a scorpion. Ten hours  
of steady rain had driven him  
to crawl beneath a sack of rice.

Parting with his poison - flash  
of diabolic tail in the dark room -  
he risked the rain again.

- "Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher" (1965): This poem also published in The Exact Name in 1965. The poet here draws a comparison between the poet, the lover and the birdwatcher. All the three persons need tremendous patience, skill and observation power to achieve the desired success in their respective pursuits. All these actions need patience, focus and keen observation. These actions require sharpest focus and right time to

execute the right action. The poet should wait for the right word, just as the lover waits for his beloved and the birdwatcher for its desired bird. The poet uses vivid and simple metaphor for expressing his thought. 'Timid wing' suggests the imaginary movement and 'darkness at the core' refers to the insightful thinking.

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.

- "The Professor" (1977): This is a dramatic monologue of a retired Professor. The professor, Professor Sheth here expresses his achievements and experience and there is the silent presence of a listener or an interlocutor. Here the listener is a student. The professor is giving detail descriptions of his children and their success; his daughters and their happy married lives, his eleven grand children; his good state of health etc. He appreciates the family planning system of modern days to control population. The tone of the poem is slightly ironic and melancholic.

That is good. These are days of family planning.  
I am not against. We have to change with times.  
Whole world is changing. In India also  
We are keeping up. Our progress is progressing.  
Old values are going, new values are coming.  
Everything is happening with leaps and bounds.  
I am going out rarely, now and then  
Only, this is price of old age  
But my health is O.K. Usual aches and pains.  
No diabetes, no blood pressure, no heart attack.  
This is because of sound habits in youth.  
How is your health keeping?  
Nicely? I am happy for that.

- "Urban" (1960): This poem is an extract from the anthology The Unfinished Man. The poem is

completely focused on the mundane modern existence. The life is monotonous and chaotic. The modern life is fragmented. The urban life is devoid of the serene natural beauty which exists far away. The poem shows the urban life of Bombay. It depicts the modern repetitive life style like the life of modern Sisyphus who is trapped in a single monotonous work and entangled in the labyrinthine chain and is carrying on working in defiant pride.

The hills are always far away.  
He knows the broken roads, and moves  
In circles tracked within his head.  
Before he wakes and has his say,  
The river which he claims he loves  
Is dry, and all the winds lie dead.

At dawn he never sees the skies  
Which, silently, are born again.  
Nor feels the shadows of the night  
Recline their fingers on his eyes.  
He welcomes neither sun nor rain.  
His landscape has no depth or height.  
The poet is a resident of Bombay. Although he feels alienated in his city due to his Jewish origin but is unable to separate him from the din and bustle of the city. The city life is inseparable from their existence.

- "The Patriot" (1977): The poem is written in flawed Indian English language. This poem exposes the hypocritical attitude of the modern day self-proclaimed patriot who speaks highly about Gandhian Non-violence but himself follows the British traditions blindly and utilizing the foreign things like the news paper and clothes unhesitatingly.

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)

- The Unfinished Man (1959)-This is the poetic collection of Nissim Ezekiel. The anthology deals with the modern urban existence of people. The modern life is chaotic, fragmented and is monotonously engaged in repetitive action without muck progression. The poet here meditates on his self evaluation to cope up with the situation. This collection vividly portrays the complex modern existence in the urban ambience of Bombay.
- A Morning Walk- In this poem the modern civilization, the decaying social structure, the poet's alienated existence in the sick city "Barbaric city sick with slums" Bombay is vividly portrayed. The poem is published in his poetry collection, The Unfinished Man (1960). The poem compares the lush side of rural natural beauty with the dry and decayed urban life "Deprived of seasons". The disillusioned existence of modern man is demonstrated evidently. The poet yearns for the natural connection but 'The hills are always far away'.
- "The Railway Clerk"- This poem is a vibrant picture of middle class railway worker. Although he is struggling for money, he has to experience economical crisis and unsatisfied family life due to lack of finance. Despite working sincerely the monotonous routine wise work he is not getting peace and satisfaction. This poem exposes the reality of modern middle class family.
- "Enterprise" (1965): This poem shows the disenchantment of a group of pilgrim through the use of allegory. The excitement of the journey has been turned into disgust and meaninglessness due to the ordeal and struggle during the journey. The people become frustrated and disinterested due to the purposelessness of religious journey.

#### IV. THEORETICAL APPROACHES

- Modernism- The alienated, disenchanted, chaotic and fragmented human existence is shown in the texts.
- Existentialism: Existential crisis and lack of individual identity are the demonstrated in the poems.
- New Historicism: The texts help to analyze the contemporary context in a better way.
- Marxism: Capitalism, class struggle, ideology are the recurrent themes of these literary texts. The poems help to comprehend the economic structure of society and financial struggle of some people.
- Psychoanalytic Theory: Alienation, depression, loneliness, moral unrest, anxiety these are some of the characteristic traits of the modern people.
- Postcolonial Theory- Colonialism and its consequences are shown in the poems and literary works.
- New Criticism: The poems demand thorough reading in between the lines for the better comprehension of the topics.
- Ecocriticism- The sickly and ecological degradation of Bombay is shown in the poems. The poet yearns to go to the lush side of nature in rural area.

#### V. CONCLUSION

Nissim Ezekiel is a prominent Indian English writer. He helps in bringing modernism in Indian poetry replacing the dominant romanticism. His Jewish origin and Indian life have provided a new dimension in Indian English Literature. Due to his enormous contribution in poetry he is regarded as the Father or Pioneer of Indian English Poetry. His works vividly portray the lifestyles, moral condition of contemporary Indian society.

#### REFERENCES

1. Ezekiel, Nissim. *A Time to Change*. Fortune Press, 1952.
2. Ezekiel, Nissim. *Sixty Poems*. Fortune Press, 1953.
3. Ezekiel, Nissim. *The Third*. Oxford University Press, 1959.
4. Ezekiel, Nissim. *The Unfinished Man*. Oxford University Press, 1960.
5. Ezekiel, Nissim. *The Exact Name*. Oxford University Press, 1965.
6. Ezekiel, Nissim. *Hymns in Darkness*. Oxford University Press, 1976.
7. Ezekiel, Nissim. *Latter-Day Psalms*. Oxford University Press, 1982.
8. Ezekiel, Nissim. *Collected Poems 1952–1988*. Oxford University Press, 1989.
9. King, Bruce. *Modern Indian Poetry in English*. Oxford University Press, 1987.
10. Parthasarathy, R., editor. *Ten Twentieth-Century Indian Poets*. Oxford University Press, 1976.
11. Mehrotra, Arvind Krishna, editor. *The Oxford India Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets*. Oxford University Press, 1992.
12. Ramamurti, K. S. *Nissim Ezekiel*. Arnold-Heinemann, 1976.
13. Sharma, R. S. "Urban Sensibility in Nissim Ezekiel's Poetry." *Indian Literature*, vol. XX, no. 3, 1977, pp. XX–XX.
14. Rao, K. Venkata. *The Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel: A Critical Study*. Prestige Books, 1993.
15. T. S. Eliot. *The Sacred Wood*. 1920.
16. Cleanth Brooks. *The Well Wrought Urn*. Harcourt, 1947.
17. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. *The Communist Manifesto*. 1848.
18. Terry Eagleton. *Marxism and Literary Criticism*. Routledge, 1976.
19. Edward Said. *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books, 1978.
20. Homi K. Bhabha. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.
21. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 1988.
22. Sigmund Freud. *The Interpretation of Dreams*. 1900.
23. Carl Jung. *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. Princeton UP, 1968.
24. Simone de Beauvoir. *The Second Sex*. Vintage, 1974.
25. Elaine Showalter. *A Literature of Their Own*. Princeton UP, 1977.