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## Cross Cultural Fertilization - The Influence of Modernism on Indian Poetry in English

Sanjit Mishra, Ph.D. and Nagendra Kumar, Ph.D.

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### Emergence of New Literature in Post-colonial Era – In Search of New Idiom

Towards the end of Second World War and the decline of colonialism in Afro-Asian countries, there was an upsurge of new literature in English in the erstwhile British colonies of the world. These new literatures were typically characterized by the postcolonial tenets.

In the Indian context, it is important to note that the new poets have always been desperate in their search for an idiom which could be distinctly designated as Indian. However, a close study of these poets reveals that their poetry was greatly inspired by the Western poets. In fact, this cross-cultural fertilisation was fruitful in so many ways.

The present paper intends to highlight these western influences on the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel and Jayant Mahapatra, the two representatives of Modern Indian Poetry in English.

### The Emergence of Modern Poetry in England

The modernistic poetry in England was one such influence on the writing of these poets which needs to be discussed here. On account of rising industrialisation, the entire Europe was under the grip of urbanisation and the attendant miseries of such progress were very obvious in different forms. The growing materialism left no room for human values necessary for a peaceful existence of humanity which ultimately pushed the entire world towards the two Great World Wars causing unprecedented loss of life. Apart from this, the upcoming scientific and technological developments made the life still more complex. The Existentialist thinkers were constrained to declare the meaninglessness of life. G S Fraser defines modernism as “an imaginative awareness of the stress of the social change” (Fraser 1970).

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To quote R J Quinones (1985):

As a literary movement and broad cultural force, Modernism has made its mark and has its impact. It has entered into history and needs now to be discussed with the same comprehensive scope and yet with the same historical imagination that we might muster in discussing the Renaissance or Romanticism. Certainly the time is long past when distinguished literary historian (who here shall be nameless) could refer to the use of the term 'modernism' as pretentious. Modernism has become, in that celebrated Modernist Phrase, a 'climate of opinion', and now permeates the everyday life and common patois of time, it being with us when we knew it not.

### **Modernism in India**

Modernism as a literary movement and cultural force came to India only after the Indian Independence much after it brought a change the west and perhaps paved the way for post-modernism (Das 1992).

While discarding the poetry of earlier generation of poets like Aurobindo and Sarojini Naidu for their vague poeticism and ideals, P. Lal observes that that poetry must deal in concrete terms with concrete experience. The experience may be intellectual or emotional or historical-tragical-pastoral-comical, but it must be precise and lucidly and tangibly expressed. Lal further adds that it is better to suggest a sky by referring to a circling eagle in it than to say simply 'the wide and open sky'. (Amanuddin 1981)

### **Modernistic Sensibility in Select Poets in India**

The typical Modernistic sensibility gets a vivid reflection in the poetry of T S Eliot, W B Yeats, Ezra Pound W. H. Auden and Philip Larkin, among others. However, the present paper attempts to show the influence these poets on the Indian poets like Ezekiel and Mahapatra.

Talking about the various influences, Ezekiel admits that some of his early poetry was influenced by Rilke. However, after finding himself unable to assimilate this influence, he eventually discarded it. Ezekiel does not hesitate in accepting that he had imitated Eliot, Pound, Yeats and others, albeit partially, and feels that these random and temporary influences had often muffled and confused his essential voice. In an interview with Suresh Kohli, Ezekiel shares his view that these influences were not always for the better, rather they caused a weakness of his verse, ultimately leading the poet to stop being swayed by the English Modernists. To quote him, "I was not influenced by Yeats after *The Unfinished Man*, nor by Eliot and Pound after *Sixty Poems....*" (Kohli 1972)

### **The Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel**

Ezekiel's first two volumes *A Time To Change* and *Sixty Poems* bear a strong imprint on Ezekiel of Rilke's mind. His poems like "Speech and Silence" and "Prayer I" appear to be written under Rilke's influence. The following lines bear testimony to this view:

If I could pray, the gist of my  
Demanding would be simply this:  
Quietitude. The ordered mind.  
Erasure of the inner lie.  
And only love in every kiss.

("Prayer I", *COLLECTED POEMS*, p.54)

Chetan Karnani has noted this fact: "His early prayer was for quietitude. He wanted to seek the life of solitude and meditation. This ideal of Rilke is strongly expressed in these poems" (Karnani 1974). Ezekiel, however, denies having imbibed anything from Rilke straightway. He never intended to be a mere imitator:

If someone were to say, "Ah, but in these poems in an early book there are echoes of Rilke and Eliot," I would agree. This does not mean that I produced a whole poem which is nothing but Rilke. If there were some poems like that, I don't think, I published them (*Selected Prose*, p. 171).

### **Yeats' Influence**

W.B. Yeats' most pronounced influence is seen in Ezekiel's early poetry, which has derived immensely from the Irish poet's imagery and symbols. It was under Yeats' influence that Ezekiel identified parameters to discover his self at various stages of its development.

In his well known statement the Irish poet has said of his poetry : It is myself that I remake" and Ezekiel, in his "Foreword" to *Sixty Poems* , wrote:

There is in each (poem) a line or phrase, an idea or image, which helps me to maintain some sort of continuity in my life." (Quoted in Karnani 1974)

The Yeatsian impact is traceable in *Sixty Poems* where several images used by him remind the reader of Yeats' imagery. In "The Stone", the image seems to have been borrowed from Yeats' "Easter 1916" – "The stone is in the midst of all." In Yeats' poem stone is the symbol of fixity that defies change. The image of the stone represents obsession of the Irish revolutionaries with the liberation of their country, which in the process had rendered them heartless and inflexible. A parallel use of this image occurs in Ezekiel's poem:

I have learnt to love the texture of a stone,  
Rough or smooth but all unyielding stone,  
Which plays no facile game of outward show,  
And holds itself together as a bone;  
(*COLLECTED POEMS* , p.40)

The title of his fourth volume, *The Unfinished Man* is also taken from Yeats' poem "A Dialogue with Self and Soul":

The ignominy of boyhood; the distress  
Of boyhood changing into man;  
The unfinished man and his pain  
Brought face to face with his own clumsiness...  
(*COLLECTED POEMS* p. 115)

Ezekiel believed in Yeats' dictum that poets, like women, "must labour to be beautiful," and the poem "Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher" (*COLLECTED POEMS*, p. 135) is a suitable case in point where the poet says "The best poets wait for words" like an ornithologist sitting in silence by the flowing river or like a lover waiting for his beloved till she "no longer waits but risks surrendering." Ezekiel, like Yeats, has managed to create his own Lake Isle of Innisfree:

He dreams of morning walks alone/  
And floating on a wave of sand"  
("Urban", *Collected Poems*, 117). The only difference between them lies in Ezekiel's commitment to put up with "kindred clamour close at hand" instead of Yeats' "I shall arise, and go now, go to Innisfree."

### **Impact of T. S. Eliot**

T. S. Eliot's impact on the twentieth century poets has been so pervasive that no poet of substance could afford to remain uninfluenced by him. In his Obituary on Eliot, Ezekiel refers to this phenomenon:

Eliot's poetry from 1917 to 1943 is like the Himalayan mountains, with the Everest of *The Waste Land* several but inaccessible peaks, a score or so of attractive but treacherous ranges (*A Song For Simeon*, *Marina* et al.) and a miscellany of small, steep hills obscured in the mist. *The Quartets* form a spacious, high plateau among the clouds. The air is rarefied but gracing, the winds are strong and chilly. The temptation to remain in this mountain-scape and to accept it as the only sovereign territory of poetry was irresistible to several generations of readers. (Ezekiel, 1989).

Repudiating adverse comments on *The Waste Land* about its haphazard structural pattern, Ezekiel appreciates the poem and observes that despite its disorganisation, it expresses a 'unity of a personality' which finally overcomes its disorganisation, once the requisite erudition is acquired by the reader to grasp that unity.

### **Not a Blind Imitator**

It should, however, not create the impression that Ezekiel is a blind imitator of Eliot because he also disagrees with him at times. In the same Obituary (as quoted above), he finds it painful to compare Eliot's liberating conception of the literary heritage with his constricting dogmas of the human heritage as a whole. Ezekiel further feels that the theory of how individual talent ought ideally to operate, and the vision of the existing monuments modified

by the introduction of a really new work of art among them, is so abstract and metaphysical that it adds little to our appreciation of specific masterpieces.

### **On Dealing with Human Loneliness**

Eliot approaches the problem of human degeneration in *The Waste Land* in a typically Christian way—"I had not thought death had undone so many." Though not a religious poet, Ezekiel shares Eliot's diagnosis of human loneliness caused by a variety of factors.

In poems like "Urban", "Island" and "A Morning Walk", Ezekiel vehemently denigrates selfish interests and material concerns. The denizens of Ezekiel's 'unreal city' of Bombay are no better than their counterparts in Baudelaire's Paris or Eliot's London in that they are simple human ghosts with nothing positive in life.

Ezekiel's hybrid colonial city epitomizes all the tensions and corruptions which had engulfed all the major European capitals after the First World War. In the face of a complete collapse of Western Culture—"London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down"—Tiresias is at his wit's end—"Shall I set at least my lands in order?"—Ezekiel's protagonist "as a good native should" takes "calm and clamour in its stride" ("Island", *COLLECTED POEMS*, p. 182)

### **Ezra Pound and Ezekiel**

Ezekiel has been equally indebted to Ezra Weston Loomis Pound, whose association with Yeats and Eliot is part of Modernism's history. He candidly admits that the American Imagist influenced him thematically as well as technically:

The early influence on me of Pound and Eliot concerned poetry as an art, as well as on criticism of poetry, of society past and present, of modes of thinking and feeling etc. But I never accepted the doctrines which Pound and Eliot, separately defined for themselves and their readers. I sorted them out for myself, modified them to suit my temperament, and so on. It would be misleading and unfair to say that Pound and Eliot influenced me only on the "technique side". Their influence was far reaching, even comprehensive, but I was never dominated by it. I used it and went back to it from time to time, noting how my growth changed my attitudes to their outstanding creative as well as critical writing. (Ezekiel 1968)

### **Impact of Movement Poetry**

Ezekiel's poetry has an overwhelming impact of Movement poets like Philip Larkin and Donald Davie in its deft precision of phrase, common subject matter, self irony and allergy to hypocrisy.

Larkin and his colleagues had ensured that poetry ceased to be an instrument of propaganda, an official hymn, as in the case of the poets of the Thirties, it must be saved from degenerating into romantic yearning of Dylan Thomas' variety. Ezekiel on his part had to keep himself at arm's length from both: the romantic vagaries and also the misplaced

patriotic strain of pre-Independence poetry. He has admitted his debt to Philip Larkin and this is most pronounced in his deliberate eschewal of intricate symbolism or far-fetched mythology, denigrated by the British poet as “common myth-kitty”.

David McCuchion has perceptively commented that Ezekiel

belongs with the Thom Gunn, R S Thomas, Elizabeth Jennings, Anthony Thwaite, and others like them. He has their cautions, discriminating style, precise and analytical, with its conscious rejection of the heroic and the passionate as also of the sentimental and cosy. (McCuchion 1968)

### **Movement Poetry Constraining Ezekiel’s Poetic Canvas**

The contention of Christopher Wiseman that the impact of the Movement poets was rather unhealthy for Ezekiel’s poetic virtuosity, is not entirely off the mark. The Movement style did restrict Ezekiel’s poetic canvas and his own real voice often got suppressed.

To quote Wiseman,

It is, I think, significant that Ezekiel never experimented with the traditional forms to the extent that most British and American poets did, seeming to be content with strict accentual-syllabic patterns and relatively straightforward stanza forms; and, for all his obvious innate talent, many of his earlier poems suffer from an almost mechanical rigidity, a monotony of sound which deadens and weighs down the bright buoyancy of his content. (Wiseman 1976)

### **Formative Influences on Ezekiel**

Enumerating his formative influences, Ezekiel wrote to Anisur Rahman (1981) that his poems written after 1965 have shaken all the influences howsoever dominant and irresistible they might have been in his early poetry:

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“In the early stages, there were Eliot, Yeats and Pound, Rilke, modern American poetry from Whitman to William Carlos Williams, the poetry of the 30’s in England, including specially Auden, Spender, MacNeice and Day Lewis. The later poetry is not under particular influence, because I had begun to resist them. All the poems in *The Unfinished Man* are obviously in the spirit of the Movement poets in England but from *The Exact Name* onwards, I am on my own again.”

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### **Impact of Western Counterparts on Jayant Mahapatra**

Jayant Mahapatra gladly acknowledges the inspiration that he draws from his Western counterparts but still holds that that the English poets from the West did not have a long lasting impact on his poetry:

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I am more fond of European and Latin American poets today than the American poets, for example. But I admire Robert Pen Warren, especially his later books... I enjoy reading Neruda, Seferis, the Spanish poets Alexandre, Alberti, Cernuda and Jimenez. (Simms, 1986)

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### **Changing Contour with the Passage of Time**

Writing about Jayant Mahapatra, B. K. Das feels that Mahapatra is aware of the changing contour of his poetry with the passage of time (Das 1992). Being a conscious artist, he 'looks before and after' and pines for what it is not. Mahapatra has no inhibitions in getting inspiration from the American poet Allen Ginsberg. In this connection Mahapatra writes,

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Today, I would say that my poetry suffers from such endless questioning, and also from clichéd subjects of time, death and the quest which man is after, but such thoughts come out from the meditation on the immediate landscape of my land. I am struck by the poetry of Allen Ginsberg, a poet who has probably lived closer to the limits of the history of his time than any other poet in America.

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### **Thematically Closer to Modernist Poets**

Bruce King finds that Mahapatra's poetry is thematically closer to the Modernist poets while his style is post-modernist (King 1987). In the typical modernist vein, Mahapatra depicts the contemporary life with rare vividness of imagination and evokes the myth of the land in his poems "Relationship" and "Temple". In the poem "Temple", he writes:

Around the kingdom of Opals she wandered  
Making her need be led the words of her myth  
Crossing world upon world, breaking vision upon vision  
Moving about in circles of timeless power  
... ..  
("Temple")

### **Myth and Contemporary Life**

Finding it difficult to define a myth, the poet moves on to contemporary life to learn the anguish and predicament of modern man, again a modern sensibility:

"Now I stand among the ruins,  
Waiting for the cry of a night bird  
From the river's far side  
To drift through my weariness,  
Listening to the voices of my friends...  
With the smells of the rancid fat of the past.  
("Relationship")

In using myth as a potent tool for poetry, Jayant Mahapatra could well have been inspired by the famous English poet and critic T. S. Eliot. Praising James Joyce for his brilliant use of myth, Eliot wrote in his essay "Ulysses, Order, and Myth"(1923):

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In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him. [...] It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. It is a method already adumbrated by Mr. Yeats, and of the need for which I believe Mr. Yeats to have been the first contemporary to be conscious. It is a method for which the horoscope is auspicious. Psychology (such as it is, and whether our reaction to it be comic or serious), ethnology, and *The Golden Bough* have concurred to make possible what was impossible even a few years ago. Instead of narrative method, we may now use the mythical method...

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In the poetry of Mahapatra also we find a similar inclination for the use of myth related to the Oriya culture and mythology. His poetry takes into its orbit, infuses it with the present and looks forward to the future (Das 1992). In doing so, he also betrays some features of post-modernists as well. In Mahapatra's use of myth as an attempt to give shape to the chaos, one is also reminded of Yeats when the Irish poet says "Myself must I remake".

### **On Time**

Mahapatra seems to be influenced by Eliot in his theme of 'Time'. Both the poets do not consider the linearity of time, rather they believe in its circular movement where present becomes the focal point of past, present and future.

The poem "Today" brings all the experiences of the past years to concentrate on one day:

Time faces me and there  
Like the lucking madness in a tyrant's eye  
Is the whom of another day  
Dark wings shut and unmoving in the blue.  
This day is an instant which possesses me  
From which I cannot escape.  
("Today")

In the poem "Through the Stone" which reminds the readers of Yeats' use of stone as a symbol, time is viewed as a part of eternity:

Here is the stone, the taste  
Of poison in the lungs,  
The broad polished gestures that say  
The world will not come to an end.

The poem "Relationship" bears a strong imprint of Yeats' "Sailing to Byzantium". A striking parallel can be obviously drawn between Mahapatra's image of 'a strange country in which  
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you weave your flaming play' and yeats' 'That is no country for old men. The young in one another's arms...'.

### **Echo of Eliot**

In the choice of phrases like 'this brassy October afternoon', one is obviously struck by the echoes of Eliot's "April is the cruellest month". With the use of images like sleep, twilight, phantom darkness, half light of rain, the pallor of dreams, the granite eyes...to see the stone throb, Mahapatra dexterously creates a world akin to Eliot's *The Hollow Men*.

The use phrases to depict the sense of 'loneliness' on an October afternoon when he sees 'the secret coves on the naked beach/ charred by old fires and littered with picnic paper and empty bottles' is an explicit reminder of Eliot. The reader cannot help drawing a parallel between the two poets in the images like 'a galvanometer needle/ between the zero and the hundred of gloom' and the 'shameless fevers whose viruses tear the skin like paper'.

The echo of Eliot could be felt in the poems like "The Indian Way" when Jayant Mahapatra describes a love scene:

We would return again and again  
To the movement  
That is neither forward nor backward,  
And let the sun and moon take over,  
Trailing their substances and shadows.  
You know  
I could not touch you  
Like that,  
Until our wedding night.

### **Successful Evolution of Their Own Idiom**

As we draw to a close, it could well be argued that the poets discussed above, Nissim Ezekiel and Jayant Mahapatra , do acknowledge an inspiration from the British Modernists, yet they have successfully evolved an idiom of their own which is distinctly Indian and unique in itself. The urge for creative self expression in the changing postcolonial milieu has been a powerful motivation towards shaping up their idiom.

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