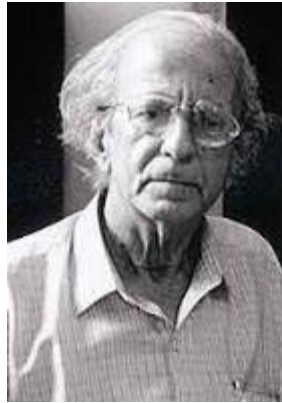


Selected Themes in Nissim Ezekiel's Poems

M. Archana Devi, M.A., M.Phil.



Nissim Ezekiel (1924-2004)

Courtesy: <http://www.poemhunter.com/nissim-ezekiel/>

Abstract

This article presents some of the themes in Nissim Ezekiel's poems. Nissim's greatest contribution lies in modernising poetry, in giving it themes and technique in consonance with the spirit of the age. His poetry is the main link between pre-Independence and post-Independence Indian poetry in English. The themes dealt with in the paper include detachment, independence and individuality, skeptical self, and rooted in native soil.

Key words: Nissim Ezekiel, modernizing Indian poetry in Indian Writing in English, themes.

Nissim Ezekiel's Poems

Nissim Ezekiel is one of the most productive talents and is one of the most distinctive poetic personalities of modern India. Having produced seven volumes of poetry, he is acknowledged as an established Indian-English poet of the post-Independence era. He provided an example of a poet intellectually and morally concerned with making poetry out of experiences. In his poetry, there is the truth of acknowledging what is felt and experienced in its

complexity, contradictions, pleasures, fears and disillusionments without preconceived ideas of what poetry should say about the poet and life.

Modernizing Indian English Poetry

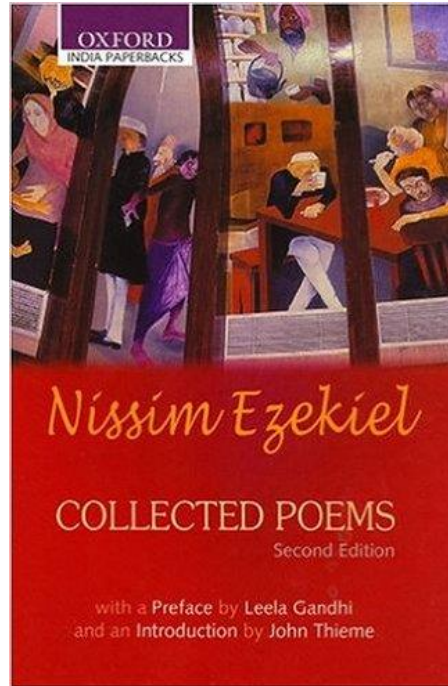
Ezekiel's place in Indian English poetry is permanent and assured. His greatest contribution lies in modernising poetry, in giving it themes and technique in consonance with the spirit of the age. His poetry is the main link between pre-Independence and post-Independence Indian poetry in English. He brought an urban touch to poetry and with the help of irony and mild satire exposes the evils of urban society. Michael German rightly comments on his contribution to poetry:

He brings to the established traditions of love, religion
and the passing hour, the modern attitude of the need
for a commitment, an existential plunge into life,
and of old analytic disgust, becoming more ironical
and detached as he develops.

(Satish Kumar, SIEP 193)

Indian Presence in Nissim Ezekiel's Poetry

The post-Independence Indian English poets are basically committed to probe into and present the prevailing situations in the subcontinent to which they belong. The Indian milieu and ethos provide the superstructure as well as the infrastructure for the post-Independence Indian English poetry. The Indian presence in Ezekiel's work is deeply rooted in the physical reality of the country.



Detachment

His ancestry perhaps accounts for the detachment that he can afford to cultivate while simultaneously practising inwardness in his understanding and absorbing the experience of the situation in India. He is a poet whose Indianness has lent a special interest to the work of a Jew who was a foreigner settled permanently in this country. He has exposed in his poems the follies, foibles, weaknesses, and deficiencies of the Indians. The typical strength of his poetry arises from the fact that he had ideas firmly rooted in the Indian soil.

Independence and Individuality

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.

Skeptical Self

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Ezekiel's poetic impulse is to pattern the experiences in terms of his self. At the centre of his poetry, from his earliest work *A Time To change* (1952) to his last volume of poems *Latter-Day Psalms* (1982), there is the same dominant, skeptical self perceiving and ordering the experiences of modern urban life. The urban experience constitutes an important segment of Ezekiel's work. So does rural experience. Ezekiel was the first poet to allow the significant entry of realistic rural experience into Indian poetry in English. His poetry reveals his primary concern with the understanding of the meaning of his life and attaining self-realization. Poetry seems to be the means to this goal.

Chetan Karnani observes: "Ezekiel treated life as a journey where poetry would be the chief source of discovering and organizing one's life, and that there is a very close connection between his life and life and his poetry."

(Raghu, PNE 61)

Rooted in Native Soil

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.

Themes

Love has occupied a central position in the realm of Indo-English poetry and Ezekiel has used it with superb artistic excellence. He has beautifully portrayed love and sex in his poems. With all frankness and openness, he expresses suitably in the Indian situations and contexts. He describes from *A Time To change* to *Latter-Day Psalms* his journey from lustful passion to serene feelings of love.

All great Indian English poets during the post-Independence era - K.N.Daruwalla, Arun Kolatkar, Kamala Das, Gauri Deshpande, and O. P. Bhatnagar have followed the Ezekiel tradition of urbanity, identification with environment, art and irony and the importance of flawless form.

Shashi Iyer comments on his abiding contribution to Indian English poetry:
Ezekiel of course has been a kind of law-giver to the young poets writing in Indo-English tradition. He has taught them to avoid sentimentality, looseness of structure and abstract sublimities which all seem to be peculiarly Indian traits.
(Satish Kumar, SIEP 193)

Cynicism

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

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