

A Complex Interplay of Tradition and Modernity in the Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel

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Abstract

The paper examines A Complex Interplay of Tradition and Modernity in the Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel, one of the leading poets in post-independent India who wrote in the English language. The poetry of Ezekiel is a delicate balancing of the old cultural values of the Indian tradition and the ideals of the modernity. Being an urban poet with strong Indian ethos and being under the impact of the western literary forms and sensibilities, Ezekiel expresses the identity, belongingness, and cultural duality problems. This paper analyzes the way he incorporates irony, realism, and introspection in an attempt to convey the Indian middle-class experience through close reading of some of the poems, namely “Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.”, “The Night of the Scorpion”, “The Patriot”, “Background”, “Casually”, “Enterprise” and other poems. His colloquial use of the English language, native imagery and moral interrogation is also an intermediary between the local and the universal as he attempts to define himself amid a society that is changing fast. This exploration states that the poetic vision of him does not reject the tradition and does not simply accept modernity; on the contrary, it tries to find a significant synthesis which can reflect the changing awareness of postcolonial India. Finally, the work of Ezekiel is the monument to the creative contradiction between the continuity and the change, the spirit of the nation which is negotiating its cultural identity in the modern world.

Keywords: Tradition and Modernity, Postcolonial Identity, Indian English Poetry, Cultural Duality, Realism

Introduction

Nissim Ezekiel (1924-2004) is one of the giant figures in both Anglophone and Indian literary history who is commonly recognized as the Father of Modern Indian poetry in English. Ezekiel was born in Bombay (now Mumbai) within the Marathi speaking Bene Israel Jewish community, which by his birth and profession was a plurality of cultural influences, of Jew, Indian and Western. Such a complicated background made him best suited to maneuver in the dark social and political world of post-Independence India. His career was prolific, and in the course of his active career, he worked as a poet, playwright, editor, art critic, and university professor. Ezekiel made poetry a serious lifelong occupation, an application of intellectual discipline and professional rigor to the field which had not hitherto existed. The following passage bears the testimony through the pen power of VK Sharma and MK Sharma in their research paper “Nissim Ezekiel: The Mechanics of Poetry”:

Human nature is the fount whence Ezekiel's poetry springs. He has delved deeply into the realms of Indian culture and what his eyes have seized is his poetry. He is a role model for Indian English poetry. With him the vernal breeze of new poetry bursts into the castle of Indian English poetry to sweep the long existed cobwebs away. His poetic corpus is boundless, endless and sublime; the real image of modern India. (Sharma 15)

Ezekiel ushered in a radical change of the aesthetic direction of Indian poetry in English. His coming was a conscious and needed clean cut with the Romantic past. A mystic theme, periodical rhetoric and a trace of Victorianism had commonly marked the previous Indo-Anglian tradition. Ezekiel did not subscribe to this practice and opted to look at contemporary, introspective and urban issues. His writings proposed a fresh aesthetic based on clarity and directness, simplicity, deliberately shifting away the obscurity of a number of his fellow Western modernists, including T. S. Eliot, without losing any depth. He popularized Indian English writing by adopting the themes of personal angst, cynical self-reflection, and their family life, leaving the spiritual or orientalist themes to other writers.

Interplay: Hybridity and Conflict as Postcolonial Condition

The general idea behind the corpus of Ezekiel is the conflict of tradition and new modernity as inherited by the previous generation, but which was the duality of India after the British colonizers left it in 1947. Tradition in this case can be understood to be the native culture, spiritual background, social beliefs, and ingrained superstitions of the subcontinent. The concept of modernity includes Western skepticism, scientific rationality, the existential emphasis on personal choice, and the psychological phenomena of the 20th -century metropolis, especially alienation and urban decay. The following stanza from the poem "The Double Horror" depicts the same.

I am corrupted by the world, continually
Reduced to something less than human by the crowd,
Newspapers, cinemas, radio features, speeches
Demanding peace by men with grim warlike faces. (Ezekiel 1-4)

The poems of Ezekiel are usually referred to as hybridity, meaning the amalgamation or integration of cultures and languages and identities due to the postcolonial experience. His work is a manifestation of the conflict between people who have to struggle with dual identities, one of the traditional Indian cultures and the other affected by Western ideals and intellectual organization. It is vital that he explores the issue of hybridity because it is not just a mere clash of East against West, but rather a dynamic space where colonial pasts and native traditions negotiate and renegotiate one another. This negotiation, thematic as well as formal, is quite complex and it gives the critical matrix of his poetic success.

Dichotomy: Tradition and Modernity

To create the modern Indian English poetry, a drastic break with aesthetical norms of the pre-Independence period was necessary. Ezekiel, and his age had realized the necessity of substituting the cobwebs of old tradition, long established in poetry. The high regard with which this earlier literature was valued, inherited, nevertheless, a decidedly adorative, frequently

mystic, and imitative lack of repose, overcharged with Victorian poetry syntax and content. Thus, the poets of this time actively rejected the Romantic tradition of that time in order to reflect the turbulent and multi-dimensional temper of the post-war and post-Independence era.

Ezekiel adopted the technical innovations of the western modernism to reach this rupture, turning out to be the Indian representative of western modernism. He imbibed some of the inspiration of poets such as T. S. Eliot and W. B. Yeats, and followed their modes of self-criticism, disengagement and ironic sight. Nevertheless, this acceptance was very discriminatory. He drew on the critical attitude of modernism but at the same time he himself opposed its esotericism and romanticism. Ezekiel opposed unnecessary difficult poetry, and thought that complexity in the present day can be covered in false forms of simplicity, enabling his poetry to be palatable to the average man. His poetic approach, then, is an interesting paradox: external, foreign, modern tradition was practically required to obtain an internal, local autonomy, without any reference to the poetic traditions of the colonial era. Modernism was duly given the structural and rigorous form in which the true Indian content might be presented in a precise and critical way.

The interaction of tradition and modernity can be viewed in the poem "Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T. S." in which the author conveys the vision of Indian social niceties and speech peculiarities in a prime way with a sense of humor and at the same time affection. The poem vividly depicts a common Indian farewell party where English language as a colonial heritage is spoken in its particularly Indianized language. This setting is selected by Ezekiel in his effort to point out the desire of the modern Indian middle to seem like a cosmopolitan and yet have a strong influence of the traditional Indian values of warmth, hospitality, and expressiveness.

Miss Pushpa is coming
from very high family.
Her father was renowned advocate
in Bulsar or Surat,
I am not remembering now which place. (Ezekiel 15)

The speaker of the poem, with his stilted syntax and his direct translation of Indian idioms into English, is the representative of the Indian cultural hybridity: to be torn by the admiration of the Western modernity and by his instinct of native expression.

Simultaneously, the poem still maintains the beauty of the Indian traditional manners under the comedy. This politeness, optimism and smilingness of Miss Pushpa are typical Indian virtues of kindness and humility. However, even the formal farewell speech given in English, which is a custom of the Western society, indicates the penetration of modernity and globalization into the Indian life. Ezekiel does not mock this amalgamation but instead glorifies it to be a part of the shifting Indian identity. As such, Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T. S. is an implicit critique of the way Indians can exist between tradition and modernity and how they can accept both worlds, with humor, grace, and self-awareness.

His next poem "The Night of the Scorpion" is a clash between tradition and modernity is described by the dramatic event in the Indian country in a rural family. When the mother of

the poet is bitten by a scorpion the villagers come together and express themselves in superstitious rituals and religious chants because they believe that her pain will purify her sins and also her previous lives. They believe in God and karma which is a manifestation of the traditional way of thinking of the countryside India. Ezekiel writes:

The peasants came like swarms of flies
and buzzed the name of God a hundred times
to paralyse the Evil One. (Ezekiel 7)

On the contrary, the father of the poet, a rationalist and non-believer in religion, seeks a remedy to his troubles in the sciences of present times--in combining powders, applying herbs, and the means of medicine. This opposition of beliefs is depicted by Ezekiel not by the judgement, but by the understanding, how both these approaches exist in the Indian society.

Although tensions between superstition and reason are there, the end of the poem is very human and emotional as the mother, after the pain is over, only thanks God that it was she who was stung by the scorpion, and not her children. Being selfless, she is not bound to any tradition or to the modernity, but to the universal value of a maternal love. Through such a domestic incident, then, Ezekiel employs to develop vaster cultural and philosophical issues, and in the process, India is introduced as a land of faith and rationality, of the old and new civilization, of a fine balance between the two. With the use of vivid imagery, irony and empathy, this poem manages to give a feel of the dual identity of India- a society that is on the verge of becoming modern but remains in the grip of the traditions that are centuries old.

Ezekiel presents his theme of modern Indian identity in "The Patriot" based on satire and self-awareness. The speaker that presents himself as very Indian is the representation of the bewilderment of a society that is torn between the nationalism of the past, and the cosmopolitanism of the present. Ezekiel ironically describes how the indoctrination of modern Indian sensibilities is via Western education and colonialism, a sort of linguistic and cultural lost in imitation. But behind this irony is a serious thought of the wish to belong--to find a compromise between the ancient lessons of Indian life and the new trend of progress, individuality, and international consciousness. The fact that Ezekiel writes the poem in Indian English is a critique and at the same time a glorification of this cultural fusion, as modern India speaks its own language using a language that used to be foreign but now has become a part of itself.

In Background, Casually, Ezekiel recalls himself, following his own path of being an Indian Jew trying to find his way around the conflicts of his Western education, alienation, and discovery of self in India. The poem shows that the modernity is liberating intellectually, and alienating at the same time, whereas tradition brings a feeling of groundedness. Ezekiel eventually embraces his Indianness, not as a curse but as a fact the contradictions of his culture. In the same way, in the poem, "Enterprise," the poet applies the metaphor of pilgrimage as a way to represent the group of human movement towards spiritual and social fulfillment. The travelers, who start off with good intentions, lose their integrity and belief when material interests prevail, and it is a representation of the disappointment with the life in the modern world. However, at the end, when he returns home it is a case of a re-discovery of simple,

traditional values which survive beyond intellectual or physical accomplishments. These poems, combined with one another, represent the balanced vision of Ezekiel, the mind of the modern generation who is not so naive to disregard the traditions that preceded him, but wants to find the means to reconcile the two extremes without dismissing either one.

The basis of his modernism lies in the depth of attachment of Ezekiel to Bombay (Mumbai) and the critical attention that he gives to it. He is known as a city poet whose poetry describes vividly the realities of urban life in India, social evils, coldness, brutality, poverty, and squalor. The city scene pictures; of the street sleeping pavement; hutment dwellers; the dead souls of men; the tragedy of burned-out mothers, take the place of the old landscape poetry of his fathers. This realistic attitude to the physical facts of the land placed his poems deeply in the natural earth, and met the need of giving the current local conditions.

The idea of urban modernity in Ezekiel revolves around the theme of existentialism. His works talk about the human condition, spirit, and act, and the role of the individual in the choice and the inner conflicts. There is a strong presence of the themes such as "loneliness, nothingness, authenticity," and to a large extent, alienation. This is the alienation, the breakdown of the harmonious relations and faith in modern India, which is similar to the decline of morals and social principles of European modernism.

Importantly, the personal identity of Ezekiel helped him to take this detached and modernist perspective. Trying to be a Jew in a very Hindu-Muslim world, and a secular thinker who left religion altogether after school days, he felt an inner social alienation. The fact that he is a mugging Jew among the wolves at school instilled in him a feeling of being an outsider. It is this individual estrangement against the cultural and religious mainstream that enabled him to embrace the critical and objective standpoint that was a hallmark of modernism with credible sincerity. It was his hereditary custom to be a minority, which helped him later adopt the modern detachment, and the criticism of the faults of Bombay came as a genuine one, and not as a result of the alien literary examples.

Conclusion

The poetry of Nissim Ezekiel is an exceptional portrayal of the duality of the Indian culture where tradition and modernity co-exist, clash and finally complete one another. By his sharp eye, by his irony and self-examination Ezekiel is able to capture the soul of a nation in transit, one which struggles to move forward in a bid to modernize without losing its moral and spiritual foundations. In such poems as "The Night of the Scorpion", "Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T. S.", "The Patriot, Background", "Casually", and "Enterprise". Ezekiel manages to combine the simplicity of Indian life with the complexity of modern sensibility. His Indian English language, imagery of the place, and ordinary events close the gap between the traditional and the modern making his voice quite Indian but also universal. However, finally, the Ezekielian poetry does not support the denial of the tradition and modernity but represents a synthesis, a place where the knowledge of self, cultural identity, and human values can flourish in the changing world. It is light of this balance that Ezekiel not only determines the nature of the modern Indian poetry in English, but also provides an eternal comment on human condition as it is constantly changing.

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