

Theme of Alienation in the Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel

BARUN KUMAR JHA

Abstract. Nissim Ezekiel is a neo-symbolist poet. He is considered as the father of the post-independence Indian English verse. He started the trend of modernity in Indian English poetry. He deals with the problems of Indian society in simple and conversational style. Ezekiel has expressed his experience of alienation in his volumes of poetry. He was born and brought up in Indian atmosphere and surroundings, however he failed to establish harmony between himself and his surroundings. He always felt alienated in the society. It influenced his sensibility and alienation became the central theme of his poetic creations. Ezekiel accepts that alienation is undesirable from moral and social points of view.

Keywords : Neo-symbolist; alienation; sensibility; modernity; harmony; creation.

Indian poetry in English echoes spirit of modern age and tries to articulate distinctly Indian response. M.K. Naik's observation is very remarkable in this regard, "while alienation is the dubious birth right of the modern artist in any society, the situation of the contemporary Indian English poets reveal several forces at work which appear to generate a specially strong sense as alienation in him". (Naik,76)

Ezekiel had to bear alienation, discrimination and torture in his childhood which he has expressed clearly in many of his poems. "Background Casually", an autobiographical poem produces a powerful feeling of alienation. This poem is satirical. He frankly admits social and cultural alienation. It is because Ezekiel was a Jew, he did not belong to India by blood and so the harmony between two foreign strange cultures was impossible. It is obvious that Ezekiel had decided to live here and adopt India as his own but the gap of place in his poems, his irritation and dislike disclose the fact of alienation. He recollects his school days when the Hindu and Muslim boys teased him to his great irritation but he was quite helpless. In the poem "Background Casually" he speaks about his school time:

I went to Roman Catholic School
A mugging Jew among waves
They told me I had killed the Christ
A Muslim Sports man boxes my ears
I grew in terror of the strong
But under nourished Hindu lad
Their prepositions always wrong
Repelled me by passivity
One noisy day I used a knife. (Ezekiel, 1, 6-15)

Ezekiel indicates the prevailing feeling of religious and communal discrimination in Indian society. He feels alienated from his classmates. He again feels alienated among the Hindus and the Muslims as he belongs to a minority community. He feels alienation with his family as they try to bind him to follow bends of the family responsibilities against his free will as a poet. To escape all this he flies to London. But there also the feelings of alienation among the strangers haunts him and he starts craving for returning back to India, his birth place. Ezekiel continues in "Background Casually" :

I have made commitments now
This is one: 'to stay where I am
As others choose to give themselves
In Some remote and backward place
My backward place is where I am. (Ezekiel,3,21-25)

These lines reflect that Ezekiel is totally committed to India as he has no place to go. He understands that he cannot get rid of his sense of being an Indian. Now he is a part of India as India is the part of his soul. In India which have permitted to call mine I acknowledge without hesitation the existence of all darkness.

He was frequently ill-treated by Indian boys and once a Muslim had boxed him on his ears and since then he was in a terror of the other boys. They had tortured him in various ways. This was his early experience. A feeling of hatred and alienation developed since his school time which haunted him all his life. Although he lives in India, and describes Indian life and society, irony in his tone is quite obvious. He sometimes tried to attain harmony but failed because his early impressions were much more powerful and he could not wipe them away all his life. Background Casually is the best proof of his sense of alienation in him. He disagrees with the prevailing Indian condition, still he is committed to stay in India which is enough to prove the deep rooted sense of alienation in him. M.K. Naik writes:

Ezekiel is acutely aware of this alienation being accentuated by the fact that he has spent most of his life in highly westernized circles is cosmopolitan Bombay with Marathi as his lost mother tongue and English his second Mother tongue; Ezekiel's quest for integration made for a restless career of quick change and experiments including, Philosophy and poetry. (Naik, 203)

The theme of alienation theme is central to Ezekiel's work and colours his entire poetic universe. In an interview Ezekiel discussed the phenomenon of alienation at some length some years ago and asked the question :

How would you react to change that most Indian writers in English are alienation?

Ezekiel replied that actually he would like to see some alienation among Indian English writers. However undesirable from social, moral and other points of view, it has been aesthetically very productive, provided it is genuine. One cannot pretend, one cannot play the game of alienation ... and feel one is hostile towards others and they are hostile. One hates their gate and they also hate. This can produce great literature. This genuine alienation is really absent. Asked to define alienation he answered:

For an Indian, English writer to be alienated, he must have contempt for his audience and a similar failure on his part pointlessness in trying to communicate. I know no such Indian writer, isolated like a Camus or Dostoevsky character. What they really mean is that these writers use an alien language. (Internet)

A sensitive artist like Nissim Ezekiel probes deep into the real nature and essence of Indian civilization. He gives us his vision of dark interior that breeds monstrous infidelities and sinister betrayals. Nissim Ezekiel's poems are a compassionate plea for the resuscitation and preservation of human values to enable mankind to avoid searching a state of nothingness and total extinction. Ezekiel declares that his background makes him a natural outsider. At the same time the poet's sense of alienation echoes in his early poems. In the poem, "Enterprise" he asserts:

When, finally, we reached the place,
We hardly knew why we were there,
The trip had darkened every face,
Our deeds were neither great nor rare.
Home is where we have together grace.
(Ezekiel, 26-30)

Ezekiel shows his alienation from the Indian society in the use of language and life as well. He has adopted a mocking style for the presentation of Indian people particularly of Bombay that reveals his sense of alienation. He mocks the superstitious villagers in the poem "The Night of Scorpion". He dislikes the hypocrisy of the Indian saints and priests who are full of lust and are corrupt. They want human virtues and so the poet finds nothing great or praiseworthy in them. The alienation is quite obvious when he questions :

Is saints are like this?
What hope is there then for us?
(10-11)

Ezekiel is able to create something more than minor out of his alienation experience and it is significant that he can do so only when his response to his situation is much more subtle and complex.

"Latter- Day- Psalms" also offer direct criticism of modern life and civilization as when the poet asks,

What have we done with the dominion
Thou hast given up,
What are we doing to the sheep and the oxen?
And beasts of the field the fowl of the air
And the fish of the sea. (3,18-22)

The concluding lines of "Latter- Day- Psalms" is a comment on the previous line as well as on the one hundred and fifty old Testament Psalms. The poet finds:

All that fuss about faith etc...
Bearing and pathetic though
He adds but how elemental,
How spiritual the language
How fiery and human
In the felly as its feeling. (10,1-10)

This alienation is between the religious person and the common man which causes the frustration in the poet. He has also attacked the charity groups with same sense. Nobody has any sympathetic feeling for others. The students go to distribute edibles among the flood victims not because they have any attachment with them but because they want to be photographed in this act. So not only the poet but every man in the society suffers from this alienation. Ezekiel could not identify his self with his own culture and the ways of life. On the one hand, is the picture of beggars who smile at and mock every foreigner which implies their alienation from them, while on the other, as in Jewish Wedding in Bombay, his alienation from his own, Jewish community is clear. His alienation ironically describes the Jewish ritual and hypocrisy of orthodoxy and reveals his disillusionment. But the fact remains that in spite of the alienation, Ezekiel wants to create reconciliation between himself and society around him. He says that he cannot leave the island, because he was born here and he belongs to this place.

We can say that the alienation has helped him much in creating some great poetry as "The Night of Scorpion". This poem is satirical and ironical in which the poet tries to understand this alien culture. Ezekiel has not fully succeeded in transforming his feeling of alienation but it has been a motivational force leading him to write realistic poems.

Barun Kumar Jha

Associate Professor
Department of English
Baba Mastnath University, Rohtak

Works Cited

- Ezekiel, Nissim. *Background Casually : Hymns in Darkness*. Delhi: OUP, 2005.
_____. *Entertainment, Hymns in Darkness*. Delhi: OUP, 2005.
- Mathews, Fed. "Latter Day Psalms : A Postcolonial Reading Postcolonial Reading". *Indo-Anglian Literature* (ed.) K.V. Dominic. New Delhi: Authors Press, 2009.
- Naik, M.K. *Studies in Indian English Literature*. New Delhi: Sterling Publisher Pvt. Ltd., 1987.
- _____. *A History of Indian English Literature*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2014.

