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Indian Sense and Sensibility in Nissim Ezekiel's Poems

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Abstract

Prof. V.K. Gokak defines Indianness as, "A composite awareness in the matter of race, milieu, language and religion." But Indianness has been interpreted differently by different critics. It can be described as the author's feeling of being an Indian, whether he lives in India or lives abroad. Indian writing in English reflects the authors' cultural, socio-political and religious background. Whatever the genre; poetry, drama, fiction or even essays, this unique identity of the Indian author is mirrored. K.N. Daruwalla rightly says; "Nissim Ezekiel was the first Indian poet to express modern Indian sensibility in a modern idiom." Ezekiel has experimented with the use of typical Indian English. The poems reveal the common Indian mistakes of using present progressive tense in place of the simple present. Indianness is a vital element in Ezekiel's thoughts and feeling and imagery. Indianness has become one of the major themes of Ezekiel which he treats as an intensely personal exploration. Ezekiel's poetry is noticeable for the depiction of typical Indian atmosphere. He has committed himself to Indian values, culture, people and language, and Indianness has always been in his blood and writing.

Keywords: Indianness, sense and sensibility, Indian idiom

Introduction

Indianness has been interpreted differently by different critics. It is the sum total of the socio-cultural patterns of India, the deep-seated politico-spiritual beliefs, philosophical ideals – spiritual, social, economic and political – that constitute the very mind of India, which categorically is different from the rest of the world and are reflected in the fast growing body of literature which is unseen by the Indians.

Indianness can be described as the author's feeling of being an Indian, whether he lives in India or lives abroad. Indian writers have a tradition and community value that gives them a sense of special identity. They are deeply rooted in Indian contexts. And when they write their beliefs, ideologies, myths, rural and urban societies, their religio-philosophic bonds of mind, the Indian writing in the midst of differences – all find fitting expression through English which is a foreign language. It is difficult to define "Indian sensibility" or "Indian experience." Defining Indianness is a daunting task because of the diversity of Indian culture and languages.

Indian writing in English is very rich and varied in terms of content, imagery and style. Indian writing in English reflects the authors' cultural, socio-political and religious background. Whatever the genre; poetry, drama, fiction or even essays, this unique identity of the Indian author is mirrored. In uniqueness there appears a rare universality, which appeals to the lover of literature all over the world. Some of the writers who made great impact on world literature and made the world take notice of Indian literature are Rabindranath Tagore, R.K. Narayanan, Girish Karnad, Nissim Ezekiel and Mulk Raj Anand to mention a few. These writers retain their nativity and yet have a universal appeal, and continue to enthrall the readers with their realistic portrayal of Indian life.

Indianness may be found in various forms and shapes. It is mainly found in material, style and language. One of the major aspects here is the use of imagery. Most of the Indian English poets use "Indian imagery." The images of "river," "animals," "mythical elements," are typically Indian. More important than material and imagery is the level of sensibility. Poets especially have Indianised English and have freely used Indian words and expressions which make the poems typically Indian not only in language but also in its soul. Indian English words help in visualizing typical Indian characters, environment, and life breathes life into individuals and communities and also Indian spirituality.

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An important aspect of Indianness in Indian poetry is the use of Indian idiom. In fact, the validity of Indian English poetry depends on, creation of a new idiom – Indian English Idiom which is distinct from the idioms of the writers all over the world who write in English. There is a demand as it were in the past for the creation of an Indian English idiom to give authenticity and identity to post nineteen-sixty Indian poetry in English. It is a fact that recent poets like Nissim Ezekiel, Kamala Das, Shiv. K. Kumar, Gauri Deshpande, Daruwalla and O.P. Bhatnagar and a few writers have succeeded to some extent in creating a new idiom in English idiom. For example, Ezekiel uses a number of Indian words (particularly Hindi words) in italics. Such words include, “guru, goonda, burkha, chapatti, paan,” etc. Ezekiel also makes use of Indian English which is grammatically unacceptable. Several critics have spoken about the Indianness in English poetry. K.N. Daruwalla rightly says; “Nissim Ezekiel was the first Indian poet to express modern Indian sensibility in a modern idiom.”

The grammatical structure is reminiscent of the English spoken by the Indians. The use of the present continuous tense instead of simple present tense and the repetition of the continuous twice are the Indianness. Ezekiel has experimented with the use of typical Indian English. The poems reveal the common Indian mistakes of using present progressive tense in place of the simple present. The suffix, ‘-ing’ is used in a wrong manner unnecessarily; this is very typical for Indian users of English. It also brings out the random outpour of Indian speech.

“we are meeting” for “we met”
 “I am not remembering” for “I don’t remember”
 “My wife is always asking for money.
 “Money, money, where to get money?”

The longing and obsession of most Indians to speak English fluently is explicitly mentioned in his poem. He is outspoken in his poems which reveal the relation between the language and cultural identity.

Everyday I’m reading Times of India
 To improve my English Language.

The use of typical Indian words like, “one goonda fellow,” “Indiraben,” “a glass of lassi,” etc too finds place in his poems.

You want one glass of lassi?
 Very good for digestion
 With little salt lovely drink
 Better than wine.

Ezekiel’s poetry contains various aspects of Indianness. First, Indianness is a vital element in Ezekiel’s thoughts and feeling and imagery. Indianness has become one of the major themes of Ezekiel which he treats as an intensely personal exploration. Secondly, Ezekiel’s poetry is noticeable for the depiction of typical Indian atmosphere. He surprises the reader with the originality of approach and observation when he deals with an Indian society or family. Thirdly, Ezekiel portrays effectively the poverty, the squalor and the anguish of Indian existence. For example, *The Railway Clerk* reveals the pathetic condition of the poor.

The Railway Clerk symbolizes the helplessness of the poor in India. The atmosphere is of Borivli in Mumbai. The plight of the clerk is exactly similar to any Indian clerk of his type. The railway clerk symbolizes the poverty of India. The clerk says:

My wife is always for money.
 Money, money, where to get money.

The clerk represents the pathetic condition of many Indian middle class people. The following lines are noteworthy:

My wife’s mother is confined to bed
 And I am only support.

Nissim Ezekiel though born in a Jewish family is an Indian poet writing in English. He has committed himself to Indian values, culture, people and language, and Indianness has always been in his blood and writing. In an interview with Frank Birbal Singh he says: “I am an Indian national I was born in India; my tribe of the Jewish community has lived in India for 2,000 years. If I had rejected my Indianness, which some other writers obviously have done, and if I had decided that I am so much of an outsider that I have to settle down in London or New York, and then, even if I did write about India, I don’t know if I could be regarded as an Indo-English Writer. There would be some problems in that situation, though there are marginal cases.”

Besides epitomizing the soul of India in his poetry, Nissim Ezekiel ushered into the age of one-world-ness. But his works do not reflect the India which appeals to the West, but the India in to which he can, and does, merely belong to which he can really relate to. He does not glorify the Indian custom and culture but instead he sees it as it is. Even he is acutely and painfully conscious of the deficiencies and defects of the Indian people. In Ezekiel’s poem *Background Casually* the Indian customs are reflected. It is generally believed that Indians talk loudly and knock at the doors heavily and this is portrayed very picturesquely:

When someone talked too loudly, or knocked at the door
 like
 the Devil,
 They hawked and spat

In this autobiographical poem, he himself being a Jew – a minority in India – he depicts the trouble and traumas that he underwent throughout his life.

I am not a Hindu and my background
 Makes me a natural outsider.

Casteism is another factor which is deep-rooted in the Indian soil and which is very much there in his poems as well. As he records painfully,

My ancestors, among the castes, were aliens.

Though he writes about losing his national identity, his poem, *Background Casually* gives expression to his love of the soil. He affirms that he is very much an Indian and his roots lie deep in India.

I cannot leave the island,
 I was born here and belong.

But he has learnt the way of the world from his multi-faceted experiences:

I look about me now and try
To formulate a plainer view
The wise survive and serve – to play
The fool, to cash in on
The inner and outer storms.

In the words of Paul Gieve: “A writer needs a national or cultural identity, without which he becomes a series of imitations, echoes, responses; he does not develop, because there is nothing at the core to develop.” (1999:105) This realization could have made Ezekiel deliberately turn to Jewish sources and themes, as though some inner urge requires it.

Ezekiel’s *Very Indian Poem in Indian English* reveals his Indianness and the use of very typical Indian English.

I am standing for peace and non-violence
Why world is fighting and fighting
Why all people of world
Are not following Mahatma Gandhi,
I am simply not understand

Yet, he grieves the neglect of Indianness, which is again a favourite topic of everyday Indian conversation, the gradual neglect of Indian traditions and customs and the invasion of global culture:

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.

Ezekiel is very patriotic and is greatly pained when there is any threat to Indian peace. Like every other Indian, he also attributes the loss of peace to the countries across the Indian border

Pakistan behaving like this
China behaving like that
It is making me very sad, I am telling you.
Really, most harassing me.

Night of the Scorpion, though a narrative poem, offers a positive image of Indian women and mothers – woman as a creator, protector, and educator and as an integrating force. He recalls the painful night in the life of his mother when she was stung by a scorpion.

The peasants came like swarms of flies
And buzzed the Name of God a hundred times to
paralyze the
Evil one.

Unity of all religions in India is seen here. Peasants of various faiths, Christians, Hindus, Muslims, and Jews came in large numbers to see her and prayed for her. The lines

May the sins of your previous birth
Be burned away tonight.

Through the voices of the peasants, the poet echoes the Indian belief in washing away their sins of their previous birth by suffering in the present birth.

May your suffering decrease
The misfortunes of your next birth

Though he may appear to be ridiculous, he does not ridicule the Indian customs and traditions but depicts popular Indian beliefs as they are truthfully. He is in fact compassionate, unlike V.S. Naipaul. The scene in *Night of the Scorpion* is made more dramatic by his father, a skeptic and a rationalist who tried “every curse and blessing/powder, mixture, herb and hybrid.”

The final lines,

My mother only said
Thank God the Scorpion picked on me
And spared my children

are very beautiful and a befitting portrayal of a typical Indian mother. The concluding lines mesmerize and define the Indianness impressively in Nissim Ezekiel as it brings out the authentic flavor of India, though his poems are simple, introspective and analytical.

His later poems such as *Hymns in Darkness* and *Poster Poems* show his meditative religio-philosophic concerns. In his poetry he continues many traditions of love, philosophy and religion – of Judaism, Hinduism and Christianity. In *Psalm 151*, he says,

Deliver me from evil, Lord
Rouse me to essential good,
Change the drink for me, Lord,
head me from the waiting wood.

In *Poster Poems*, Ezekiel does not consider God as supernatural reality. Influences of Hinduism could be traced especially when he humanizes God and speaks to God informally like a friend and often addresses Him with banter and irony. Here, his friendly relationship with God is reminiscent of Rabindranath Tagore, though Tagore is ecstatic and subtly expresses his various relationships with God. Subtlety is definitely not Ezekiel’s forte, neither is subtlety the forte of middle class Indians, hence, Ezekiel’s poems are very honest in content and language.

In the poem, *The Visitor*, Ezekiel laughs at superstitions of our society. The poet describes the crow which came three times at the window and the events which follow. It suggests possible arrival of a guest. It is a social satire.

Thus, Nissim Ezekiel is one of the last notable poets of the last 50s and 60s, whose poems reveal the genuine Indian temperament, Indian sensibility that can be considered as the true Indianness.

K.R.S. Iyengar believes that: “It stands to reason that what makes Indo-Anglian literature an Indian literature is the quality of its “Indianness”. Finally, in respect of Indianness, James H. Cousins says that Indian poetry in English is: “Indian in thought, Indian in emotion, Indian in imagery and English only in word.” In the words of Nissim Ezekiel, “My poems in Indian English are rightly described as very Indian poems. So they should not be considered as “mere lampoons”. The characters and the situations projected are intended to be genuinely Indian, and the humour is in the

English language as it is widely spoken by Indians, to whom it is not funny at all.”

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