

Nissim Ezekiel

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NISSIM EZEKIEL (1924 – 2004)

Biographical Note: Life and Works

Nissim Ezekiel was born in Bombay to Moses and Diana Ezekiel, on the 16th of December 1924. His was a Bene-Israeli Jewish inheritance (links: <http://adaniel.tripod.com/beneisrael.htm>) and this remained a personal and thematic concern in his poems.

Esther David's **Book of Rachel** (2006) gives a fictionalised account of the history of this community, while her other novels, **The Walled City** (1997), **Book of Esther** (2002) and **Shalom India Housing Society** (2007) reveal the contemporary situation of the life of the members of this community in Ahmedabad, Gujarat,

A motif that recurs through his poems is that of the search – for a home, for love, for understanding, for belief, and for belonging. This could be related to his descent from a community that travelled in search of a new homeland and in the process had to redefine its identity in order to identify with their new compatriots and at the same time retain a sense of self.

Education

Ezekiel studied in the Convent of Jesus and Mary and the Antonio Desouza High School and graduated with a First Class in English from Wilson College, University of Bombay (Insert picture of Wilson College from www.wilsoncollege.edu). He began his career as a teacher of English and the fact of both his parents being educationists could be partly responsible for this. His father was Professor of Botany at Wilson College where Ezekiel studied and later

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taught and his mother was a school teacher who later went on to become Principal of a school. After forays into the worlds of journalism, copywriting and marketing, this is the profession to which he ultimately returned. Among the numerous honours and accolades bestowed on him in recognition of his contribution to Indian Literature were the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1983. This award was instituted in 1954 and is given to writers in any of the twenty five Indian languages, for their outstanding contribution to Indian literature. Nissim Ezekiel was also honoured with the Padma Shri in 1988.

Did you know that R. K. Narayan was the first Indian English writer to be given this award in 1960, for *The Guide*? The Indian English poets on whom this award has been bestowed are Jayanta Mahapatra in 1981 for his book length poem *Relationship*, Nissim Ezekiel for *Latter-Day Psalms* in 1983, Keki Daruwalla for *Keeper of the Dead* in 1984, Kamala Das for *Collected Poems* in 1985, Shiv K. Kumar for *Trapfalls from the Sky* in 1987, Vikram Seth for his novel in verse *The Golden Gate* in 1988 and most recently Dom Moraes for *Serendip* in 1994.

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Passion for Theatre

Theatre was also a lifelong passion, the seeds of which were sown when Ezekiel joined the Theatre Group (TG) in 1946. It was Sultan Bobby Padamsee's production of *Macbeth* (1941), which attracted a fair amount of interest among the bright, young minds and also inspired them to produce other such plays. By 1944, Derrick Jefferies, Jean Bhowmagary, Adi Marzban and other theatre aficionados joined Bobby in forming the Theatre Group and gave Bombay productions like *Othello* and *Salome*. Tragically Bobby passed away in 1946. His legacy was carried forward by Ebrahim Alkazi, Derrick Jefferies, Hamid Sayani and Alyque Padamsee. In the early 50s, Ebrahim Alkazi parted ways with TG and went on to redefine theatre education at the National School of Drama. (For a full history of TG see www.thespo.org) In 1948, Ezekiel accompanied Ebrahim Alkazi to London where he studied philosophy; many years later he wrote:

That basement room/ remains a true place
in my chronology ...
Sometimes I think I'm still
in that basement room,
a permanent and proud
metaphor of struggle
for and against the same
creative, self-destructive self. ("London", 198-199)*.

Works of Ezekiel

It is here in London, in 1952, that his first collection of poems ***A Time to Change and Other Poems*** was published. In 1952, shortly after returning from England, Ezekiel married Daisy Jacob and readers are tempted to read his poem "Jewish Wedding in Bombay" (234-235) as being inspired by this event in his life. Nissim and Daisy had a son and two daughters, one of whom, Kavita, has published a book of poems. In the same year, 1952, Ezekiel was appointed as

* All references to the poems and the page numbers (indicated) are from *Collected Poems 1952-1988*, published by Oxford University Press, India in 1989.

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Sub-Editor of *The Illustrated Weekly of India* by C. R. Mandy, who entrusted him with the task of selecting poetry and helping new poets write better poetry. Ezekiel's work at *The Illustrated Weekly* was very significant for its role in providing a platform for the emergence of Indian English poetry in its nascent stages in post-independence India. In 1955 he joined *The Indian PEN* as Assistant Editor, and started *Quest*, a magazine of arts and ideas. In 1966 he founded *Poetry India*, one of the pioneering journals of Indian poetry. Ezekiel became the Associate Editor of the monthly literary journal, *Imprint*, when it was founded in 1961. He was both art critic and book reviewer and in fact from 1961 until 1968, he wrote the entire book review section of *Imprint* – a total of more than 300 reviews! The books he reviewed cover a wide range of forms and subjects, reflecting the spectrum of his interests – poetry, fiction, drama, non-fiction, travel, biography, autobiography and literary and art criticism. While continuing with his work of editing, guiding poets and setting standards for poetry, Ezekiel also gave regular broadcasts on Art and Literature on the Bombay station of All India Radio. In the newly independent nation, both media – print and broadcast – were highly influential in the formation of an Indian identity, especially for the middle class seeking to find its voice and feet in a nation struggling to come to terms with the past, to negotiate the present and to plan for the future.

Notable Works of Ezekiel

In 1953 Ezekiel's second collection ***Sixty Poems*** was published. The next year he joined Shilpi Advertising as a copywriter, where he was later promoted to manager, and he worked there until he joined Chemould Frames as Manager in 1959. Looking at Ezekiel's career graph, it is interesting to see how he worked in various areas of art and literature and also unashamedly acknowledged the need to have a job to survive. It would not have been possible, unless you came from a very rich family, to be a full-time writer in the early decades after independence. So all men writing at the time would have had a job and also

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written. Ezekiel's experience in the advertising world is what probably gives a pictorial quality and vividness to his writing, and a compactness and economy to his syntax. Also his work in Chemould Frames (for a history of this organisation and its role in the Bombay art scene see www.gallerychemould.com) was to give him his entry into the world of painting and art. Ezekiel uses his knowledge of art and painting in many of his poems and this dialogue between his profession and his vocation can be seen in poems like "Jamini Roy" and "For Satish Gujral," and also in the perspective from which he views the environment he writes about, something like a painter contemplating his subject.

The Third was published in 1959, to be followed the next year by ***The Unfinished Man***. In 1961 he returned to full time teaching as Head of the Department of English Mithibai College, where he taught until 1972, when he moved to the University of Bombay (insert photograph from www.mu.ac.in) as a Reader in American Literature. Ten years later he was made Professor at this University and he retired from full-time teaching in 1984.

Notable Works of Ezekiel

By the time his next collection ***The Exact Name*** was published in 1965, Ezekiel had worked as Art Critic for the *Times of India*, probably a logical corollary to his earlier stint at *The Illustrated Weekly* and his experience at Chemould. He gave a series of lectures on Art Appreciation and ten of these were televised from the Bombay station of Doordarshan in 1970. He was elected Honorary Secretary-Treasurer of the P.E.N. All-India Centre in Bombay. This centre like its counterparts in America and England is a meeting place for writers and intellectuals to discuss the state of the nation and its literary environment. (Read more about PEN and find out all about its agenda and mission at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_PEN) He also spent six months at Leeds, England, as Visiting Professor. Besides teaching, Ezekiel was also publishing prolifically. ***Three Plays*** (1969) contains *Nalini*, a three-act play,

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Marriage Poem, and the one-act farce *The Sleepwalkers*. All three plays, as well as the short theatrical sketch *Deprivation* (1969), satirize various aspects of Indian bourgeois life; as do many of his poems, particularly 'In India' (131-134) and "Hangover" (232), among others. In 1974 he published a children's story *The Actor*. The same year also saw ***Poems (1965-1974)*** and ***Poems Written in 1974*** in print. The "Nissim Ezekiel" special issue of *Mahfil: The Journal of South Asian Literature* (Chicago) published in 1976 contains a large number of these poems, as well as selections from his plays and literary criticism. Ezekiel's interests ranged from theatre to painting and American Literature and in all these fields he contributed original writing as well as critical articles and also edited books of essays and anthologies of literature. He was invited by universities across the world to give lectures and readings of his poems, and remained a representative voice and figure of Indian English poetry that was finding its feet and an individual voice at the time. In 1975 he collaborated with Vrinda Nabar in the translation of Indira Sant's ***Snake-skin and Other Poems*** from Marathi.

Indira Sant (b.1914) is a well-known and powerful voice in Marathi poetry whose sensitive and powerful voice speaks of love and longing and the beauty and pathos of nature in works like *Shele*, *Mendi* and *Mrigajal*.

After ***Hymns in Darkness*** in 1976, readers had to wait until 1982 for his next collection of poems ***Latter Day Psalms***. In 1989, Oxford University Press brought out his ***Collected Poems 1952-1988***. In the same year Ezekiel also wrote a play ***Don't Call it Suicide*** and this was published by Macmillan (Madras), with an introduction by A. K. Rajan. In 1992, Oxford University Press published a selection of his non-fictional writings, ***Selected Prose***, edited by Adil Jussawala.

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In 1998, Ezekiel was diagnosed with Alzheimer's and hospitalized and he died on the 9th of January 2004.

Alzheimer's is a chronic disease of the brain which leads to total or partial memory loss. It affects both the victim and those related to him as the sufferer severs all contact with his/ her surroundings.

As a tribute to Ezekiel, the second edition of *Collected Poems 1952-1988* came out in 2005.

These 79 years were spent not only in writing and publishing but also as personal reminiscences of fellow writers testify, nurturing and honing young writers to whom he always lent a ready, though critical ear. Ezekiel spent most of his life in Bombay, but he remained a traveller in every sense of the word and embarked on a lifelong quest for meaning and belonging. As he wrote in "Background, Casually" (179-181):

I have made my 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.

This 'backward place' was India and specifically Bombay, the site of all his creative enterprises and endeavours:

Perhaps it is not the mangoes
that my eyes and tongue long for,
but Bombay as the fruit
on which I've lived,
winning and losing/ my little life.

("Mangoes," from "Edinburgh Interlude," 293)

Not much is known or written about his personal life, but the most interesting key to answer questions about him remains his poems that reveal his innermost ideas and beliefs. It is in "the architecture of (my) words" ("Prayer", 55) that we can decode his writings and place them in the context of post Independence Indian Writing in English.

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The Poetic Voice

The characteristic stance adopted by Ezekiel in his poetry is one of 'irony':

A rough-and-tumble view of things –

A damned impertinent ironic view of things –

A hell-may-care delightful view of things. ("Portrait", 45)

This perspective, along with the influence of Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot and W.B. Yeats that all critics agree on, makes Ezekiel a 'modern' poet whose images are, as Bruce King comments "grounded in reality, reflection, experience" and have a "logical, discursive form".



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Modernist poetry emerged in Europe and America in the early twentieth century. While breaking away from the Victorian mode, it also retained many of the significant traits of the many movements that had preceded it. Aesthetic theories and practices such as Symbolism and the poetry of the decadent, which emerged around the around fin de siècle or end of century, left an indelible impact on the modernists. At the same time, there was an attempt to move back to medieval and pre-Christian literary forms such as ballads. Many parallel movements in the visual arts, music and opera too impacted on the literary practices of the poets and writers in the 1900s. For example, the post-impressionist exhibition held in various cities in Europe and, especially those in Paris and London, left a huge impression. Post-impressionism, an art movement that began in France, emphasised a movement that both extended and moved away from the practices of the impressionists such as Monet.

The American poets like Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot as well as TE Hulme were the chief architects of modernism in Anglo-American poetry. Even an older poet, WB Yeats, who called himself one of the last romantics changed his style to suit the times in his later poetry. Though Yeats charted his own course, Pound and Eliot, between them, spearheaded swift changes in the modes and movements in poetry, by professing an aesthetic-political stance that was ostensibly anti-Romantic. Early on they used imagist credo in their poetry. This form of poetry was unadorned, bare and almost “prosaic” in nature. The modernist poets further dealt with the experience of the new era in history marked by the world wars. The modernists frustrated the Victorian sense of complacency in the achievements of imperial and capital cultures by decentering the man from the center of the universe. An example of this thematic preoccupation would be Eliot’s “The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock,” a dramatic monologue in free verse that charts the aimless wanderings of a bald, middle-aged man, who constantly ponders on whether he should raise a question or not. In ‘The Waste Land,’ Eliot combines fragments of Indian philosophies of Hinduism and Buddhism with the western, Christian theology to find a solution to the problems of the modern man’s existence. The poets of the 1930s, who were to influence Ezekiel, poets like WH Auden and Stephen Spender wrote a different kind of committed modernist poetry. Later in the 1940s, Existentialism becomes an important preoccupation of the modernist writer. It calls upon the necessity of performing one’s role in life, being responsible for one’s one destiny instead of trusting or hoping for divine salvation.

As far as the Eurocentric-definition of modernism goes, Indian English poetry experienced a belated modernism. Broadly speaking, it began in the 1940s with the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel.

King further adds that Ezekiel “wants the economy and precision, aesthetic distance and unified vision of the major early-twentieth century poets. But he

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also wants poetry invested with moral awareness, truth, self-knowledge and mature experience." (King, *Modern Indian Poetry in English*, 78) Thus Ezekiel brings, what King (91) calls 'professionalism' to Indian English poetry as he writes about "life in the city, sexuality, the problem of marriage, the need to overcome alienation and to create integration among the various aspects of his character".

A recurrent metaphor in his poetry is that of the quest or the journey and "At 62" (273-274) he wrote:

Within my peace
and poetry,
the world of suffering is not explained away,
though some of it
has its own validity.
I want my hands
to learn how to heal
myself and others,
before I hear
my last song.

Other Indian English poets who followed Ezekiel also explored literary modernism and give it a particularly Indian voice. If one of the characteristic stances of the modern poet is his distance and alienation from the world around him and his attempts to find a vocabulary to describe this world and his relationship to it, then Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry is a good place to start our quest for modernity in Indian English poetry. For Mahapatra the important thing is not the language of his poems, but the poems themselves which often confront him with their inability to adequately express the hunger and suffering around him. This is not because of the language he is using, but because no language has the vocabulary to describe the reality he witnesses around him. In "The Stories In Poetry" (*Shadow Space*, 59) he writes:

You said poetry contains us both.
So it appears logical
I should search for poetry.
Not because I thought I could find you,
but because I didn't know
what to believe in –
even in the toy clockwork of poetry...

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Even at a time
when poetry offers no explanations
to outraged and overwrought adults.
When poetry does not listen in awe anymore
to the mysteries of laughter
about a time of hate and genocide...

The world plots on.
And poetry stumbles and falls.

R. Parthasarathy's single published collection ***Rough Passage*** (1977) still holds centre stage in the oeuvre of Indian English poetry for the dialogue it initiated between the Indian English poet and his/her mother tongue. Poetry – the art and the artefact – remain a subject of preoccupation and in his forthcoming collection ***A House Divided***, Parthasarathy has a number of poems on this theme. Ezekiel too was preoccupied with the art and craft of the poetic process. One of his well known poems, 'Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher" (135) is devoted to this theme and begins with the lines:

To force the pace and never be still
Is not the way of those who study birds
Or women. The best poets wait for words.

"ENTERPRISE"

Let's turn now to the three poems prescribed for detailed study and contextualize them in Ezekiel's poetic world.

"ENTERPRISE" is a part of his collection appropriately called ***The Unfinished Man*** (1960), the title of which is taken from Yeats' poem "A Dialogue of Self and Soul". This epigraph points us towards the direction that Ezekiel's poetry will take – one of continuous searching and seeking – looking for a place to call home and people who can understand him and his poetry.

The poem has six stanzas of five lines each and each stanza follows a similar rhyme scheme with alternating rhymes, which gives an onward, moving rhythm to the poem. The poem begins with the statement that this journey began

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as a 'pilgrimage' and gradually it took on a more mundane nature as survival rather than faith became of crucial significance:

We noticed nothing as we went,
A straggling crowd of little hope,
Ignoring what the thunder meant,
Deprived of common needs, like soap.

Written in the first person plural (collective), Ezekiel's poem can be read at multiple levels – the personal, the communitarian and the national.

At the personal level, this poem, as the title suggests, expresses man's eternal quest for meaning in his life as he moves from the innocence of boyhood and youth to the complexities of adult experience. As man journeys from childhood towards adolescence, his concerns are with the material and the mundane and it is the minutiae of daily existence that preoccupy him. Ambitious to reach his destination quickly, he labours with enthusiasm and youthful vigour:

We stood it very well, I thought,
Observed and put down copious notes
On things the peasants sold and bought.

Trials and tribulations and the difficulty of forming meaningful relationships in a fiercely competitive world, make the next part of the journey more difficult:

But when the differences arose
Of how to cross a desert patch,
We lost a friend whose stylish prose
Was quite the best of all our batch.

As the journey continues, occasional despair and fatigue make it seem that the horizon is stretching endlessly, beyond mortal reach as "some were broken, some merely bent" (line 25). With maturity and understanding comes the realisation that it is the journey rather than the destination that makes our lives on earth unique and blessed.

At the level of the community, this poem also refers to the search for the 'Promised Land' that made the Jews eternal travellers. This poem, if read as personal history could well refer to the journey undertaken by Ezekiel's ancestors. (<www.beneisraelheritage.com>) The journey begins with hope and optimism,

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but gradually the rigours of the hostile topography take their toll and there is conflict and struggle. The divisions are exacerbated by differing interpretations of Scripture that plague an already beleaguered people:

Another phase was reached when we
Were twice attacked, and lost our way.
A section claimed its liberty
To leave the group. I tried to pray.
Our leader said he smelt the sea.

When they finally land on the shores of India, Ezekiel's forefathers find the reality very different from the promises made in the books. Ezekiel is perhaps referring to this in "Island" (182) in which he writes:

Unsuitable for song as well as sense
the island flowers into slums
and skyscrapers, reflecting
precisely the growth of my mind.
I am here to find my way in it.

Having reached the shore, after braving mortal peril, the only way to go is forward and so they decide "Home is where we have to earn our grace" (line 30). In all the literal and imaginary journeys that the poetic persona takes in Ezekiel's poems, there is a similar reconciliation towards the end and in "A Morning Walk" (119-120) as he walks away from the city and surveys it from the vantage point of a hill, he finds:

His past is like a muddy pool
From which he cannot hope for words.
The city wakes, where fame is cheap,
And he belongs, an active fool.

Also as he writes in "Island" (ibid):

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

If read as a metaphor for national identity, this poem could well refer to the long struggle for independence and its aftermath of the horrors of partition and the price we paid to acquire this long anticipated freedom:

When finally we reached the place,
We hardly knew why we were there.

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The trip had darkened every face,
Our deeds were neither great nor rare.

It is the present that the poem focuses on, along with a dogged determination to “win redemption/ In the private country of my mind” (“A Time to Change”, 3-6).

"NIGHT OF THE SCORPION"

“NIGHT OF THE SCORPION” is a part of Ezekiel’s collection *The Exact Name* (1965) The epigraph is from a poem by the Spanish Nobel Laureate Juan Ramon Jimiñez and in this extract, the central motif of the collection is symbolised as the search for ‘the exact name of things’ to be sought through the intellectual faculty at the cognitive rather than the emotional level. However the reference to the poet’s ‘soul’ indicates that the quest will also be sited in the realm of belief and the search for a balance between the various calls on the poet’s nature – his Jewish inheritance and the predominantly Hindu milieu that he inhabits. Two of the poems in this volume are more obviously ‘Indian’ than others, especially in terms of location and themes. “In India” (131) takes the reader on a journey through the subcontinent through a series of vignettes of its inhabitants. In this poem the poet almost mechanically lists all that makes up the environment in which he finds himself:

Always, in the sun’s eye,
Here among the beggars,
Hawkers, pavement sleepers,
Hutment dwellers, slums,
Dead souls of men and gods,
Burnt-out mothers, frightened
Virgins, wasted child
And tortured animal,
All in noisy silence
Suffering the place and time
I ride my elephant of thought.

‘Night of the Scorpion,’ perhaps the most anthologised of all Ezekiel’s poems is his portrait of rural India seen through the eyes of a young boy who is witness and chorus for the drama that unfolds. The poem begins with the curtain rising on the action in terms of time, location and event:

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I remember the night my mother
was stung by a scorpion. Ten hours
of steady rain had driven him
to crawl beneath a sack of rice.

The poet uses free verse and the rhythms of the spoken word to create a poem that needs to be read aloud for its full impact. The setting is clearly rural and the reader expects the poem to move into tragic lament, as the narrator's mother has been bitten by a scorpion. But the surprise element is the incantatory rhythm that follows the dramatic opening, as the lines alternate between the frantic actions of the onlookers and the still writhing figure of the victim in the centre:

More candles, more lanterns, more neighbours,
more insects, and the endless rain.
My mother twisted through and through
groaning on a mat.

The personified and demonic scorpion vanishes as suddenly as he appeared, leaving behind shadows and poison:

Parting with his poison - flash
of diabolic tail in the dark room -
he risked the rain again.

The peasants who come 'like swarms of flies' invoke folk remedies and wisdom to comfort and cure, while the sceptical and rational father/husband tries a more prosaic remedy and sets fire to the bitten toe when neither curses nor blessings, nor 'powder, mixture, herb and hybrid' mitigate the effects of the sting.

While the simile used to introduce the peasants indicates that the narrator views the visitors as an irritant and a nuisance, the tone gradually softens as he realises that they are genuinely concerned about his mother and her pain. The chanting of the concerned neighbours takes on the rhythms of a prayer as they intone:

May he sit still, they said.
May the sins of your previous birth
be burned away tonight, they said.
May your suffering decrease
the misfortunes of your next birth, they said.
May the sum of evil

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balanced in this unreal world
against the sum of good
become diminished by your pain

The poem ends on a note of relief and benediction as the poison loses its power and the mother reclaims her traditional role of nobility and self-sacrifice. The undertones of fatalism and the quiet acceptance of suffering make this a poem that is grounded in an India that Ezekiel tries hard to claim as home, despite his doubts and insecurities about his role in it. One of his "Poster Poems" (209) refers to this dilemma when he says:

I've never been a refugee
except of the spirit,
a loved and troubled country
which is my home and enemy

"Night of the Scorpion" is a sympathetic portrayal of the conflicts between rationalism and superstition and while the poet provides the context, he is very much on the outside of the scene and maintains throughout the stance of a narrator and outsider.

If we read this poem in the context of Ezekiel's lifelong search for 'the exact name' we find that even by the end of the poem, despite the 'happy ending' the poet does not find what he is looking for in the practice of religion as he observes it around him. So in other poems we see how he decides to look at God directly and without the trappings of ritual. He has written a series of poems in which he talks to God on a one-to-one basis and discovers faith and belief for himself. The tone of these poems is very different from that of the others and the voice is a humbler one with the intellect striving to come to terms with inherited dictums of spirituality. In "Declaration"(34) he sets the tone as he writes:

Obedience to a comprehended law is freedom, peace and power. Creation moves in submission timelessly. Unyielding men are broken by the hours.
And look, the liberation! The poise of being one with God, the precious quietude of blood, the aftermath of bold acceptance. Intimation of some final good comes in surrender; waiting instead of seeking, wanting nothing, being nothing, like a crab or kingfisher by the water, in the sun, and lighted up within.

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The arrogance and alienation heard elsewhere has been replaced by a voice of supplication and the poet's self is in a receptive state to receive the grace of serenity and a sense of belonging.

(You can hear the poem on

www.bbc.co.uk/mobile/learning/bitesize/gcse/audio/download/eng_poems/story1_1.shtml, read an interesting interview about the poem on

www.bbc.co.uk/gcsebitesize/audio/english/pdf/eng_poems_11_night_of_the_scorpion.pdf and read an analysis on

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/english/poemscult/ezekielrev3.shtml>

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"GOODBYE PARTY FOR MISS PUSHPA T.S"

"GOODBYE PARTY FOR MISS PUSHPA T. S." is one of Ezekiel's *Very Indian Poems in Indian English* (1976). The important context to keep in mind while reading the poem is the long battle for legitimacy that Indian English writing has waged over the last century and the tussle over issues of language and authenticity. Ezekiel has the last laugh as he writes poems like "The Patriot", "The Professor", "Irani Restaurant Instructions" and "Soap".

His first caricature is of "The Railway Clerk" (184-185) whose monologue includes a complaint of his beleaguered lot and of the system that does not take care of hard-working and honest people like him. He is portrayed as the archetypal lower middle class man of India and that too in grammar that is authentic insofar as it reflects the kind of English that he is likely to speak. He says:

Everyday there is so much work
and I don't get overtime.
My wife is always asking for more money...

My job is such, no one is giving bribe,...

I wish I was bird...

I am doing my duty,
but who is appreciating?
Nobody, I am telling you...

Once a week, I see film
and then I am happy, but not otherwise.
Also I have good friends,
that is only consolation.
Sometimes we are meeting here or there

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and having long chat.
We are discussing country's problems.
Some are thinking of foreign
But due to circumstances, I cannot think.

This clerk would be hard put to be poetic about his very prosaic life and Ezekiel effectively projects the mundane life of this man caught in a bind of family responsibilities and lack of money.

The next poem is "Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S." (190 – 191) and in this poem the voice is that of the person who is speaking on behalf of the office colleagues bidding farewell to Miss Pushpa. He is typical in his exaggeration of her good qualities and Ezekiel pokes fun at him and the lady to whom the encomiums are addressed, as the speaker intones:

Miss Pushpa is smiling and smiling
even for no reason
but simply because she is feeling...

she is most popular lady
with men also and ladies also.
Whenever I asked her to do anything,
she was saying, 'Just now only
I will do it'. This is showing
good spirit...

Pushpa miss is never saying no."

The insincerity of his farewell is evident from his carelessness about exactly where Miss Pushpa belongs and he is more concerned about the fact that she "is coming from very high family" and that she is going abroad "to improve her prospect". By the end of the poem the speaker is so carried away with his own eloquence that he forgets who the guest of honour is and says that after the other speakers have spoken, he will ask Miss Pushpa to "do summing up". The poem has its moments of humour, but the tone is satirical and the reader cannot ignore the presence of the poet who stands above and outside the party to poke fun at everyone in it. Somewhere is the feeling that the speaker believes his use of English will confer status on him and gravity to the occasion, but the effect on the reader and listener is quite the opposite. The poet satirises those who insist

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on speaking in English for the social status they believe it bestows, without any reference to syntax, semantics or sincerity. On the other hand, he also has a dig at the critics of Indian English poetry, who insist that Indians should not write in this 'foreign' tongue, but write in their native language if they want to write 'authentic' poetry. The speaker of the poem is the male boss of Pushpa whose farewell party is the occasion of the poem. The speaker in the poem utters all the commonplaces appropriate for the occasion, along with the compliments about the guest of honour. He is not really clear about her exact genealogy or nature, but uses the occasion to talk about himself. The poem ends with him even forgetting that she is not going to be a secretary in the organisation much longer as he asks her to do the 'summing up' afterwards. Opinions remain divided about who Ezekiel is making fun of in this poem, but the reader should make this decision for her/himself.

Ezekiel is conscious of the status associated with the knowledge and use of English, and at the same time critical of a society that demands such pretension. In "Hangover" (232), which describes a typical scene of drunkenness and gluttony in a five-star hotel, he is quick to point out that the only language that can be heard there is English. In the poem "Soap" (269) he describes a hilarious encounter between a customer who is trying to buy "well-known brand" soap "for ordinary washing myself purposes", and an aggressive shopkeeper who palms off a "defective version" on him. All the politeness of the former and his efforts to speak in Hindi even though he claims "my Hindi is not so good as my English", come to naught. Finally he is forced to resort to shouting and vulgarity, but is silenced when he realises:

shopman is much bigger than me,
and I am not caring so much
for small defect in well-known brand soap.
So I'm saying
Alright OK Alright OK
this time I will take
but not next time.

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The poet also takes the opportunity in these 'Very Indian Poems in Indian English' to expose people like "The Patriot" (237) and the pathetic condition of those like "The Professor" (238). In the portrait of the former the poet includes all those attitudes which he is contemptuous of, and in language that is pompous and tautological. This patriot reads "Times of India/ To improve my English language" and anticipates a time in the future when "Everything is coming – Regeneration, Remuneration, Contraception". He talks blithely of the brotherhood of man and in the very next breath goes on to say:

In India also
Gujaraties, Maharashtrians, Hindiwallahs
All brothers –
Though some are having funny habits.
Still you tolerate me,
I tolerate you,
One day Ram Rajya is surely coming.

The portrait of the lonely professor is a more pathetic one, but Ezekiel does not spare him either as he puts in his words the subtle chauvinism of a man who takes pride in his sons who have cars and in his eleven grandchildren. The poem ends on a note that deflates the dignity of the old man who says:

You were so thin, like stick,
Now you are man of weight and consequence.
That is good joke.
If you are coming again this side by chance,
Visit please my humble residence also.
I am living just on opposite house's backside.

Finally, in "Irani Hotel Instructions" (240), first published in 1972, the poet gives a clue as to the kind of customers the hotel attracts as is clear from the instructions:

Do not write letter
Without order refreshment
Do not comb
Hair is spoiling floor
Do not make mischiefs in cabin
Our waiter is reporting.

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Ezekiel's English Usage

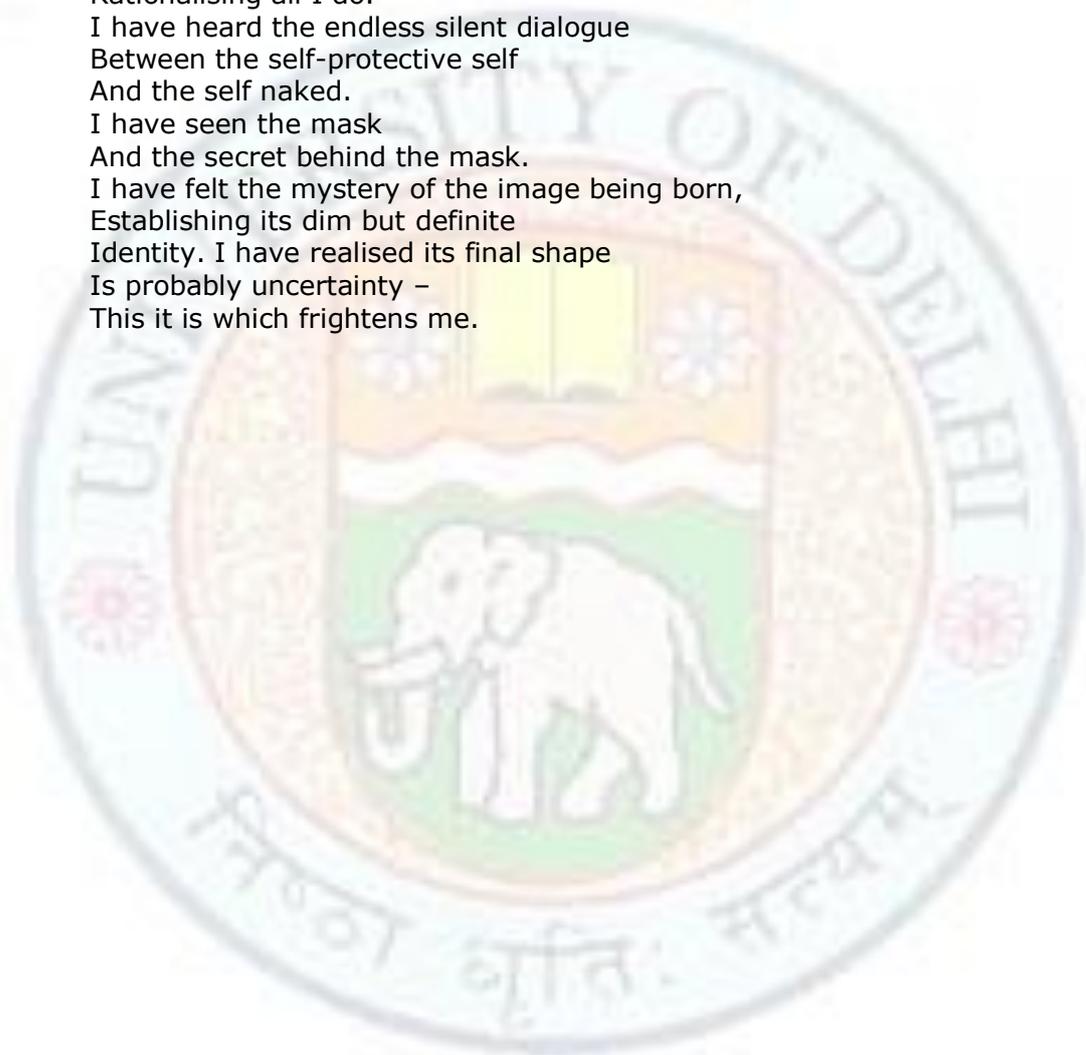
In the poems in which Ezekiel uses what he calls "Indian English", there are three dimensions to his attitude towards language. The first of these is an attitude of ridicule in which he makes fun of the syntactical and semantic errors common to non-native speakers of English. Secondly, he puts attitudes and stances in the mouths of these speakers, whom he believes he is superior to. He thus positions himself above them. Finally and most importantly, he is having a dig at the critics who harp endlessly on the importance of speaking in a 'native idiom' and shows how this idiom would sound in verse. The authentic and correct expression of his other poems indicates clearly that an Indian poet does not have to use incorrect grammar to proclaim his nationality in the community of poets. Parthasarathy (1976, page 8), however, is critical of Ezekiel's use of pidgin English and writes that "the jargon never rises above caricature" and does not see in Ezekiel's use of this kind of English any "colloquial reverberations" of the kind encountered in African usage. M.Sivaramakrishna (pages 12-13) does not share these views and says that Ezekiel's syntactical oddities in his 'Indian English poems' are used with a deliberate attempt to reveal the "implicit attitudes and the corresponding sensibility – a sensibility, which is no less comic than that of the Indian poet himself trying to write in a language which is not his by birth ...which in distorting formal English becomes emblematic of the Indo-English poet's own predicament. ...The implicit defiance in the poems relays itself both on the levels of grammar and syntax on one side and the muted rejection of native roots on the other by the poet himself." It is not poetry that Ezekiel is ridiculing. It is the usage itself and its effect on poetry. And the truth is that no poet attempts to write like this, as our poets are much more talented. Also Ezekiel's argument in the poems does not hold water because he was the only Indian English poet who attempted to write, even to ridicule, the Indian writing English.

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All others, at least while writing poetry, do not resort to expressions of the sort that Ezekiel portrayed, which means it is not really true.

The most appropriate conclusion to this note on Nissim Ezekiel would be a quotation from one of his poems, "What Frightens Me" (106):

I have long watched myself
Remotely doing what I had to do,
At times ashamed but always
Rationalising all I do.
I have heard the endless silent dialogue
Between the self-protective self
And the self naked.
I have seen the mask
And the secret behind the mask.
I have felt the mystery of the image being born,
Establishing its dim but definite
Identity. I have realised its final shape
Is probably uncertainty –
This it is which frightens me.



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Summary

This lesson on Nissim Ezekiel is an introduction to his life and his works and also takes a detailed look at three of his poems, prescribed for the BA (H) I Year English Honours Course of Delhi University.

Beginning with his early life and education, the reader is given an insight into the formative influences on his poetry, especially his Bene-Israeli Jewish inheritance and the fact of his being born in a time and place that contributed to his unique poetic style and craft. Ezekiel's wide-ranging experiences in the fields of journalism, theatre, literary criticism, editing, copywriting, teaching and even marketing all fed into his poems that reflect the worldview and angst of a man who is a constant seeker after truth and meaning in both art and life. Ezekiel wrote in the modernist tradition of Yeats, Pound and Eliot and his characteristic poetic stance of 'irony' is the signature that he appends to his work and this is what sets his poems apart from that of his predecessors writing in English in India.

The first poem to be analysed in detail is "Enterprise" and it is 'read' from the points- of-view of the personal and the communitarian and also as an expression of the anxieties attendant upon the search for the contours of one's national identity. This poem is a good example of the motif of the quest that is a recurrent preoccupation for this writer. The next two poems "The Night of the Scorpion" and "Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S." are more overtly 'Indian' in their content and setting. The former is a vivid description of a traumatic episode in the poetic persona's childhood and this poem explores the dilemma of a man living in a social and cultural milieu whose beliefs and customs he finds it difficult to identify with. The latter poem is a deft and ironic caricature of hypocrisy and pretence at multiple levels.

As the poet laureate of the ordinary and the commonplace, Ezekiel transmutes the mundane into the magical with the power of his imagination. As the first

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major poet writing in English in independent India, Ezekiel played a major role in the formation of the genre of Indian English poetry and many poets like Adil Jussawalla, R. Parthasarathy, A. K. Mehrotra and Keki N. Daruwalla, were inspired by his example and continue to acknowledge their debt to this creative artist. Based in Bombay, that is the location of his poetry and the site of his poetic journeys, Ezekiel ensured that this city was to dominate the Indian English poetry scene for many decades, as he was the centre around whom many aspiring poets found their voice and vocation.



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