

## A GLIMPSE OF REALISM IN THE POETRY OF NISSIM EZEKIEL

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### Abstract

*This paper aims to study and analyze the realistic elements in the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel, who lived between 1924 and 2004. For purpose of study, the poems 'Night of the Scorpion', 'The Island', 'Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.' and 'The Professor' have been considered. Ezekiel's poetry is marked by simplicity and a conversational tone reflecting on the vagaries in Indian society. Reality meets poetry and a delightful confluence emerges. The poems reflect belief in superstitions, mother's love, importance given to religion, sense of isolation in a big city and Indian English, along with other quintessential Indian traits and qualities. Conferred with the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1983 for his work, 'Latter Day Psalms', Nissim Ezekiel was also honored with Padma Shri, in 1988 for his contribution to Indian English literature. Besides poetry, he also wrote plays, was an art critic and the editor of the Indian branch of PEN International. An Indian Jewish poet of the twentieth century, he enriched the literary scene and is considered as the father of post colonial Indian English poetry. He taught English at Mithibai College, Bombay and University of Bombay. He was a visiting faculty at several universities in the world, including National University of Singapore, University of Leeds, and University of Chicago.*

**Keywords:** Conversational, Realistic, Traits, Religion, Qualities

Ezekiel was a founding figure in modern Indian English Literature. Replacing the old tradition, new English poetry appears in Indian literary scene as Ezekiel emerges with his poetry. He depicts the real image of modern India in his poetry. He makes India a paradise for poets and rules over the Indian poetic realm as the prince of poets balancing two worlds: morally cultured India and Westernized India. (Islam 33)

Ezekiel depicts Indian life and customs in his poetry. The thematic content of Ezekiel's poetry can be split into three segments – themes of interaction, themes of introspection and themes being Indian in content and structure. City, village, Nature and women make up much of the first part. Ezekiel has spent practically his entire life in Bombay; it becomes natural that the city should have left its marks on his poetry. (Chelliah 1)

In 'The Night of the Scorpion', set in a rural area, the speaker's mother has been stung by a scorpion that had sought shelter, from the incessant rain, in their house.

***"Ten hours  
of steady rain had driven him  
to crawl beneath a sack of rice.  
Parting with his poison - flash  
of diabolic tail in the dark room -  
he risked the rain again.'(Ezekiel, lines 2-7)***

After accomplishing its task, the scorpion darted out again.

The poem, published in 1965, is realistic in its portrayal of the house that has mud walls and the

lack of electricity, as this is apparent from the peasants searching for the scorpion in the light of their candles and lanterns. A large part of rural India was yet to get access to electricity. The subsequent activities reflect the superstitious attitude of the neighbors who come to see the lady. They pray that the sins of her previous life be purged in the pain that she is undergoing and that her sufferings in the next birth would reduce on account of her present misery. Though superstitious, the neighbors are concerned and come to meet the woman stung by the scorpion. In their own way, they want to help and offer solace and try to come up with natural remedies to relieve her agony. This kind of solidarity and reaching out to members in the community is an Indian trait and peculiar to the Indian sub-continent.

The relationship, especially the human relationship is the strongest among the villagers. This is the most ideal humanitarian aspect of village life. The feelings of oneness and belongingness are specific to the rustic people. Indian villagers are the model for the thick fellow feelings with sympathy and empathy. It is unconditional and without expecting any reward. (Antony 49)

Religion is given a lot of importance in the society and this is seen in summoning the priest to play his part in providing relief for the woman. She was subject to herbal medicine, prayers, incantations, hordes of visitors yet her torment continued as she writhed and groaned, till the effect of the sting remained in her body. Her husband doesn't involve himself in the efforts undertaken by the neighbors and attempts to find a cure in his own way by trying out different remedies even going to the extent of burning the part of the body where the scorpion has stung his wife.

In the end, the effect of the sting wears off and after her twenty hour ordeal, the woman who is also a mother expresses thankfulness and gratitude that the scorpion bit her and not her children. A mother is traditionally associated with selfless love and giving and this is seen in the character of the woman who stoically embraces the situation and is thankful that her children were spared from being stung by the scorpion.

Ezekiel's 'Island' is a vivid portrayal of Mumbai, or the erstwhile Bombay, the city of his birth, where he lived and died. This poem takes a realistic look at Mumbai and states that one does not find a scene that is typical of an island here. An island conjures up images of vacation, sparkling waters, glittering sand, a clear blue sky, palm trees dotting the horizon and a life of leisure. On the other hand, the city is filled with slums and skyscrapers. The beauty of an island is not evident here. John Donne proclaimed in Meditation XVII, "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main." Contrary to this sentiment, the poet experiences an overwhelming sense of isolation and keeps his thoughts to himself.

***"I am here to find my way in it.***

***Sometimes I cry for help***

But mostly keep my own counsel." (Ezekiel, lines 5-7)

Despite obvious drawbacks, the city is not without advantages which are evident in the form of opportunities for growth and enhancement as expressed in the lines,

***"Bright and tempting breezes***

Flow across the island," (Ezekiel, lines 11-12)

The poet accepts the situation as it is and is content to remain in the city. This would strike a chord with the residents of the city that never sleeps. In 'Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.', a

Farewell party is in progress, to bid adieu to Miss Pushpa, who would be soon going abroad, for better prospects. The poem is in the form of a monologue and is a speech delivered in honor of Miss Pushpa. There is a penchant among Indians for speaking in English and a brand of 'Indian English' is often spoken. It is this aspect which finds expression in the poem. The poem offers a satirical look at how some people in India speak English, a device that the poet presumably used to get an Indian reader to laugh at himself. The poem misuses the present continuous tense and uses turns of phrases and syntax found in the Indian language, like when Ezekiel writes, "Whatever I or anybody is asking/ she is always saying yes." The poem also hints at dramatic irony if the reader infers that the speaker's audience at the farewell party doesn't know that his English is grammatically incorrect. (Gustafson) Using English was also considered a sign of superiority and upward mobility. The speaker blissfully continues without being aware of or inhibited about the apparent flaws in his use of the language. Another realistic element in the poem is the fascination that Indians have for going abroad in search of greener pastures. People from all parts of the country try to seek opportunities on foreign shores. The reader is informed that Miss Pushpa hails from a good family and is of a pleasant disposition, thus making her popular among both men and women. She would be leaving for a foreign country and the speaker praises her, extolling her virtues and wishes her well.

*"Whenever I asked her to do anything,  
she was saying, 'Just now only  
I will do it.' That is showing  
good spirit. I am always  
appreciating the good spirit.*

*Pushpa Miss is never saying no.  
Whatever I or anybody is asking  
she is always saying yes,  
and today she is going  
to improve her prospect*

and we are wishing her bon voyage." (Ezekiel, lines 29-39)

Ezekiel accomplishes the effect of parody without sounding patronizing and the poem serves a slice of reality laced with gentle humor. In 'The Professor' a retired professor, who taught Geography, comes across a student of his and speaks to him. The poem is in the form of a monologue, with only the professor speaking. Through the monologue, Ezekiel brings out typical Indian elements like pride in sons holding good positions at work, daughters being married off to suitable men and boasting in the number of grandchildren. Men and women are stereotyped in the sense of men having worldly riches and women being happily married off. In India, it is a common conversational topic to discuss about health and the way a person appears. Professor Sheth proudly points out that he is in good health, by saying that he has "No diabetes, no blood pressure, no heart attack." He credits this to sound habits inculcated and practiced in his youth. He comments that his student used to be as thin as a stick previously but has since put on weight. Weight, apart from physical weight, can also be symbolic of the position held by the person. As seen in 'Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa TS', Indian English makes a presence here too. There is a distinct preference for using the present continuous tense as reflected in these lines:

*"Whole world is changing. In India also*

***We are keeping up. Our progress is progressing.***

***Old values are going, new values are coming.***

***Everything is happening with leaps and bounds.***

I am going out rarely, now and then" (Ezekiel, lines 17-21)

In giving rhyming names to his daughters, Sarala and Tarala, the professor exhibits a trait that is commonly seen among Indian parents. He focuses the talk on himself and doesn't leave much room for the other person to speak. Considering the poems taken for study, it can be said that Nissim Ezekiel uses a lot of realistic elements in his poetry, pertaining to India and Indians. Nissim Ezekiel has given Indian poetry 'a local habitation and a name,' Ezekiel's commitment is to India and he deals with various aspects of Indian life, the superstitious rural people, the Babu English and the city life in Bombay. Ezekiel creates Indian characters in their situation. He also recreates their language as well. His 'Very Indian poems in Indian English' are not caricatures. His language is typical Indian English. He creates new idiom. He brought everyday conversational language very close to poetry. (Hussain and Zaidi 232)

The poems taken up for close reading look at glimpses of realistic elements found in Nissim Ezekiel's poetry. These elements are present even today in Indian society.

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