

NISSIM EZEKIEL: QUEST FOR IDENTITY

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Abstract

Nissim Ezekiel, one of the greatest post-independence Indian poets, like many other modern poets, can be seen constantly making a quest for identity in the fast developing materialistic society of metropolitan city. Hailing from the Bene Israel community of Israel who migrated to Bombay, driven out by Muslims, he descends from the rich ancestry but is always conscious of finding his identity in India. He satisfies himself by admitting that he is a Bombay city poet living amid Indian Hindu, Muslim and Christian friends. But, still he makes a quest for identity. His quest is not only exclusive but also that of any 20th century man of wasteland society. Like orthodox Hindu he thinks of going to some Guru, but the sceptic in him fails to find his faith in any of them. He meditates independently to release his kundalini but fails to reach the destination. He abandons religion and tries to find his identity in marital love and even in post-marital love, but is not satisfied. Ultimately, having abandoned everything, he meditates upon God without the help of any person or sect. And, eventually finds his identity as an independent educated human being on the earth who is respected by everyone.

Paper

Today, the metropolitan cities are full of multifarious social, political, economic and religious activities, yet the people living in them suffer a loss of identity. The word 'identity' refers to one's individuality, one's uniqueness one's personality, one's recognition in the society, the strength of which one draws from his roots. It also refers to one's sense of belonging to one's origin. In most of the metropolitan cities, people come to settle from different lands, countries, communities and religions to live their domestic lives and vocation. But as the time passes, they go far from their origin; their generations come after generations and with a long span of time, they lose their original identity. Then comes the phase of void in their lives and they try to make a quest for their identity. This quest often leads to their hopelessness, faithlessness, rootlessness, aloofness and disintegration. But there are some who try one thing or other and in their trial ultimately succeeds in finding for themselves a line or philosophy on which they live in faith throughout their lives. This faith becomes their identity.

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Nissim Ezekiel (1924-2004), the 20th century Indo-English poet, was a descendant of a minority community of Bene Israel; which is regarded as a lost Tribe of Israel, which settled in the metropolitan city of Bombay. He was the son and the grandson of Ezekiels, who were the Shanwar Telis of their times. His ancestors took up the profession of oil-pressing as an earning source. As to Hindus, 'Shanivar' or Saturday is considered as inauspicious, which is holy for the Bene Israelites, who considered Saturday as the most auspicious of all the days of the week. It seems, the 'Shanwar Telis'¹ is derived from the Indian expression of 'Saturday'. Ezekiel admits his origin in his poem "Background Casually" as thus:

"My ancestors, among the castes,
Were aliens crushing seed for bread.
(The hooded bullock made his rounds)" 2 (CP,180)

The manner in which Ezekiel's ancestors crushed seed for oil is the same as practiced in India by rural oil extractors.

Ezekiel's schooling commenced at the small convent school of Jesus and Mary in Bombay and then gradually he shifted to Antonio D' Souza High School, where the famous Indian Hindi Film 'Showman' , Raj Kapoor became his friend and was his class fellow too.³

Nissim's favourite subject at the academic level was one and only English. In an interview with Behram Contractor, he tells that he wrote his first poem when he was barely nine or ten years old.⁴

Ezekiel had a great love for Bombay. Although, he tries to find his roots here, yet he has not been able to fully establish his identity. His quest for identity remained throughout a struggle in his life. Though he thinks himself to be rootless and disintegrated, yet he satisfies himself by feeling as a denizen of Bombay: "I feel I am a Bombay city poet...

I am oppressed and sustained by Bombay."⁵

In many of his Bombay poems, we find his love for this metropolitan city. As in the poem "Island", he says:

"I cannot leave the island,
I was born here and belong." (CP, 182)

He once said: "I would never leave Bombay- it's a series of commitments."⁶ He also said:

"It is only here in Bombay that I have sought jobs, not in Calcutta or Delhi or Madras. In New York, you may get ten times the salary, but I was not interested in that."⁷

The problem of modern poets is man's recognition in the society and his search for an answer to the most unanswerable question about life and death, how to conquer the anxiety, how to endure life of vicissitudes and face death. Every modern poet is making a quest for his identity and with experience paves a comfortable way for his living as a man and as a poet. Since, Ezekiel is one of the greatest modern poets of India, he cannot be considered as an exception to this tradition and has therefore much in common with the 20th century modern English and American poets. That is why, we see in his poetry a constant quest for identity in the fast developing materialistic society around him. He endeavours to center himself within his own self in order to discover his roots both as an individual and as an artist. In fact, by endeavouring to discover his roots he takes up the problem of rootlessness of 20th century society at large of metropolitan cities of India, of which he himself is an active member. In metropolitan cities like Delhi, Kolkata, Madras and Mumbai most people have become conscious of their rootlessness. Their generations have been living in these cities, since time immemorial, and by now with this long passage of time they have forgotten their original hometowns and their old social ties. This has resulted into a sense of alienation among them and hence loss of peace of mind. They are yearning in desire to go back to their past culture but the complexities of the present do not allow them to go back. They are at a loss to know how to regain the lost paradise and how to lead a peaceful normal life. In order to escape the most horrible pangs of alienation and rootlessness the modern men often join some religious sect so that they can have a sense of belonging at least to that sect. The old institution of the family is a worse victim to the alienation in metropolitan cities. The problem of Ezekiel is the problem of a 20th century man of metropolitan city.

Ezekiel paints the psychology of the modern townsmen in the poem "Family". The institution of the family is the worst hit in the townsmen of today.

The alienated members of a modern family confess to a psychiatrist that they are sick:

“We cannot find our roots here,
don't know where to go, Sir,
don't know what to do, Sir,
need a Guru, need a God
Need to find our roots, Sir,
All of us are sick, Sir.”⁸

Ezekiel's poetry is the result of what we call today 'Urban Catharsis'. His poetry is the natural outcome of his release of tensions created by diaspora during the migration of the Jewish community from Israel to India. The isolated poet in quest for identity wanted to belong to the sect of a Guru so that his low caste and forgotten creed of a modern man remain concealed. But when he looks at the mushroom growth of several Gurus in India and scandals connected with them, he loses his faith in the Guru also and becomes hopeless.

He laments this loss of faith in the poem "Guru", thus:

“But then we learn
the saint is still a faithless friend,
obstinate in argument,
ungrateful for favours done,
hard with servants and the poor,
discourteous to disciples, especially men,
condescending, even rude,
to visitors (except the foreigners)
and overscrupulous in checking
the accounts of the ashram.
He is also rather fat.
If saints are like this,
what hope is there then for us?” (CP,192)

Ezekiel now was free to write his poems at his secluded retreat. As he himself has described in his renowned autobiographical poem "Background Casually" that he lived only with "Philosophy, Poverty and Poetry" (CP,179). Having his faith in all external moorings, he now tried to find his identity as a lover of a woman where he could feel important. He got involved in a full-fledged affair with the poet Linda Hess. Also, many of his poems include his story of man-woman love affair. But, even extra marital relations did not provide him with mental peace. "In Emptiness" Ezekiel talks of discord and harmony between marital relations of man and wife.

Even if there is no spiritual harmony between them, they have to live in reconciliation and compromise. Even if they are partners of "marriage in decay", they have to live in compromise:

“As man and wife; let them quarrel,
Make love or live occasionally
Apart, and then be reconciled,
But let them not , indifferently,
Empty the house of words and music,
Partners of a marriage in decay.” (CP, 12)

When all the objects of the 'external' world failed to give him solace, he was disappointed. He was still in search of his identity, his roots, his origin. And this time in his new quest for identity, he now tried his hand at LSD in April 1967 at the age of forty-two.

After taking LSD, he made a rendezvous with his own soul. Ezekiel admits that after his LSD experience 'his appreciation of music and art was broadened and intensified.'⁹ LSD had an awakening impact on his life. He started believing the presence of God and developed a strong faith for Him and as a result of his deep mystical vision he became a vegetarian and remained a vegetarian throughout his life. He wrote several books one after the other. His Selected Poems gives a complete record of the revolutionary development of his mind and art.

The first book in Selected Poems is, "A Time To Change", (1952) which is dedicated to his mother. The state of mind of the poet in this book is one of a confused person about whom the book of Revelation (3.16) tells, "So because you are lukewarm-neither hot nor cold. I am about to spit you out of my mouth." At the outset, he is an atheist; he has no faith but he believes in his mother's belief that God is omnipresent. Thus, he is a man hanged between belief and non- belief and so his attitude to everything is of a lukewarm person. And for this reason his thirty-one poems under "A Time To Change" revolve around the theme of confusion between belief and non- belief. He says that he does not understand what is God, what is Philosophy. All these are merely dreams for him that must be testified:

“Flawless doctrines, certainty of God,
These are merely dreams; but I am human
And must testify to what they mean.” (CP, 5)

words:

“Polish up your alien
techniques of observations,
while the city burns.” (CP, 237)

The poet is caught in the confinement of rootlessness and hopelessness. In order to get peace of mind, he says that people at large should have a faith in some godhead.

It is high time when

“Time is ripe for Saibaba,
Time is ripe for Muktananda.
Let father go to Rajneesh Ashram.
Let mother go to Geeta classes.
What we need is meditation .
Need to find our roots, Sir.
All of us are sick, Sir.” 10

But when he does not find solace in any one of the godheads as mentioned in the above lines, he abandons all godheads and surrenders at the feet of the ‘one’ Absolute God. He feels that only direct appeal to God without the help of any of the agents of God, can alone deliver the sick society of the 21st century from the hurries and worries, flurries and scurreries of life. In “Latter-Day Psalms”, he arrives at the final destination. He abandons all his ego in favour of surrender at the feet of God who listens to the prayers of the suffering humanity:

“I worship the God who regards
the prayer of the destitute,
who hears the groaning of the
prisoner, and of those who are
appointed to death.” (CP, 259)

Thus, having confronted various external elements, Ezekiel goes on shifting his experiences in the process of *neti, neti*, and ultimately, his ego gets evaporated and he finds his final identity as a devotee of God Absolute.

References

1. Cited in Nissim Ezekiel, *The Authorized Biography* by R.Raj Rao, New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2000, p.4. To be cited hereafter as *The authorized biography* with relevant page nos. under the notes.
2. Nissim Ezekiel, *Collected Poems 1952-1958*, Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1989, with an introduction by Gieve Patel. Textual quotations from Ezekiel’s poems will be largely cited from this book and this book will be abbreviated as CP with relevant page nos. within the text.
3. *The Authorized Biography*, p.23.
4. *Ibid*, p.26.
5. *Ibid*, p.36.
6. *Ibid*, p.33.
7. *Ibid*.
8. Nissim Ezekiel, “Family”, *Latter- Day Psalms*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982, p.29.
9. Cited in *The Authorized Biography*, p.179.
10. Nissim Ezekiel, “Family”, *Latter- Day Psalms*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982, p.29.