



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 3. Issue.2.,2016 (April-June)

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

RELIGIOUS ASPECT OF NISSIM EZEKIEL'S POEMS

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ABSTRACT

Nissim Ezekiel, a phenomenal Indian English poet of great merit, stressed majorly on Religion and Culture in his poems. Seeking the 'Invisible' or 'Unknown' was the sole objective of human life according to him and the same thought has been reflected in his poems. For him, poetry is outcome of various thoughts in his mind. Double simultaneous journey, temporal and spiritual, is outcome of various thoughts in his mind. He has very excellently mingled materialism with spiritualism, though fact is that spirituality has its separate place and materialistic objects affect his views on religion to an extent but materialistic facets, mental and intellectual fatigue only renders the way of spiritualism and religious ways. is an echo of Indian mythological principles and a thought which reminds us of T.S Eliot, but Eliot because of being foreigner could not be considered to be so close to Indian culture. This paper is an attempt to throw light on Ezekiel's spiritualistic point which rendered a different height to his poetic career.

Key words: Religious, spiritualism, materialism, culture.

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Nissim Ezekiel, a phenomenal Indian English poet of great merit, stressed majorly on Religion and Culture in his poems. Seeking the 'Invisible' or 'Unknown' was the sole objective of human life according to him and the same thought has been reflected in his poems. Ezekiel's religious and spiritual journey influences people of deep intellectual thought. Ezekiel's poetry imparts reflection of various mythological theories. His poetry exhibits his vast knowledge of all religious trends and fluctuations. The profound influence of his jewish origin is quite obvious and the impact of Indian culture and influence of western spiritual giants like T.S Eliot, W.B Yeats and W.H Auden is also visible. Although it is true that Ezekiel follows his own genre of poets yet maintains his own uniqueness. They all could give him a way to move, their thoughts affected Ezekiel but his own ideas also find proper expression in his poetry. His way of handling spiritual aspect is not altogether akin to any of them. For him, poetry is outcome of various thoughts in his mind. Double simultaneous journey, temporal and spiritual, is outcome of various thoughts in his mind.

He has very excellently mingled materialism with spiritualism, though fact is that spirituality has its separate place and materialistic objects affect his views on religion to an extent but materialistic facets, mental and intellectual fatigue only renders the way of spiritualism and religious ways. William Walsh is right while

finding in Ezekiel a 'vigilant observer' of the outer and the inner world and discovers in his poetry, "the union of life and peace."¹ His poetry can very easily be considered a perfect blend of visible and invisible, visual aspects give way to reach the invisible which is common practice of almost all religious poets of his genre.

There is always a point of discussion for critics of Ezekiel whether he accepted himself as he was cautious about his Jewish origin and the culture has an impact on his poetry, but the common verdict is that Ezekiel's spiritual faith is parallel to the Indian mythological thoughts; which basically is the outcome of his Indian-ness. He could not deny his closeness to culture and cultural values. There is an echo of Indian mythological principles and a thought which reminds us of T.S Eliot, but Eliot because of being foreigner could not be considered to be so close to Indian culture. If Waste Land can be recognized as an epic of twentieth century where the vulgarities of world are given expression in telling detail, Ezekiel's poetry also can be kept in the same category as both poets stressed the importance of ancient Vedas and the principles that make for a strong cultural ethos.

Eliot, after a few modifications, intends to convince his readers that ancient values are important for present day conditions and in order to restore peace men, should go back to the shelter of Dharma. Ezekiel's traditional values are transparently clear from his objectivity towards himself, which is also an Upanishadic quality. Ezekiel does not restrict his thoughts; he does not circumscribe himself to any single doctrine of spiritualism rather he speaks about all established principles and beliefs. This is the greatness of the poet that he does not speak in favour of any religious doctrine neither he is against any religious dogma. He takes numerous examples showing his beliefs in Hindu mythology, in his 'Tribute to the Upanishads' the poet writes:

"For the present, this is enough,
That I am free
To be the self in me, which is not somebody,
Not at any rate,
The mortal me,
But the eye of the eyes,
That is trying to see."²

These lines remind us of kathopnishada (2/2/11) which says that the Sun which is the sole reason of visibility of all eyes, is unaffected by the pain and suffering of all individual eyes in the same way that the soul of all the souls, Supreme Soul, remains unaffected by the sufferings of all individual souls it animates. He is equally enthusiastic while taking examples from Bible. The influence of the Bible on was never insular in his approach. He surely was not in the category of narrow minded religious believers who worship their own Gods. He is quite conscious of spontaneity of thoughts, which makes his poetry remarkable good. In order to maintain his own identity in the field of poetry and to give genuine thoughts, Ezekiel does not believe in any type of spiritual effort or renunciation like the common genre of philosophers.

His approach and his theories are entirely distinct. He speaks of the type of man who opens the door by laying himself bare and still for Him to walk in. In a different sense he speaks of surrendering himself to the will of God, which is not very easy. This echo for cultural values in his poetry prompts him to go to the shelter of old traditional and conceptual aspects of culture. T.S Eliot, who is influence upon him calls in 'Burnt Norton' descending lower to the 'world of perpetual solitude' and:

"internal darkness, deprivation
And destitution of all property,
Desiccation of the world of sense,
Evacuation of the world of fancy
Inoperancy of the world of spirit."³

In such a situation Eliot wants to stand still and wait without any hope. This is the right way to search for the way towards God, according to Eliot. This requires devotee to be full of strength and patience, Ezekiel does not expect such type of devotion from the side of human bodies. He seeks total self surrender in the way where

the devotee has to wait for the Master to come and take him in His refuge. Even the consequences of his kind of surrender are better.

“Obedience to comprehend 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 of kingfisher by the water, in the sun, and lighted up within.”⁴

Firm determination, to confess the guilt and not to hide, is required to move towards the destination as according to Ezekiel, man had forgotten the final destination which is abode of God only and in order to get back to the right path divine qualities are required. Instead of facing and rectifying our faults we seek to conceal them, which is again a sin according to poet and creates hindrance in reaching back our goal, that is salvation. Instead of realizing our identity with all men confusedly, we try to become exceptional in our quest of the God, which can never abide in time. A blur state of mind cannot help people, to find truth should be the only objective of a man’s life. Ezekiel states, in many of his poems, the consequences of such type of confused state of mind where accomplishments can’t even be imagined. Our search never finishes and alienated from God and it is not even remote from humanity. His faith in common goodness gives men mental peace as seeking identity is not an absurd deed but thinking about settlement of life is more important and along with this, men should think about getting redemption from human flaws which are the utmost obstacles in the way of spiritual objectives.

Expecting happiness in life is null and void, as contentment never comes because of these shortcomings of our personality. Ezekiel has shown perturbed self of human being, which needs gratification. Human beings can’t find that bliss, which is devoid of purification of human soul as purged soul alone can guarantee salvation. Purgation of human soul is possible only through suffering. Ezekiel advocates that suffering should not be taken as negative all the time as suffering gives us tolerance power which again is ethereal power. Suffering gives human beings an understanding with the common world, which prompts men to think something beyond these pangs and torments of the world. Worldly creatures don’t meet their aspirations and expectations that force them to seek out protection anywhere else. So, tortures of the world are not to be taken negatively, they have their own purpose and in His own way, Almighty teach men to believe in the existence of governing power of the world. Ezekiel’s words are easy to understand but thoughts are very complex and vague which gives critics a way to find different interpretations but the reality is that even the simplest of his poems has deeper meaning but there is a need to have deeper insight to probe into mind of person who is putting forth such intricate thoughts which give bona fide meaning of life.

Ezekiel is neither a contemplative philosopher who emphasizes upon abandoning the world to get salvation and ancient ways of chanting mantras like ancient Indians and Christian Existentialist nor is he quite contrary to them; he favours firm determination to walk the path of surrender as revealed in the light of wisdom. And this path in any walk of life or poetry can only be called the sadhana for him. This theory of having faith in oneself is very close to the theory of karma as mentioned in Bhagvad Gita. Even T.S Eliot who was a major influence upon him favoured same theory. It is difficult to say whether Ezekiel owed to his Indian origin or to T.S Eliot for this. It is not that Ezekiel has mere faith; his spirituality is a journey for him. He never travelled in the dark, he only stumbled into his path and then traverses the entire length of faith that he speaks of a direct encounter with the God who illumines the world as well as him.

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4. Nissim Ezekiel, ‘Collected Poems’, New Delhi, O.U.P, 2005, 234.