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NISSIM EZEKIEL: SENSE OF BELONGING TO INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The present article deals with Nissim Ezekiel's sense of belonging to India. His emotional attachment to India and the manner in which he celebrates his Indianism in his poetry show intense devotion to the country as a whole. Ezekiel explored widely through Indian cultures and what his eyes caught is his poetry and it is the real image of modern India. Ezekiel loves India from the bottom of his heart. He broke the fantasy of Indian writers that they could do better in the west and thus became the role model so far as the belongingness to India was concerned. He celebrates India in his poems in various ways depending upon his mood. He expresses typical disgust at the backwardness and the havoc wrought by westernization. His poetry is an arch dome made from Indian culture but a little damaged by westernization. The focus has been on how his love to India reflects in his poetry, how he has attacked on the damages in Indian culture caused by either westernization or backwardness and finally, how he has made feel other India poets that they can do best by not withdrawing from India.

Key words: westernization, commitment, backwardness, devotional, immorality

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Nissim Ezekiel is a modern Indo-Anglican poet for whom India is his motherland. In spite of the fact that he comes of a Jewish parentage, his emotional attachment to India and the manner in which he celebrates his Indianism in his poetry show intense devotion to the country as a whole. He is steeped and soaked in Indian life. But there is colouring of westernization. Ezekiel's Indianness lies in his commitment to this country and in his earnest and sincere endeavor to bring about certain improvements in the depressing, degrading and disgusting conditions of life through his poetry. There are many poems wherein he celebrates India in various ways depending upon his mood. Sometimes he is devotional as in "In India", sometimes he is intensely passionate about its ancestry and tradition as in "Background, Casually", yet at times he is a critic of its age worn traditions, superstitions and hypocrisy as in "Night of the Scorpion" and often he scoffs the hovering immorality. He expresses typical disgust at the backwardness and the havoc wrought by westernization.

Ezekiel loves India from the bottom of his heart. In his essay "Naipaul's India and Mine", he writes "I love India, I expect nothing in return, because critical, skeptical love does not beget love".<sup>i</sup> His love for India is different from that of VS Naipaul or anyone else. For him, India is not merely a crowd of the noisy cities but her people are innocent and peace-loving and Ezekiel has deep and long connections. So he says, "A man can do something for and in his environment by being fully what he is, by not withdrawing from it. I have not withdrawn from India".<sup>ii</sup>

When Nissim was in England, he was able to view life in India objectively. He realized that Bombay was the only place where he felt completely at ease, even though there were many things about the city of which he was a critic. He felt that the Indians were under an illusion that they would do better in the west. He could never share their optimism that one could be successful in a western country. "Indians who find work abroad, do not have a sense of belonging to any place,"<sup>iii</sup> he said to Neema Kamdar in an interview.

When he was in England he was very much home-sick, as reflects in the poem "Something to Pursue":

And how I had departed form the city  
With intention to return, and what I had become  
By merely touching with my fingertips  
The tired world. To save myself  
From what the city had made of me, I returned  
As intended to the city I had Known,  
Pity for myself suggested this  
And pity for the world.<sup>iv</sup>

There may be many boring incidents in Indian culture and society, but Nissim objects to the word hate in his relationship with India and especially with Bombay. In this context, Rao writes:

He has never felt alienated anywhere in India, though he regards himself a Bombayite...He objects to the word 'hate' when I tell him that his relationship with Bombay is a love-hate relationship. 'It's only love' he says. What he loves most about the city is that it gives him a 'sense of belonging' and this is not something he can say of any other city in the world.<sup>v</sup>

He often feels, "I would never leave Bombay; it's a series of commitments."<sup>vi</sup> He also states, "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."<sup>vii</sup> In some poems about Bombay he uses the third-person narrative but this is only a strategy, a mask for the poet persona. The details are autobiographical and Nissim relies here on personal experiences as in "A Morning Walk" he says:

"His native place he could not shun,  
The marsh where things are what they seem?"<sup>viii</sup>

In the poem "In India", India virtually becomes Bombay and Bombay a microcosm of India and in the poem "Island" Nissim firmly expresses his commitment to India:

"I cannot leave the island,  
I was born here and belong."<sup>ix</sup>

Again in the following famous concluding lines from "Background, Casually", there also echoes the same thing; no other place than India can be his Mecca:

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,<sup>x</sup>

Owing to the corruption, he feels somewhat bitterness in his heart that is reflected in some of his poems. But the bond of the sense of belonging to India is so strong that it remains firm against all odds. And his commitment proves auspicious as he assumes in the "Poster Poems-V":

I've never been a refugee  
except of the spirit,  
a loved and troubled country  
which is my home and enemy.<sup>xi</sup>

Indeed, he has tried to be authentically Indian without having the faults of his fellow practitioners of verse. His poetry is the replica of Indian culture whether it may be called pure Indian or hybrid. He believes with Yeats that:

"All that we did, all that we said or sang  
Must come from contact with the soil, from that  
Contact everything Antaeus-like grew strong."<sup>xii</sup>

Thanks to this thinking, his poetry becomes the ne plus ultra of the Indian environment. Even as a critic, he does not forgive any poet or painter who suffers from an overdose of westernization. He doesn't like FN Souza for his reckless virtuosity, nor does he approve of Jehangir Sabavala for his superficial imitation of the west. Instead, he likes Bhupen Khakar and Rasik Raval. He likes the former because "His themes are the Hindu temple, the Hindu house, the Hindu café and the 'pan shop'...The colour patterns in the Hindu themes are deeply Hindu in sensibility; red, black, yellow and saffron in bold and fantastic forms."<sup>xiii</sup> He likes Rasik Raval for his Hindu pattern making and lyricism. His admiration for Jamini Roy is aroused by the fact that he revived the primitive simplicity of the folk art of the villages of India:

He started with a different style,  
He travelled, so he found his roots .  
His rage became a quite smile  
Prolific in its proper fruits.<sup>xiv</sup>

According to Ezekiel, "To be in the swim of the contemporary art movement and at the same time to assert a racial heritage that is dormant is a way of being new which, in my opinion, has an absolute value. It opens a vein of creative responsibility."<sup>xv</sup> This is equally true about Ezekiel's own achievement in poetry. He has been alive to every new experiment made in the west, yet he has retained the characteristic Indianness in his works.

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<sup>i</sup> As Quoted in Adil Jussawalla, ed. *New Writing in India* (New Delhi: Penguin 1987) 89.

<sup>ii</sup> As Quoted in Jussawalla 88.

<sup>iii</sup> Neema Kamdar, "Towards Better Verse", *Mid-Day* 24 Dec. 1994: Supplement, 3.

<sup>iv</sup> Leela Gandhi and Thieme John, eds. *Nissim Ezekiel Collected Poems* (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2005)19.

<sup>v</sup> R. Raj Rao, *Nissim Ezekiel: The Authorized Biography* (New Delhi: Viking Penguin Books, 2000) 31-32.

<sup>vi</sup> G. Damodar, "Search for Identity: An Estimate of Ezekiel's Poetry", *The Journal of Indian Writing in English* (July 1986): 58.

<sup>vii</sup> Kamdar 3.

<sup>viii</sup> John 119.

<sup>ix</sup> John 182.

<sup>x</sup> John 181.

<sup>xi</sup> John 209.

<sup>xii</sup> Norman Jeffares, ed. *W. B. Yeats: Selected Poetry* (New Delhi: Khosla Publishing House, 1962)193.

<sup>xiii</sup> Nissim Ezekiel, "Indian Culture", *Times of India* 23 Mar. 1969: III.

<sup>xiv</sup> John 126.

<sup>xv</sup> Ezekiel *Sixty Poems* III.