

IMAGERY IN NISSIM EZEKIEL'S HYMNS IN DARKNESS AND LATTER-DAY PSALMS

Dr. PRALHAD PAWAR

Associate Professor, Dr. H. A. College Saoner, RTM NU, Nagpur, India



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ABSTRACT

Nissim Ezekiel has left a rich heritage of literary works - in his poems, plays and essays. He occupies a very high rank as a writer of Indo-English poetry and his contribution to this poetry is very significant, substantial, and valuable. His poetry has many facets and it has given a new dimension to it by extending its scope and its range. He has made an equally substantial contribution to Indo-English poetry by having written poems depicting Indian life, more particularly city life, vividly and realistically. Ezekiel has tried a variety of poetic modes in his latest poems which include poster poems, poster prayers, hymns, psalms, songs, Sanskrit-inspired passion poems and so on.

This paper seeks to explore imagery in the poems of Ezekiel's two published collections - 'Hymns in Darkness' (1976) and 'Latter-Day Psalms' (1982). He rather uses imagery cautiously and judiciously. As a result, his images remain strictly functional rather than decorative. Some images in Ezekiel's poetry are repeatedly used, and they acquire symbolic overtones.

Key words: Images, Hymns of Darkness, Latter-Day Psalms.

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INTRODUCTION

Ezra Pound gathered the scattered experimenters of imagism in a group and published *Des Imagistes* in America in 1914. It was quickly followed by three annual Imagist Anthologies- *Some Imagist Poets* in 1915, 1916 and 1917 respectively. The Imagists announced some "six principles for themselves to practice- (1) to use the language of common speech, but to employ always the exact word, not the nearly exact, not merely the decorative word; (2) to create new rhythms- as the expressions of new moods and not to copy old rhythms, which merely echo old moods, insisting on the use of 'free verse' for the sake of liberty and individuality; (3) to allow absolute freedom in the choice of subject; (4) to present an image in order to avoid vague generalities; (5) to produce poetry that is hard and clear, never blurred nor indefinite and (6) to believe that concentration in the very essence of poetry" (Louis Untermeyer, 1942, p.305). In the simplest terms, an image means "a picture made out of words" (C.D. Lewis, 1955, p.4). It is usually expressed through a phrase, an epithet, a metaphor, and a simile. C. Day Lewis has observed thus about it: "An epithet, a metaphor, a simile may create an image; or an image may be presented to us in a phrase or a passage on the face of it purely descriptive, but conveying to our imagination something more than the accurate reflection of an external reality" (C.D. Lewis, 1955, p.4). Of all these constituents of imagery, Aristotle gives priority to metaphor. In this connection, Ingram Bowater quotes, "It is the one thing that cannot be learnt from others;

and it is also a sign of genius, since a good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the similarity in dissimilar" (1967, p. 78). Broadly speaking, imagery tends to be a graphic, visual or expressive in effects, and is used for conveying some similarity, analogy or congruity. It is very useful toward 'concretization of emotions' and 'obliquity of expression' and is very effective in avoiding direct statements in poetry, as Hugh Kenner has pointed out in one of his essays, "Any image is by its nature more vivid than any statement"(1975, p. 28) · Ezra Pound once remarked that "it is better to present one image in a lifetime than to produce voluminous works" (J.M. Murray, p. 13) but Ezekiel has created more than one image of lasting worth to make him immortal in the history of contemporary Indian-English poetry.

Ezekiel's sixth collection of poems-"Hymns in Darkness" published in1976 and the seventh collection-"Latter-Day Psalms" published in1982. "Hymns in Darkness" consists of twenty-seven poems and moves along with deeper thoughts and surer techniques. This poetical volume is noteworthy for imagery employed at appropriate times. The opening poem, 'Subject of Change', in "Hymns in Darkness" makes a beautiful use of simile, metaphor and figurative expression in barely twenty lines. The metaphor and figurative application of language may be marked in the following lines:

The evening walk proved not to be
 Along the shore of memory.
 I edged towards a different light:
 The fevers of a future night.

(H.D., p.177)

In this poem, 'the shore of memory' is a striking metaphor and 'The fevers of a future night' is both provocative and figurative. The last stanza of the poem brings in a very apt comparison:

The Waves
 Rise and fall like nightmare graves
 That cannot hold their dead. The sky
 Is smaller than this open eye.

(H.D., p.177)

Ezekiel has written a large number of poems depicting the Indian conditions of life, and more particularly the conditions of life in the city of Bombay. Clearly, Ezekiel appears to be searching for the objects and their exact descriptions. To a common reader, the last line may appear to be hyperbolic or startling, but it is definitely a very apt description of the geography of Bombay, which is so obviously surrounded by the sea-water. In the city the people search for solace, comfort and peace of mind but they fail to achieve the aim. In fact, in the city the fog is thick, and the men get lost. This metaphorically refers to the ignorance of the people and their lack of direction.

Ezekiel employs metaphors and similes remarkably well in the following poems, such as in 'Poem of the Separation' and sixth section of 'Hymns in Darkness' for metaphors and in 'Guru', 'Distance', 'London', 'Tone Poem', and the fourth and ninth sections of 'Poster Poem', and the third, sixth and thirteen sections of 'Hymns in Darkness' all for similes. The subsequent illustrations of metaphor and simile will be adequate to specify Ezekiel's poetic and evocative powers. In his "Poem of the Separation," Ezekiel says: "Any man may be a whirlwind, Any woman lighting..." (H.D., p. 195)

In "Hymns in Darkness," Ezekiel combines metaphor with simile in order to extend the domain of 'old friends' and their mutual 'relationships':

His follies are familiar,
 accepted
 like old friends.
 Incapable of quarrelling with them,
 he maintains the old
 stale
 unredeemable relationships.

(H.D., p. 119-120)

It is clear that we may guess at the aptness and precision of Ezekiel's comparisons by looking at the following passage from the poem "Guru ":

We too one day
May grow like him,
Dropping our follies
Like old clothes or creeds.

(H.D., p.191) or from Tone Poem: "Your breasts are small, tender like your feelings". (H.D., p. 203)

In the last passage of this poem, the poet does not go anywhere beyond the subject of his treatment for an arresting simile. Undoubtedly, Ezekiel has compared the 'tenderness' of a woman's - the beloved's - breasts with the 'tenderness' of her feelings. But while the 'breasts' are substantial and visible, 'feelings' are not. By this comparison the poet has tried to explore 'the universe of quality' and to chart 'the non-measurable world,' as J. Middleton Murray would have it:

All metaphor and simile can be described as the -analogy by which the human mind explores the universe of quality and charts the non-measurable world. Of these indefinite qualities some are capable of direct sensuous apprehension, while others can be grasped only by a faculty which, though obviously akin to sensuous apprehension, yet differs from it. Sensuous perception is of the qualities of the visible, audible, tangible world; of the spiritual qualities of the more recondite world of human personality and its creations there is intuition. Both faculties are necessary to the great poet... (J. M. Murray, p.12).

Perhaps one cannot find a better example combining these two 'faculties' - of the visible and the invisible, of the world of direct 'sensuous perception' and 'the non-measurable world'. Ezekiel's seventh and last collection of poems, "Latter-Day Psalms" offers us an exceptional feast of functional imagery at appropriate places. Imagery in "Latter-Day Psalms" is usually concrete and sensuous, pointed and relevant. In the passage of titled poem, a striking simile is as follows: I am like a pelican of the wilderness,

like an owl of the desert,
like a sparrow alone
upon the house top –but not in misery.

(LDP, p. 259)

and another derived from the world of human experience :

I wax old as a garment,
as a vesture I am changed.
In this I accept the condition of humanity.

(LDP, p. 259)

The simile is also to be found in the lines- "Children are as arrows the hands of a mighty man" (LDP, p. 259). The poet has used metaphor in a striking way in the following passage of this poem: "The images are beautiful birds and colourful fish... etc (LDP, p. 261)

In this published volume, there are some more poems which clearly exhibit Ezekiel's imagistic skill and evocative power, for example, "Warning", "Two Sonnets", "Furies" and "Nudes 1978". In the ninth section of "Nudes 1978", the poet comes out with all the creative resources at his command and recounts a series of 'landscape images' in a single breath. In order to get an idea, a number of visible objects are mentioned in the following first eight lines of this poem:

Hills, valleys, swelling river-banks,
all those landscape images,
praise of breasts and buttocks
seen as fruit thighs as tree-trunks;
flower, moon, fire, bird
of desire, fish of sex
remotely tell a small
fragmented part of the story.

(LDP, p. 249)

Moreover, apart from landscape images, we may find sensuous and natural images as well in this poem.

The frequent images in Ezekiel's poetry are the images of journey or pilgrimage, the woman, the city, nature, and the basement room. In his poetry, the image of woman is generally associated with sexuality, corruption and defilement. The pagan woman becomes an embodiment of sensuousness and sensuality and bestiality. The image of woman as a sexual beast of seductress appears repeatedly in his verse. Some of the significant poems in this context are: "The Couple," "Poem of the Separation," "Tone Poem," the section called "The Couple" in "Passion Poems," and "Nudes 1978". Here is an example of the pagan woman: Her false love became infused, with truest love only in making love ("The Couple," *HD*, p. 183).

In this very poem, the poet speaks freely about her indolence and arrogance, about her deception, passion and possession. In Poverty Poem, "she comes out as a seductress: She didn't know beggars in India, smile only at white foreigners" (*LDP*, p. 231).

In the concluding lines of "Nudes 1978", the picture of the woman betrays her sensuality and nakedness and nudity:

'Yes, this is me as I am',
naked seen, seeing nakedness,
naked, flamed in detail,
womanly and vulnerable.

(*LDP*, p. 252)

Occasionally, Ezekiel concentrates on the physical organs of the female, such as shoulders, breasts, buttocks, thighs and hair.

Another recurring image is that of the putrid city, which together with the image of the pagan woman completes the picture of debased and defiled human life. Both the interrelated images thus, become symbols of corruption and banality. On the one hand, the image of the city confirms the poet's strong sense of commitment and robust sense of belonging to it: "I have a strong sense of belonging not only to India but to this city" (J. B. Boston, 1977, p. 1) on the other, it shows that he is not blind to its filth and squalor, its debasement and distractions. Ezekiel sees the city of Bombay burning "like a passion"; he also looks upon it as "cold and dim" "barbaric" and "marshy", as also the place where labour and fame are so cheap. Critics have rightly remarked that the "urban theme forms an important strain in Mr. Ezekiel's verse", (Taranath and Belliappa, 1966, p. 6) and that he "is a poet of the city, Bombay..." (Linda Hess, 1966, p. 30)

Nature is another recurrent image in Ezekiel's poetry, standing all for purity and tranquility in contradiction of the image of the city. For Ezekiel, nature is a manifestation of the glory and greatness of the Almighty, and it is through her that a man can understand the essential truth and 'see into the life of things'. The tension to be witnessed in a number of Ezekiel's poems often results from a juxtaposition of the defiled city and the pure nature. This may be best seen in the poem "Urban":

The hills are always far away.
He knows the broken roads, and moves
In circles tracked within his head.

(*LDP*, p. 117)

Ezekiel draws the fresh and vital images of hills, river, wind, skies, sun, moon, and rain in his poetry. According to K. D. Verma, the nature images are the archetypal life symbols: "They project a pastoral vision of a fully refulgent and harmonious life, a pattern in which man enters into sacred communion with his cosmos, including objects of nature, as a metaphorical condition of his integrated humanity and of his desire to foster a community of being (K. D. Verma, 1976, p.231).

The image of the basement room is also frequently employed by Ezekiel in this poetry. When Ezekiel was away to England for his higher courses in Philosophy, he had lived in a basement room in London with his three professed companions - poverty, poetry and philosophy:

Twenty-two: time to go abroad.
First, the decision, then a friend
To pay the fare. Philosophy,
Poverty and poetry, three
Companions shared my basement room.

(Background Casually, HD, p. 179)

The poem "London" throws sufficient light on the conditions of the basement room. In this poem he states:

That basement room
remains a true place
in my chronology.
Cold and bare, it held
a rare turbulence
in check, for growth

(HD, p. 198)

The 'basement room' thus becomes a metaphor of the poet's relentless struggle for artistic creation and introspection even at the cost of personal health. The 'basement room' has become a symbol of a place of refuge, a shelter from the distracting external world, a place where the poet can reflect and create and 'name things' in a fresh perspective. For him, it is the 'home' where he has 'to gather grace,' where he has to embark on a voyage of self-exploration and self-contemplation, where he has to perform his new and noble deeds.

Conclusion:

Ezekiel is definitely successful in producing the intended artistic effect on the mind of the reader of his 'subtly related images.' His images of the city and the pagan woman and of nature and the basement room are closely connected with one another. Ezekiel's imagery is usually undecorative and functional, and in his "Hymns in Darkness" and "Latter-Day Psalms", he uses it wherever necessary. As J. M. Murray remarks, "...the greatest mastery of imagery does not lie in the use, however, beautiful and revealing, of isolated images but in the harmonious total impression produced by a succession of subtly related images" (J.M. Murray, p. 13).

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