



# A Philosophical study of belonging in the Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel

Dr.Raushan Kumar

L.N.M.U

Darbhangha, Bihar

## Abstract

In post-Independence era Nissim Ezekiel stands as one of the most popular poets of India who has his own sense of belonging. It is amazing to find that his vision emerges out to be a kind of enquiry related to assertion of individuality. This is one of the reasons that a deeper religio-philosophical awareness is exhibited in his poetry. He was brought up in a way that he reflects the ideology of liberal humanism. It is also a fact that he left religion altogether after school days because he developed and customized analytical and rational beliefs based upon liberalism. His attitude towards life is secular, logical, rational and humanistic. His sense of belonging is philosophical in a way that it seems driven on the chariots of love and charity. His school of thought knows no barrier which divides mankind on the basis of caste and creed. He enlightens the insight which cries for religion of love and compassion for all. His sense of belonging is so strong that we are automatically reminded about Bombay when we hear his name. To me, it seems that like John Keats his name was also writ on water.

**Keywords-** *Belonging, Rootless, enquiry, Love, Compassion.*

Ezekiel often claims that he hardly get any perception of belonging expressed through religion. If he writes a poem based upon religion then it is acclaimed by scholars and critics skeptical and secular. It is because he writes about the independence of the world from the bondage of materialism and religion. W.H.Auden writes that-

“A great poet. To deserve such an epithet, a poet is commonly required to convince us of these things: firstly a gift of a very high order for memorable language, secondly a profound understanding of the age in which he lives, and thirdly a working knowledge of and sympathetic attitude towards the most progressive thought of his time.”<sup>1</sup>

In the writings of Nissim Ezekiel we can find a consistent articulation and sincerity of purpose. He is also credited to give an urban touch to Indian Literature which was earlier considered as bucolic. Adil Jussawala has pointed out that Nissim Ezekiel was perhaps one of the first Indian poets who made us aware that craftsmanship was as much important as the subject matter. He has discovered filiations between literature and life. To him everyday ordinariness was a source of inspiration for his poetic strength. His sense of belonging can be understood by following lines-

“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... I believe in anger, compassion and contempt... they are not without value. I believe in acceptance that incorporates all three, makes use of them. I am incurably critical and skeptical. This is what I am in relation to India also. And to myself. I find it does not prevent the growth of love.”<sup>2</sup>

It becomes evident from the above lines that Nissim Ezekiel was far ahead of his contemporaries in sense of belonging. Historical nostalgia and cultural mysticism is engraved throughout in his writings. He is hardly concerned to India which appeals to the colonizers, but the India to which he belongs. His subjectivity lies in his awareness for the country which is his only home. He is concerned more for modern India because his Jewish background struggles to assert his identity in accordance to India's past. It can be felt through the following lines-

“I am neither proud nor ashamed of being westernized. History is behind me. I live on the frontiers of the future that is slowly receding before me. Contempt for background impresses me as little as pride in background. Both are distorting. Tormented, self-regarding resolutions of cultural conflict create new, tormenting problems.”<sup>3</sup>

The above lines were necessary to quote because Nissim Ezekiel becomes philosophical while asserting his individuality. He was considered as an outsider because he was a Jew. He asserts that he is an Indian by decisions and circumstances. In “Background, Casually” he says-

“The Indian landscape sears my eyes.

I have become a part of it

To be observed by foreigners.

They say that I am singular,

Their letters overstate the case...”<sup>4</sup>

The above quoted lines must not be understood as an effect of alienation. Nissim Ezekiel asserts his existence on the basis of self-discovery. This kind of self-discovery is acquired humanly. In “Night of the Scorpion” the poet has presented a dichotomy between mock-social observations and personal crisis. This is again an outcome of self-discovery. The circulation of poison in Mother's blood is co-related with sins of previous birth. This is the irony that rationality is left alienated as Nissim Ezekiel himself felt alienated in India. Mother's heart is so pious that she thanked God for sparing her children. Mother can be compared to mother India where all of her sons and daughters are treated equally. There is a continuous struggle between reason and passion in almost all the ages. Nissim Ezekiel is a kind of poet who is a man of circumstances. In “City Song” he says that-

“I don’t wish to go higher.

I want to return

As soon as I can

To be of the city,

To feel it’s hot breath.

I have to belong...

Even the terrace is distant enough

I decide to go down.”<sup>5</sup>

The above lines reveal the reality of the poet. He does not want to forget his city because he feels that we can gather grace only at our home. The poet presents an affinity for his home. This affinity reveals his identity in true sense. He is distressed “In India” because here citizens are living a life of misery. Poverty and squalor strikes the citizens in a way that nobody is contented. Here beggars, pavement sleepers, hawkers, burnt-out mothers, waste child, tortured animals, frightened virgins and hutment dwellers are living in despair and anxiety. They are helpless in a way that even prayers cannot comfort them. They are in a state of delusion. Nissim Ezekiel’s attention in “The Visitor” is steeped further where we can find superstition sitting on every door. People are not interested in constructive table talk but smoking is far more substantial than that. Through this poem Nissim Ezekiel has tried to show us that most events are ordinary. It is left to readers that how they are going to manage the ordinary things according to their needs. The philosophy of belonging is crucial for the poet because he cannot take things as for granted. He has that poetic insight and experience that he can transmute the ordinariness of most events into perceptions. According to Gieve Patel such perceptions prevents the author-

“From becoming unkind caricatures of people who do not know the language they use....Friendship permeates Ezekiel’s world, touches poem after poem, goes about its business trying to repair creation’s lapses. It alleviates the grotesqueries of poverty, squalor and brutishness.”<sup>6</sup>

Scholars and critics may argue that Ezekiel’s prime interest lies in the fact that he wanted to reduce the image of citizens as unkind caricatures but we cannot deny a sense of realism in his writings. There are certain parallel instincts in the writings of Nissim Ezekiel and T.S. Eliot. Poems like “Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S” also reflect similar vision which can also be refereed as unkind caricatures. On the ground of realism we can also say that Eliot and Ezekiel are not rude in their expression because they have presented sincere gratitude towards poetic justice. Stark realities cannot be avoided or concealed on the grounds of gratitude. It is correct to say that poems written by Ezekiel are not legendary but it certainly shows his great art of writing. He has tried to mock the society because he wanted to correct it. It cannot be corrected because society is made up of different strata but it can also not be ignored. It has already been mentioned that Ezekiel is a kind of poet who cannot take things as for granted. He has the ability to wield a light pen which can reflect the darker areas of human existence. Poems like “Soap” and “Irani Restaurant Instructions” are fine examples of Indian Poems. They can be seen as excellent specimens where one can find some comic relief. They can also be seen as stray poems which bring out light diversions to enlighten the mood of the readers. It does not mean that the poet is incapable of presenting the sublime and serious aspects of his belonging. It is reflected through his creativity which is expressed best in “Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher”. It is one of my favorite poems where one can find superb poetic lines. In this poem we can witness three sets of images blended together beautifully. Unconventional but unified form of power and beauty has been expressed through such lines-

“ To force the pace and never to be still  
 Is not the way of those who study birds  
 or women. The best poets wait for words.  
 The hunt is not an exercise of will  
 But patient love relaxing on a hill...”<sup>7</sup>

These lines clearly reveal that Ezekiel was blessed with an inward eye full of visions. His sense of belonging is philosophical and unique in itself. He knew the poetic process and thus, he was a gifted poet. We have already talked about his sense of realism. It will be an unfair task if we forget to mention the viewpoint of Ezekiel on poetry. It is worthy to quote some lines here-

“A poem is an episode, completed

In an hour or two, but poetry  
 Is something more. It is the why  
 The how, the what, the Flow  
 From which a poem comes...”<sup>8</sup>

The above lines show his sense of belonging which is expressive through his poetry. W.H.Auden once wrote that “poetry makes nothing happen”<sup>9</sup> and so it might be possible that Ezekiel left things in solitude. The distinctive features of his belongingness lie in his love for the common things. It is expressed throughout his poetry which can be understood easily by readers. Ordinary or common things are not common for lovers. This is one of the reasons that ordinary things accumulate together to become extra ordinary. A flower of rose can be ordinary for a military man but it is a symbol of love for lovers. Here comes the role of images which makes anything important. A father becomes a father only if he has a child. Thus, a child is crucial both for the father and the society. It is the society which gives an identity to anything. The ignorance of society may lead to multiple personality development which can be a casual agent of identity crisis. Thus it becomes clear that nothing is ordinary because beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder. True value of anything can be understood only by the needy people otherwise it is only a waste. Thus, it becomes inevitable to understand what Ezekiel thought in his life time. He was obsessed with identity. That is why he wrote poems to make us aware about his love for the country. His sense of belonging is true because there is nothing hidden in his heart. His poems are easy to understand because he uses proper emotions. Some critics and scholars agree that his poems are easy yet difficult to understand. It is difficult because of alienation effect. There is a detachment of persona which makes it complex. Overall it can be said that Ezekiel loved India and he may not have to prove it. Yet he writes on his love for the nation because he feels the grief of being an outsider. He is not an outsider yet people charge him for his sense of belonging which is scattered. I personally believe that Jews are the most intelligent creatures on earth because they are always successful in life. Success cannot determine the identity of a person because being successful is not everything. After reading the poems of Nissim Ezekiel we can say that his sense of belonging is philosophical because he is over loaded with ideas which can be understood in isolation only. There must not be any confusion between alienation and isolation. Bacon has remarked that a crowd can never be a company yet there are differences and similarities between crowd and company. Similarly for Ezekiel alienation is what he feels for the nation and isolation is what he wants from the nation. Is it a company or a crowd? Certainly it is something which he wants desperately. It is neither a company nor a crowd it is just an identity. His demands are not big yet generation after generation will have to decide that whether he was an outsider or any native Indian.

Ezekiel must not care for public because love can neither be created nor be lost. It can only be transformed from one generation to another. Ezekiel has written few beautiful poems which are immortal and they cry like an innocent man captivated in chains- home is where we can find grace. Generations after generations will come and go but his poetry will never ever die. Gieve Patel has also remarked that-

“When he conducts programmes on art appreciation for Bombay television, he teaches. When he sits in his industry office at the Indian P.E.N, as its most active office bearer, reading quantities of other people's poems and giving his comments on them-thereby earning lifelong friends and enemies-he is teaching again. When he writes his poetry he teaches, this time largely himself In all these contexts the pedagogic bone is relieved, even subverted by self-directed irony, subdued passion, and simple, direct concern for what's at hand .<sup>10</sup>

Thus, from the above lines it becomes clear that Ezekiel was also a teacher who has influenced many young writers of India and abroad. Life has taught him several lessons and his experience is visible in almost all of his poems. It is his sense of belonging that he is present in every part of his consciousness yet he doubtful. He is doubtful because he has sacrificed his identity in past and now he is claiming back this identity because he thinks that nobody can take his soul from his body. It is not the identity crisis which he is going through but he is starving for the love of his fellow men.

## REFERENCES

1. Auden, W.H., “The Public vs. the Late Mr. William Butler Yeats” in *The English Auden*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 1977), p.389.
2. Ezekiel, Nissim, “Naipaul’s India and mine” in *new writing in India*, ed. Adil Jussawala ( Middlesex : Penguin, 1974), p.88
3. Ibid,p.89
4. Ezekiel, Nissim, “*Collected Poems*”, 1952-1988 (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), p.180.
5. [https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/85816/8/08\\_chapter%202.pdf](https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/85816/8/08_chapter%202.pdf)
6. Patel, Gieve, “*Introduction to collected Poems*”, p.xxvi
7. <https://allpoetry.com/Poet,-Lover,-Birdwatcher>
8. [https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/84003/9/09\\_chapter%204.pdf](https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/84003/9/09_chapter%204.pdf)
9. Auden, W.H., “In Memory of W.B.Yeats,” *The English Auden*, p.242.
10. Patel, Gieve (1989) *Introduction Nissim Ezekiel: collected pomes*. New Delhi:O.U.P.p.17.