

Nissim Ezekiel's "Background Casually": A Candid Revelation

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ABSTRACT

Considered to be the Father of post-independence Indian verse in English, Nissim Ezekiel was a prolific poet, playwright, critic, broadcaster and social commentator. From his school days, Ezekiel was impacted by poets such as T.S.Eliot, Yeats, Ezra Pound. The influence of literary personalities like these, is seen in his formal use of the English language and is apparent in his early works.

Nissim Ezekiel started his poetry writing career with his first collection of poetry entitled 'Time to Change'. 'Sixty Poems' and 'The Unfinished Man's' followed. Ezekiel's earlier writings show a clear preference for the use of formal English, but with the passage of time, his writing underwent a metamorphosis. Ezekiel, with the passage of time, acknowledged that 'darkness has its own secrets which light does not know'.

Ezekiel has been applauded for his subtle, restrained and well-crafted diction. His skill in dealing with common, mundane and simple themes, is commendable. 'Night of the Scorpion' strikes one for its simplicity as well as its profundity.

In Ezekiel, is seen an unsentimental realistic sensibility which brings the reader face to face with stark reality, shaking off any form of illusion or fantasy. To Ezekiel goes the credit of enlarging the scope of English Literature and moving it beyond purely spiritual and oriental themes, to include a wider range of concerns and interests. These might include mundane familial events, individual angst and skeptical societal introspection.

While staying in the established linguistic framework, Nissim Ezekiel's unique art lies in so changing a unit of expression, so as to imbue it with rhetorical beauty and make it expressive of a state of mind.

The present paper intends to do just this.

Ezekiel is capable of turning words into metaphors, images or symbols, as the situation demands. One cannot ignore the undercurrent of poetry in the seemingly prosaic words that are used. Ezekiel is fond of using paradoxical language for the enhancement of the poetic quality. His clarity of thought, clinical precision of phrases and apt use of imagery, make his poems and poetry distinctly Indian.

KEY WORDS : *Self realization, belonging, fit in, vocation, casually, evolution.*

A maladjusted childhood

Nissim Ezekiel's poem 'Background Casually' is his most known poem. The poem's significance lies partly in it being autobiographical and more in its dealing with life and its happenings, in a detached and matter of fact way. The title of the poem is indicative of its 'casual' approach to life but at a deeper level, one notices multiple societal issues and concerns which need to be taken 'seriously' and definitely not 'casually.' Ezekiel begins the poem with a short introduction of himself.

“A poet-rascal-clown was born,
The frightened child who would not eat
Or sleep ,a boy of meager bone.
He never learnt to fly a kite,
His borrowed top refused to spin.”

Ezekiel's self introduction is indicative of an unhappy childhood. The boy is slender, physically undernourished incapable of enjoying common boyish activities ,and deprived of the simple pleasures of life like kite flying or spinning a top.To make matters worse,he does not even possess a top,and the one that he spins,is a borrowed one.His calling himself a rascal and a clown, is self mockery but recognizing the poet within, is what leads him eventually, to be at peace with himself and the world around.Religion, an issue to be reckoned with Further revealing other disturbing facts ,Ezekiel says that he faced religious intolerance, and fanaticism and found himself to be weak, physically and emotionally. He is surrounded people of different faith and is not able to adjust and adapt.

“I went to Roman Catholic school,
A mugging Jew among the wolves.
They told me I had killed the Christ,
That year I won the scripture prize.
A Muslim sportsman boxed my ears.”

Being a Jew, Ezekiel faces the ire of other religious sects, who hold him responsible for crucifying Christ. He is boxed by a Muslim sportsman. Ezekiel does not even get along with the Hindu lads. He refers to them as undernourished but strong, implying emotional strength but physical weakness. This goes on until “one noisy day I used the knife. ” This struggle with different religions, kept hounding him until one day he decides to fight back . At home he grew indifferent to his religion. According to the Jewish custom, the family observed Friday prayers but for Ezekiel this was just one of the very many customs followed by them. It made no impact on the young mind of Ezekiel. He turned his attention to Yoga and Zen . His frustration knew no bounds when to his dismay, he

found ,that “the more I searched, the less I found.” Disillusionment with religion set in. He founded himself a confused young man. “ Futility of Following traditions.

Following traditions, at 22,Ezekiel is sent to England for higher studies. The family cannot bear the expenses and even find it difficult to arrange the fare. But keeping traditions in mind Ezekiel is sent to England, after borrowing money from a friend. Even in London,life did not turn exciting.

“Philosophy, Poverty and Poetry ,three Companions shared my basement room.” Two years passed in London with no real learning happening. Quest for Self realization and self discovery Overcome by a sense of failure, Ezekiel returns home .He is happy to come back home but is still at a loss of finding his real vocation in life. Coming back home was just an illusion because the sense of belonging and ‘fitting him ‘eluded him.

“How to feel it home ,was the point. Some reading had been done, but what Had I observed, expect my own Exasperation?

Ezekiel finds himself surrounded by prejudices, orthodoxical beliefs and inaccurate generalizations.

“All Hindus are Like that, my father used to say, When someone talked too loudly, or Knocked at the door like the Devil. They hawked and spat.They sprawled around.” Still searching for his true vocation, for peace of mind and realization of the self,Ezekiel prepares for the worst.He gets married, changes jobs,tries following what others have been successful in, but feels that he does not ‘belong’.There is this constant feeling of alienation, of not belonging, of not fitting in. It is only after this long struggle, that Ezekiel learns what his vocation is. “The later dreams were all of words.

I did not know that words betray But let the poems come and lost That grip on things the worldly prize.” He realizes that his vocation is to become a poet .He values words ,their meaning and their significance. His ambition is not the ambition of the world. He decides not to follow the world but to follow the calling of his heart. His life’s journey, it’s struggles and his frustration, have not been a waste. Ezekiel has now learnt, to utilize his pain, to give utterance to his frustration ,through words. He ultimately finds his identity in India which is his destined place and does, and not consider himself a foreigner, but makes his commitment and finally “fits in”.

“I have made my commitments now. This is one: to stay where I am, As others choose to give themselves In some remote and backwards place. My backward place is where I am.” Evolution of Ezekiel, the poet Ezekiel views himself with ironic detachment as he maps his life from infancy to maturity. The poem touches upon serious issues like religion, adjustment, personal angst,prejudices,finding one's vocation and most importantly, fitting in.The poem ends with the poet coming to a decision about his life ,his place in it, and his vocation as a poet. The poem follows a circular pattern of home -exile-home while the poet grows into a state of acceptance about his origin and roots. Ezekiel narrates the story of his life in a very communicative tone. Nevertheless the reader can understand the ironic note that swings between whipping the self and the society around .Beneath the casual narrative tone, can be seen , serious motifs like finding satisfaction in limited ambition, probing the question of identity and finally realizing the essence of one’s existence. Ezekiel’s poetic credo is understood by the readers-to treat personal experiences philosophically, to produce poetic significance.

The poem ends with the reader realizing issues of significance and coming to the conclusion that Nissim Ezekiel's 'Background Casually' ,is definitely not to be taken casually but should rather be viewed as a self analytical portrayal of the poet by the self.

Works Cited

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