



RELIGIOUS AND PHILOSOPHICAL ASPECTS IN THE POEMS OF NISSIM EZEKIEL

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ABSTRACT

This research paper focuses on the findings of religious and philosophical aspects in the poems of Nissim Ezekiel. Nissim Ezekiel - poet, playwright, and art critic - ranks foremost in contemporary Indo - Anglian poetry and among the very best in post-Independence Indo - Anglian literature. In his fine poems "Philosophy", "Poetry Reading", "Poet, Lover and Bird watcher", "Islands" "A Small Summit", "The Hill", "Guru", "Night of the Scorpion" he expounds his views on poetry. The poem "Philosophy" deals with complex and intricate philosophical processes and it also shows the poet's love for metaphysics and the cold "Lucidity of Logic". With regard to his latter poetry, K.N Daruwallah has remarked each volume has introduced a new note added a sense of comprehension or even humour to his irony and covered further distance in his progressive pursuit of simplicity. Each volume witnessed a development in his verse craft. "It may be divided as follows: The poems compiled during the period 1965-74 refer to the poems such as "Transparently" "Motives", "In the Country Cottage", "Lawn" and "Happenings". A poem discloses clarity of statement and simplicity of expression. This is evident in the following lines Unasked as the day Declined, she brought out her to be caressed In the volume of "Hymns in Darkness" authorized in 1976, the poet experimented with "Poster Poems" and "Passion Poems". His poetry volume "Latter -Day Psalms" which has been mentioned earlier also forms an excellent example for the religious and philosophical strain of the poet, for philosophy and worldliness cum-sensuality of traditional value systems and contrarities.

INTRODUCTION

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In the volume of “Hymns in Darkness” authorized in 1976, the poet experimented with “Poster Poems” and “Passion Poems”. The poet is more reflective and his religious and philosophical interests come to the forefront. The poems “Islands” and “A Small Summit” point out the theme of the feeling of isolation of a man from his environment. The poem “Background, Casually” is regarded as one of his famous and significant poems. It is an autobiographical one and presents a strong current of anger and bitterness. The poet recalls the hurdles which he had to face in the past at the school and some other aspects. The poem moves from one experience to another, connected only by the bitterness, their memory evokes, to the serene acceptance of the native city and his complete identification with India. This is true, when we refer to the following lines.

*The Indian landscape sears my eyes
I have become part of it*

Shahane in her critical essay points out the religious philosophical strain vividly in the Indo-English poetry of Nissim Ezekiel, as it is done earlier by the great scholar and critic by Prof. K.R.S. Iyengar. This religious philosophical strain in the poetry of Ezekiel raises the basic issue of poetry and belief. In commenting on Ezekiel’s religious and philosophical poems especially post April 1967, a few preliminaries must be started first. In a letter to Prof. Delmer, Bogner at New Paltz, Newyork, Ezekiel wrote on 14 June 1966 that he was brought up in a mildly Orthodox Jewish home which gradually became liberal Jewish. He attended the liberal Jewish synagogue in Bombay until he abandoned religion altogether soon after leaving school. He is a Maharastrian Jew but his early education in an English medium school led to a total negligence of his mother tongue Marathi.

Nissim Ezekiel in his religious and philosophical quest creates a “Room” of his own, a spiritual parallel to his own physical room, where he writes poetry. He wants to resolve his philosophical dilemma although the light in the room is rather dim, suggesting the spiritual state of his groping in darkness. The poem “Happening” is a moment of intense revelation of the self. It is expressed in a language and mode characteristic of the poet’s pinning their faith in liberal, emotive philosophical humanism. This is true when we refer to the following lines.

*The food I eat
Cannot nourish me
Unless I love the human face*

His religious and philosophical issues and experiences are found in the post 1967 poems which reveal the descriptions of light, darkness, transparency, rocks, hill, broken bridges, burnt boats, human body, masks, face, room, shadows, earth, inferno, winging etc. The



element of the imagery in these poems is rather restricted since they aim at conveying directly the poet's predicaments to the reader and offering an objective correlative in terms of concretions of the poet's experience and philosophical abstractions. For instance, the poem, "Transparently" uses the descriptions of light and darkness, words which the poet consciously loved, and "all it stood for?" The poet feels however, that more than half of his hours are heavy and dark and that even rocks are reasonable or clouds are clear compared to his mind and then he unfolds his basic predicaments. This is noticeable in the following lines:

*Who wants experience
at the cost of achievement?
..... of resolving it
within my limits.*

The poet's created world, art, philosophy and religion are intermingled. In him the stress in a minor key is almost always on the world of reality. As a result, his poetry suffers as art, though there are various meeting points where his poetry seems happily wedded to his philosophy and his ideas. In this context, "The Hill" is a fine poem which focuses attention on the normative quality of his art and ideas. The "normative hill" is "Transparently accessible and man should not miss it at all. The hill may demand a man" with forces flowering.

*as from the crevices
of rocks and rough surfaces
wild flowers
force themselves towards the sun
and burn
for a moment*

Here in the aforesaid poetic passage the image of wild flowers blossoming and burning in a moment is very significant suggesting man's quest for eternity and the divine. The poet raises questions such as, what is survival? What is existence? But the answer is not confined to the realm of poetry alone, it transcends into the realm of other worldliness and philosophy. Ezekiel is quite conscious of the wider issues involved in the process. Ezekiel's effort of climbing "a small summit" is also metaphysical in its ontological and cosmological contexts. It is ontological because it explores the nature of being, reality and self. This is true when the poet writes in the poem, "Do I belong, I wonder, to the common plain? A bitter thought" the metaphysical element may also be akin to its cosmological context as it deals with the structure of the world. The poet closes his eyes and allows the dream to sustain his spirit. The botanic turmoil in his poetry is only a sort of physical aspect of the metamorphosis of the soil

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and the poet learns the secrets of the mother earth. The event is a representation of religious revelation. Though a Jew, belonging to the BeneIsrael community, he is very much under the impact of the Hindu thought. The poet, wrote the critic recently suggesting this impact of sensibility “I also veered towards the Hindu view of life, which I consider mystically, religiously and metaphysically right, though I do not accept its ethics and social codes”.

The picture of the earth as spaceship is beautiful and apt in the context of our present day knowledge of the universe, it also articulates Ezekiel’s testament, his religious belief in the divine, in God. The religious philosophical strain in his poetry raises the basic issue of poetry and belief. His poetry projects his beliefs meaningfully relation to the posture of the believer and his practice. Belief is not presented in isolation in a mere theoretical or theological context but expressed poetically and is made related to life impulses. The poem “Guru” makes this idea clear.

Ultimately, it must be stated that his religious poetry rises out of a tension within his own personality. In his letter to the critic, he commented upon his position: “I am not religious or even a moral person in any conventional sense. Yet I have always felt myself to be these two statements is the existential sphere of my poetry.” Ezekiel is eminent among present day Indo-Anglian poets primarily because his poetry explores this existential realm of his beliefs.

The religious and philosophical strain forms one of the characteristic features of the Indian English poetry of Nissim Ezekiel. This aspect is finely and clearly illustrated through his poem “Night of the Scorpion” in which the poet has used religion, superstition, priest, supernatural element, god and prayer of the mother at the end of the poem “Thank god, the scorpion picked upon me, and spared my children”. His poetry volume “Latter -Day Psalms” which has been mentioned earlier also forms an excellent example for the religious and philosophical strain of the poet, for philosophy and worldliness cum-sensuality of traditional value systems and contrarities. Its themes are religio-philosophic themes poetized in direct and simple words. Shahane as a great scholar and critic in her guest article or essay has commented that the religious philosophical strain runs (Pervades) throughout the poetry of Ezekiel. Prof K. R. Sreenivasa Iyengar also, as an eminent critic, has pointed out the religious, philosophical strain of Ezekiel in his Indian-English verse. This religious philosophical quest creates a “Room” of his own, a spiritual parallel to his own physical room, the study where he writes poetry. He wants to resolve his philosophical dilemma, although the light in the room is rather dim suggesting the spiritual of his groping in darkness.

“Happenings”, the post 1967 poems, “Transparently” for instance are the best ones where the poet’s created world, art, philosophy and religion are intermingled. In his poem

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“Transparently” the image of wild flowers blossoming and burning in a moment becomes very significant suggesting man’s quest for eternity and the divine. Ezekiel’s efforts of climbing, ‘a small summit’ also form metaphysical in its ontological and cosmological contexts. The images furnished in “Transparently” also raises in the poet’s mind some religious and philosophical questions such as, what is survival and existence?. A bitter thought which refers to the metaphysical element, is akin to its cosmological context since it has dealt with the structure of the world. The botanic turmoil a physical aspect of metamorphosis of the soil through which the poet learns the secrets of the earth is the symbolic of religious revelation. Though a Jew by birth or in origin, Ezekiel, has been very much under the impact of Hindu religion and Indian thought as Dwivedi said. His religion is a religion of love and charity ideals which every religion cherishes and preaches. The image of the earth as spaceship is beautiful and apt in the context of our present day knowledge of the universe. It also articulates the poet’s testament, his religious belief in the divine, in God. The religious and philosophical strain in his poetry raises the basic issue of poetry and belief. His religious poetry rises out of a tension within his own personality. “Guru” is also a very good example for his religious, philosophical aspect. Here belief, is expressed poetically and is made related to life impulses. His religious philosophical strain is also noticeable clearly in the “Hymns in Darkness” and “Poster Poems”.

In the other fine poems “Philosophy”, “Poetry Reading” and “Poet, Lover and Bird watcher”, he expounds his views on poetry. The poem “Philosophy” deals with complex and intricate philosophical processes and it also shows the poet’s love for metaphysics and the cold “Lucidity of Logic”. With regard to his latter poetry, K.N Daruwallah has remarked each volume has introduced a new note added a sense of comprehension or even humor to his irony and covered further distance in his progressive pursuit of simplicity. Each volume witnessed a development in his verse craft. “It may be divided as follows: The poems compiled during the period 1965-74 refer to the poems such as “Transparently” “Motives”, ‘In the Country Cottage’, “Lawn” and “Happening”. A poem discloses clarity of statement and simplicity of expression. This is evident in the following lines

*Unasked as the day
Declined, she brought out her small
..... to be caressed*

The poem “Tribute to Upanishad’s” is philosophical one which speaks, the person who comes nearer to it. Three more philosophical and reflective poems are there in the aforesaid book. The poem “The Room” which is “always the same”, yet some events to happen here is a metaphor of the poetic self. The poem called “Mind” is a modernistic invocation to muse. It



also reveals some poetic creation which is considered something larger than a matter for aesthetics. The poem

“Subject to Change” is the very first one in this collection. In this, the poet delves into the personal past and endeavors for its restructure, for reality is perceived as change so he says:

*Not a stone in the edifice
Well loved is likely to suffice
Everything calls for a new place
A different rage behind my place*

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