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# The Expression: An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal

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## **CONFESSIONAL THEME IN THE POETRY OF NISSIM EZEKIEL**

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### **Abstract**

Ezekiel's approach to religion and morality is unconventional. He combines the virtues of all the religion and establishes his faith in human religions or secularism. He pays equal regards to all the religions practiced in Indian and does not show any special preference for any of them. Ezekiel brought in modernity in Indo-English poetry. There are variety and complexity which are regarded as true attributes of modernity. He writes with wit, irony and humour to describe corruption and exploitation in the contemporary society. He makes the exact use of exact word, and observes economy in his expression. He takes up current subjects and immediate surroundings for his poetic treatment. The imagist tradition set up by Eliot and Pound is also carried forward and re-inforced by him. Thus the rigorous discipline of his art, the sharpness of his wit and irony, precise expression and the use of impressive imagery and current themes make him a modern poet of great significance in Indo-English poetry. Ezekiel also guided and inspired the poets of younger generation to write poetry. He popularized free verse and counseled the young poets to write poetry in their own way without being influenced by another poet from home or abroad. Most Ezekiel's poems are auto-biographical. This is so because he is very much obsessed with his own personality and loaded his poems with fragments of his confession. He is subjective to the point of being described as a confessional poet. He sincerely combines the confessional element of his poems with artistic and poetic faith. Thus, his poetry is a faithful expression of his temperament and poetic personality.

### **Keywords**

Nissim Ezekiel, Indian English Poetry, Confessional Themes, Religion, Cultural Ethos.

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The confessional aspect is so significant in Ezekiel's poetry that he has himself advised his readers to pay special attention to it. The poet frankly accepts the importance of sexual passion and emotional entanglement in his collections of early poems. His *A Time to Change*, *Sixty Poems* and *The Third* testify to his confession in respect of the treatment of love, sex and marriage. The study also seeks to compare and contrast Ezekiel's confessional poetry with that of the Western poets such as Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath on the one hand, and the Indian poets, such as Kamala Das, Shiv K. Kumar and Jayanta Mahapatra, on the other hand. The study also examines the poet's frank avowal of his belief that conjugal bliss can be attained in the form of birth and creation.

The present work further seeks to point out the failures and frustration in the poet's life and his candid acceptance of the grim realities of life. *The Unfinished Man* and *Hymns in Darkness* describe the confrontation between urban chaos and imaginary quietitude. They describe the poet's stance to identify himself in one form or the other. The work also examines Ezekiel's efforts to find 'the right idiom' to express the right idea. The poet assigns appropriate titles to the poems in *The Exact Name* which seeks poetry in the common place and the ordinariness of the events. The present study further includes Ezekiel's strong preference for secular religion and his regards for the Indian cultural ethos. The *Latter-Day Psalms* rejects the existence of various religions and recommends the adoption of secular religion in India. The study also asserts Ezekiel's faith in the doctrine of equal rights for all the human beings and thus, establishes the poet's faith in humanism in the last phase of his poetic career.

Nissim Ezekiel was born in a Bene Israel Jewish family in Bombay on 16<sup>th</sup> December 1924. The Bene Israel are one of the Lost Tribes of Israel who had landed in Maharashtra, off the Konkan coast after a shipwreck. The survivors took to farming and oil-pressing and were known as

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'Saturday-Oilmen' Ezekiel's grandfather and parents adopted the noble profession of teaching and enjoyed respect in the society. Ezekiel himself gave up lucrative jobs and worked as a Lecturer in the college and as a Reader and Professor in the University.

The Bene Israel tried to mix-up quickly with the local natives. But they had to incur the prejudice of the natives of the other religions on account of their foreign origin. Nissim also fell a prey to their atrocities in his early age. So he felt himself marginalized and alienated in his early life. But, after his return from England, he settled the issue of his belonging and confessed that he was a citizen of Bombay/India. However, he identified himself only with the modern India and not with its ancient past.

Ezekiel's family life was not happy. His relations with his wife, Daisy, strained owing to his inclination towards other women and his indifference to his domestic responsibilities. Therefore, his marriage with Daisy ended in a separation. His last days were gloomy and lonely. He was struck with Alzheimer's disease and left for his heavenly abode on 9<sup>th</sup> January, 2004.

Ezekiel holds a prominent place in the Indo-English poetry of the post-war era. He led a revolution against the romantic poetry of Toru Dutt, Sarojini Naidu and Aurobindo Ghosh and introduced modernity on the lines of the western poets, such as Eliot, Pounds, yeats and Auden. He also acted as a teacher and poet to the poets of younger generation, such as Dom Moraes, P.Lal and others.

Ezekiel stressed on the combination of form and content which accounts for his modernity. In the opinion of Linda Hess, he is 'outstanding in craftsmanship, maturity, range and depth of sensibility' He also leads the group of poets who enacted the role of truth teller and described the intensely personal experiences of life in poetry. He has undergone an evolutionary change in his art and vision of life. Ezekiel works under the influence of Western masters only in the early phase of his poetic career. But, in his ripe and mature period, he shuns this influence and acquires his own authentic voice. He is rightly adjudged to be a great poet because he dominated the Indo-English poetry for over three decades.

Ezekiel deals with love and passion in the early phase of his poetic career. That is why he is regarded as the poet of the body. He is painfully and poignantly aware of the flesh, and so he describes the need to obey the call of passion. The word 'love' is repeated many times in *And God Revealed*. The poet also accepts the presence of a 'sensual' woman in his early poetry when his mind is obsessed with sex. He describes the significant role played by sex in *Nakedness- II*:

'Then, wanting to be whole again, he prayed:

That this his body may belong to him

And let him understand that in the working

Of his mind the body takes a hand.' (C.P.-P-61)

Again, in *Lines*, Ezekiel stresses the need to satisfy the insistent demands of flesh:

'Unmask the mind, know the hardness of the hidden and oppressive bone,

Locate the source of shallow breath.

Hear the throb of lines in love.' (C.P.-P.43)

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Although Kamala Das treats of insurgent urges of flesh in an equally straightforward manner, yet she differs from Ezekiel in her attitude towards women: While Ezekiel considers women to be responsible for man's fall, Kamala Das believes in the doctrine of equal right for women. Ezekiel finds a parallel so Shiv K. Kumar in the interest of men in watching the nakedness of women. Ezekiel's *At the Hotel* and Shiv K. Kumar's *Cabaret Dancer* describe the hypocrisy of menfolk in concealing their motive of visiting the hotels late at night. Jayanta Mahapatra's attitude towards women stands in complete contrast with Ezekiel's: While there is a complete absence of professional prostitutes in Ezekiel's poetry, "Whores walk freely" into Jaynta Mahapatra's poems.

Ezekiel holds firm faith in the institution of marriage and believes that marriage unites lovers and strengthens their love bonds. He never treats of life as a Bohemian activity free from social censor and religious sanctity. He rather prefers a wedded life to a life of celibacy. He thinks that marriage ensures safety, forms a family and grants liberty to work for the evolution of society and humanity. It also gives true happiness and develops the spirit of fraternity. The poet paints the gloomy picture of an unmarried woman in *Virginal*:

'You breathe the bitter air of liveliness,  
Pretending that it does not matter when  
You close the door and switch the wireless on.  
Remote from the prospect of wedding kiss.' (C.P.-P.138)

To provide a contrast, he describes the blissful aspects of a marital and domestic life:

'To own a singing voice and a talking voice.  
A bit of land, a woman and a child or two.  
Accommodated to their needs and changing moods  
And patiently to build a life with these.' (C.P. P.4)

It is remarkable that the continuance of human race is made possible only through love and creation. While love creates harmony in the universe, it is procreation that keeps the world going:

'Closing and brave in the ward  
It is woman released, rose to my kisses  
And bore me a child, bearing the stamp  
Of my name and shells of her eyes. (C.P. P.27)

Ezekiel's *Creation* carries forward the poet's belief that conjugal love results in creation which, in turn, provides bliss and happiness to the parents and continuity to the human race. However, this bliss can be enjoyed only by those who believe in the sacred institution of marriage. Thus, love and creation are the two significant sources of worldly happiness and celestial bliss. But procreation must take place when the society sanctions the union of the lovers.

In the Middle phase of his poetic creation, Ezekiel deals with the facts and realities of life. He attains ripeness and wisdom because he combines knowledge with his practical experience. While writing the first and the last poems of *The Third* and all the ten poems of *The Unfinished Man*, he grips worldly reality that leads him to maturity. Here, he describes the hiatus between his high expectations and low achievements which is the main reason of his failures and frustrations and also the main theme of these poems. He deals with the disappointment of an apparently settled life.

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Urban, A Morning Walk and Love Sonnet demonstrate Ezekiel's discontent with the city life. They re-inforce the appeal to the city as the purgatory before blessedness. Enterprise describes the sweet hope at the initial stage followed by ultimate failure and disillusionment:

'When, finally, we reached the place,  
We hardly knew why we were there,  
The trip had darkened every face,  
Our deeds were neighter great nor rare.' (C.P.-P.118)

The poet, therefore, recommends a home-ward journey because it is home and home alone where we can attain redemption. Commitment, Marriage and Case Study insist on action as a sort of holiness. Event and Morning Prayer dwell upon the need of communicate with the people around us. Finally, Jamini Roy deals with the choice of a popular idiom to communication with the largest number of people to find one's roots. It paves way for the poet's next volume of poems the Exact Name. Here, Ezekiel tries to extend the scope of poetry and seeks poetry in the ordinariness and the common place. Night of the Scorpion is a perfect example of dealing with a common place event. The event takes place in a village and displays the sympathy of all the villagers, who pray for the victim of the sting. The village symbolizes a family where all the members combine together to fight down a natural evil. In Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher, the poet is advised to wait for apt words to explain the realities of life.

Ezekiel does not express his faith in a particular religion or system of thought. He even turns into an atheist-rationalist under the influence of M.N. Roy. But when he takes his LSD trips in 1967, he has visions of Christ, Krishna and other prophets, and becomes a believer in God and religion. He assimilates all the attributes of Judaism, Hinduism and Christianity and calls it a secular religion. Thus he asserts his faith in a secular religion as much as he finds his identify with modern India or his belonging to the secular city of Bombay. In the Eighth piece of Latter-Day Psalms, he expresses his faith both in Jewish and Hindu Philosophy. It shows that the whole human society belongs to one family. In the like manner, the seventh piece combines the virtues of the Jewish philosophy with those of the Biblical faith. The final piece dismisses all the 'fuss about faith" and establishes only one religion that may be called secular religion. Hymns in Darkness, Latter-Day Psalms and blessings express his faith in secular or human religion.

Ezekiel's interest in Hinduism makes him express the Indian element or Indian ethos in his poetry. It fact, Indian element manifests itself in the form of allusions and themes in Ezekiel's poetry. The most popular of Indian themes are poverty, superstition, suffering, sacrifice, hypocrisy and exploitation. The greatness of Ezekiel's poetry lies in the fact that it demonstrates the whole of Indian ethos and, unlike A.K. Ramanujan and Jayanta Mahapatra, it does not confine itself to a particular religion or culture. Most of the poems written from the publication of The Exact Name onward are significant in the study of the Indian ethos. Night of the Scorpion and Very Indian Poems in Indian English are perfect examples of Indian themes in Ezekiel's poetry. It is remarkable that Indian content in Ezekiel's poetry makes its repeated appearance only after the issues of belonging and identification are settled.

Ezekiel inherited the quality of liberal humanism from his Jewish background and exhibited the same in his poetry as well in his personal life. He shows concern for the sufferings

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and feelings of ordinary humanity. The common man's predicament is the focal point of his love and sympathy and the very basis of his humanism:

"I want a human balance humanly  
Acquired, fruitful in the common hour." (C.P. P.40)

In fact, Ezekiel raises himself higher than most of his contemporaries "in his sincere identification of himself with ordinary humanity". His Morning Prayer affirms his social relations with the people around him:

'Whatever the enigma,  
The passion of the blood,  
Grant me the metaphor  
To make it human good'.

Ezekiel's humanistic approach to life lays stress in the creation of human warmth, which is a gateway to love, affection, order and security. This is evident from his Night of the Scorpion, Happening, Servant, Ganga, The Truth about Dhanya and other poems in The Exact Name, Hymns in Darkness, and Latter-Day Psalms. In all these collections of poems, Ezekiel shows his concern for common man, the man of flesh and blood, the man who is born, suffers and dies..."

There is no denying the fact that Ezekiel shows human concern for godly and ungodly, the innocent and the guilty. He practices humanism not only in his poetry but life as well.

There is continuity and growth of ideas in Ezekiel's poetry. The theme of love, sex and marriage which finds expression in his early poems runs through his later volumes also. In the same way, grim realities of life that begin with the first and last poem of The Third pervade through the Unfinished Man, The Exact Name and Hymns in Darkness. The common place events also begin with The Exact Name and run through all the later volumes of poems. Even his humanism pervades through and illumines all the volumes of his poetic creation.

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