



Research Paper

Aspects of “Indianness” In Nissim Ezekiel’s Poetry: An Analysis of “Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.” and “The Night of the Scorpion”

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Abstract

Modern Indian poetry in English language that began to be written around the 1950s took a turn from the broader themes of spirituality, nationalism and Indian independence towards the inner conflicts and private turmoil faced by the common people, inaugurating a phase in Indian English poetry that corresponded to literary modernism. Most of the themes that are articulated in this poetry tend to stem from a common anxiety about the question of “Indianness” and what constitutes the essence of ‘authentically’ Indian poetry. In this context, this paper focuses on how Nissim Ezekiel (1924-2004) exemplifies his commitment to Indianness through his choice of typical variety of English, often referred to as “Babu Angrezi”, the themes of his poems that portray the humdrum of daily life in India, and peculiar situations that bring to the fore the superstitions and unique thought processes of Indian people. In this regard, this paper analyzes Ezekiel’s two poems, viz. “Goodbye Party to Miss Pushpa T.S.” and “The Night of the Scorpion” to explore the different aspects of Indianness as manifested in them.

Keywords: Ezekiel, modern Indian poetry, Indianness, identity, language, superstition, English

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In the wake of Indian independence from the British rule in 1947, there was a growing concern amongst the poets to explore and portray the altered realities of their life, the challenges of industrialization, modernization, and urbanization, and the growing alienation amongst people from their social surroundings. Modern Indian poetry in English language that began to be written around the 1950s took a turn from the broader themes of spirituality, nationalism and Indian independence towards the inner conflicts and private turmoil faced by the common people, inaugurating a phase in Indian English poetry that corresponded to literary modernism.

The modern Indian English poets registered their difference from the older traditional or conservative poets wherein they shifted their thematic focus from the problems of the poor or rural masses or traditional culture of India. Instead, they suffused modern Indian English poetry with a decidedly urbane outlook reflecting their own socio-cultural background that was marked by middle-class upbringing, education in English medium schools, and travel to foreign lands for higher education and professional ambitions. At a time when Hindi was hailed as the national language of India, these poets fervently believed that English could play a pivotal role in articulating the experiences of common, middle-class people, rather than just being relegated to the realm of being a ‘foreign’ language. Bruce King highlights that these poets wanted to create poetry in English which was Indian—with all its peculiarities and distortions and not cluttered with quaint imagery and attitudes; a sort of living language in which one could feel deeply and communicate effectively experiences and responses typically Indian (*Modern Indian Poetry in English*). It is in this context that one can read the poetry of writers like AK Ramanujan, Kamala Das, Gieve Patel, Ezekiel, Adil Jusswalla, Parthasarthy, Dilip Chitre, Arun Kolatkar, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, Pritish Nandy, Jayanta Mahapatra, Keki Daruwalla, and Shiv Kumar.

Most of the themes that are articulated in the poetry of the above mentioned poets tend to stem from a common anxiety about the question of “Indianness” and what constitutes the essence of ‘authentically’ Indian

poetry. According to Bruce King, "The Indian poet in English feels alienated by his language. There is no tradition from which to evaluate his work. Therefore, he is conscious of his Indianness, which results in a crisis of identity" (79). In a similar vein, Prithvi Nandy opines that the Indian English Poetry stood for a movement which was not limited "by a particular framework of values" nor a common technical similarity. It just had a common idiom, "an undercurrent that runs through the work of an entire generation of poets" (9). Rather than being a restrictive movement, it was a "heterogeneous grouping of poets with completely different views on life, society and poetry" (9).

While different poets have picked up the questions of Indianness and belonging to a particular country or tradition in their own particular ways, Nissim Ezekiel (1924-2004) fuses the dilemma about his identity, the search for life's truths amidst social, existential and moral crisis, and the yearning for a place called "home" in the manner of a detached observer and keen intellectual. Reflecting the changing styles of poetry composition that marked a break from the earlier traditional poetry, Ezekiel's poetic voice is a contemporary one dwelling on the themes of sexuality, life in a metropolis, problems in marriage, and the growing alienation of society in a rapidly modernizing Indian nation state. The question of Indianness, belonging and marginality in Ezekiel's poetry is a product of both his astute observations and intellectual ruminations about modern life as well as his own personal background as a Jewish born and brought up in Bombay.

Ezekiel was raised as a secular Jew and is a product of the modern world, and specifically the cosmopolitan city of Bombay. Owing to his cultural and linguistic background, he is marginal in relation to the Hindu and Muslim communities in India. For Ezekiel, it is this marginality that makes him representative of the modern, urban, English-speaking community of postcolonial India that must find expression in the modern Indian English poetry. His deeply felt and personal sense of alienation makes him relate to the experiences of fragmentation, spiritual vacuity and isolation as the hallmarks of modern existence. One aspect of this alienation is his constant oscillation between between the sense of "Indianness" and "outsiderness"—a theme that perennially runs throughout his poems. While Ezekiel has a deep attachment to his homeland, India, there is also an unavoidable tone of frustration, emerging from his perceived alienation from the dominant culture of his country. Ezekiel's own statements in this regard are most perceptive:

My quarrel with Mr. Naipaul...is not because of these condemnatory judgements of his...My quarrel is that Mr. Naipaul is so often uninvolved and unconcerned. He writes exclusively from the point of view of his own dilemma, his temperamental alienation from his mixed background...I am not a Hindu and my background makes me a natural outsider: circumstances relate me to India. In other countries I am a foreigner. In India I am an Indian (qtd. in Patel xxii).

Ezekiel's acceptance of India as his "home" also reflects in his choice of typical variety of English, often referred to as "Babu Angrezi" as well as his choice of themes that portray the humdrum of daily life in India and peculiar situations that bring to the fore the superstitions and unique thought processes of Indian people. In this regard, this paper analyzes Ezekiel's two poems, viz. "Goodbye Party to Miss Pushpa T.S." and "The Night of the Scorpion" to explore the different aspects of Indianness as manifested in them.

"Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S." is one of Ezekiel's most popular 'Indian English' poems which is written as a parody of the Indian English variety that is often spoken by Indians on whether it be social, administrative, or commercial occasions. The poem is written in the form of a farewell speech delivered, perhaps, by a senior colleague, in honor of Miss Pushpa T.S. who is all set for a new journey in her life. While the tone of the poem is light-hearted, it is replete with typical Indian nuances of expression, manners and thought and also exposes the linguistic distortions as evident in the use of English by Indian 'babus'. "Babu English" or "Babu Angrezi", which Ezekiel has also used in his poems like "The Professor", "The Railway Clerk", and "Irani Restaurant Instructions", here refers to the use of English which is aspirational in nature, and meant to impress the audience despite being full of technical flaws and inconsistencies. Two most common characteristics of this type of English are excessive politeness and the use of present continuous in place of the simple present tense. For instance, right at the start of the poem, the speaker declares that "our dear sister is departing for foreign in two three days". Other instances of this distorted use of English tenses is evident in words like "meting", "coming", "smiling" and "feeling" through the course of the poem.

Commenting on Ezekiel's use of 'Indian English', Irshad Gulam Ahmed opines that " "Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S." combines a delightful comedy with serious postcolonial concerns that often escape the casual reader" (165). The strategic choice of 'Indian English' allows Ezekiel to not only note the peculiar 'distortions' of Standard English that occur in the variety of English spoken by Indians in quotidian situations but to also trace and satirize the psyche of Indian men and women that still carries certain prejudices and remnants of colonized thinking. For instance, the central event of the poem, i.e. Miss Pushpa's plan to settle abroad is viewed as a most sought-after breakthrough in her life, an occasion that demands a formal 'seeing-off'

marked by long-winding speeches and extravagant praise.

Ezekiel's intelligent use of typical Indian ways of address such as "Dear sister" or a reference to Miss Pushpa's "internal sweetness" are meant to foreground the characteristic psyche of men and women vis-à-vis one another in the Indian society. The speaker of the poem, is extremely conscious while giving his speech. His address to Miss Pushpa as "Dear sister" immediately lends a moral respectability to his relationship with Miss Pushpa, who is more or less of his age group. Within the traditional Indian context, the most acceptable form of address for an unrelated woman is "sister" in contrast to "a dear friend", for instance, as in Western countries. The use of "dear" is an example of Babu English as it also indicates excessive sentimentalism and concern for propriety. The speaker's complex psyche and his uncertainty about Miss Pushpa's life and character is further revealed when he announces that she is going abroad for "two three days" and cannot understand why she smiles so often. Even when he speaks of her "very high family" he cannot remember where they live and drifts off into his own memories of a visit to his family in Surat where the cooking was good. In many instances of the poem, the speaker's comments about Miss Pushpa are ambivalent and carry multiple connotations which further throw light upon her character.

The poem, constructed as a farewell speech, shows that Miss Pushpa represents a simple individual, who is affable, kind and pleasant with everyone, including her colleagues. She is a perpetual "yes" woman who is approachable and helpful ("Miss Pushpa is never saying no") (Gulam 166). The speaker at one point says, "Whenever I asked her to do anything,/ she was saying, "Just now only/ I will do it." That is showing good spirit." Yet, her simplicity and affability makes her vulnerable and taken for granted which is clearly evident in the prejudiced manner in which the speaker tries to justify his comments about her "internal sweetness". Infact, Miss Pushpa's popularity with men and women alike ("she is most popular lady/ with men also and ladies also") is has a double meaning to it.

Miss Pushpa belongs to the middle-class English speaking society in India who aspire for better economic and material prospects in their life. Therefore, she must "depart for foreign" because a trip abroad represents ultimate dream and achievement to her. The occasion to go abroad is a cherished landmark in the career of an Indian, a stage achieved after putting a lot at stake in hope of social and material advancement not only for oneself but also for their families. The friends and relatives on such occasions naturally tend to be rather too extravagant in their praise of the person going abroad, and the poem satirizes this extravagant praise through the speaker's farewell speech. Miss Pushpa's plans to look for prosperity in foreign lands also exposes the colonized psyche still persisting in the postcolonial nation. This mindset is represented both by Miss Pushpa and those who have come to pay their accolades and compliments to her on this "achievement". In the words of Irshad Gulam Ahmed, "This is the yet-to-be decolonized Indian psyche that the poet seeks to foreground [...] [expressing a notion of] colonialism which consists not so much in the use of the English language in its unaltered or undistorted form but in the perpetuation of a colonized psyche, a colonial mindset still persisting in the postcolonial era" (166). Therefore, the poem stands for the coexistence of colonialism and anticolonialism in the Indian psyche. Ezekiel attempts to expose this colonized mindset by expressing it in "Indianized English".

If "Goodbye Party" portrays Indianness through typical use of Indian variety of English, the Ezekiel's "Night of the Scorpion" captures the ordinariness of village experience through striking imagery and rhythmic poetic patterns to recreate the humdrum of one particular night when the narrator's mother was bitten by a deadly scorpion. Bruce King in *Modern Indian Poets* remarks "The aim [of "Night of the Scorpion"] is not to explain but to make real by naming, by saying 'common things'. The poem is a new direction, a vision of ordinary reality, especially of Indian life, unmediated by cold intellect" (99). As Ezekiel strives to capture the mundane incident that occurs in the village, he deftly sets up a contrast between the rational approach of the narrator's father and the orthodox, superstitious outlook of the villagers, which allows the poem to be steeped in the particular Indian ethos. According to C. Paul Verghese, "This is a simple narrative poem in which the force of superstition and age-old beliefs is pitted against the scientific temperament". The voice of the poet is emotionally detached and lets "the situation speak directly to us" (68).

The poem begins by the narrator recalling the night when his mother was stung by a scorpion, thereby evoking the pain and trauma faced by her as well as the sense of panic that had set amongst the villagers. As the news of this incident travels throughout the village, the peasants throng to the narrator's house "like swarms of flies" and chant the "name of God a hundred times" (31). Just like buzzing flies, the villagers keep discussing the unfortunate incident and how the ill-effects of the sting could be alleviated. According to the poor, gullible peasants, the scorpion represents nothing less than a fiend or a devil who flashes its "diabolic tail" and instills deep fear amongst everyone (31). He is personified as the "Evil One" who could bring bad luck through its poison and hence has to be paralyzed at any cost. The villagers immediately start searching for the scorpion by

flashing candles and lanterns "on the sun-baked walls" (32). The lack of electricity and unplastered walls of the hut once again remind the reader of the extreme poverty and primitive conditions of living of the villagers.

Moving on, the villagers recite prayers in unison in the hope of pacifying the evil forces that are embodied by the scorpion's poison. With the repetition of the phrase "they said", the narrator tells the reader that the villagers pray that "May the sins of [her] previous birth/ be burned away" and "May [her] suffering decrease/ the misfortunes of [her] next birth" (33). They also wish that the poison of the scorpion would purify her from unwanted desires and ambitions and alleviate her total suffering that was destined for her. Imbuing a peculiar incantatory effect to the poem, these attempted remedies reflect the "simplicity of the peasants' beliefs as well as their spontaneous human goodwill". At the same time, the choric repetition of the phrase "they said" implies "something of the ancient, sophisticated ritual of the chanting" to cure maladies (Walsh, qtd. in Mohanty 54). As the peasants remain seated on the floor with the speaker's mother in the center, "the peace of understanding on each face" implies that they seem to possess a perfect understanding of all the metaphysical realities of life, death, sorrow and suffering, while ironically being oblivious to the excruciating physical pain under which the speaker's mother is groaning. The complexity of the situation is further compounded by the contradictory reaction of the father who is a "sceptic, rationalist" and yet tries "every curse and blessing, /powder, mixture, herb and hybrid" (32). With over twenty hours of trying all the superstitious and scientific methods out of which none work properly, the pain and effect of the poison dilutes on its own.

The last stanza of the poem echoes the typical response of an average Indian mother who is conditioned to prioritize the safety and well-being of her children and family before herself. Even after the physically draining process, all what the mother responds is "Thank God the scorpion picked on me/ and spared my children" (32). According to A. Raghu, the poem is an authentic portrayal of Indian ethos because it brings together some of the most important elements of the Indian reality—poverty, suffering superstition, duplicity and communal effort (49). The poem despite its clinical gaze at the superstition and blind beliefs of the villagers, highlights the fact that even though they may not have been able to bring the solace to the groaning woman, but their collective effort shows the importance of the community in Indian ethos.

In the two poems discussed above, one notices a commonality vis-a-viz the use of language and diction, "Babu Angrezi" in one case and colloquial narratorial voice in the other. Both are designed to capture the peculiar nuances of Indian speech patterns and everyday experiences in the Indian society. While Ezekiel has pointed out to his alienational experience with respect to the religious and cultural mores of the Indian masses, he nevertheless successfully captures and paints an equally authentic picture of Indianness as evident in his poems that talk of slice-of-life situations. Both the poems also ironize the experiences depicted in them so as to juxtapose the themes of Indian cultural identity, scientific temperament vis-à-vis the Indian tendency to rely upon superstition, and language as an important determinant of one's position in society. Both the poems, in highlighting different aspects of Indianness exemplify Ezekiel's commitment to his Indian identity, even though he may view many of its attitudes and characteristics with deep skepticism.

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