

The Exact Name: A Testimony to Nissim Ezekiel's realisation of Indian Social Panorama

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Abstract

Nissim Ezekiel is an acclaimed Indian English poet. He is primarily viewed as a poet with urban sensibilities, a poet with an alien consciousness and a poet with a sceptical eye to Indian codes, conducts and manners. But Ezekiel's fifth poetic volume entitled 'The Exact Name' speaks volume of his 'sense of belonging'. His feeling of alienation often yields to his native consciousness. The poems in this volume reflect the poet's awareness of Indian social scenario that marks a step towards his emotional identification with the core of Indian sensibility. Cast in a modern setting his poetic persona seems to be sick with the 'frightening and sickening aspects of urban life'. He often finds it inconvenient to cope up with the make-belief world of the city and the atheist self of Ezekiel feels compelled to make way to his new self devoted to God in order to 'calm the self of its disquiet'. His attention so long attached to urban sensibility is directed to some deeper consciousness. The paper in question seeks to locate how The Exact Name offers to readers Ezekiel's poetic persona delving deep into both urban and rural sensibilities in order to come to terms with Indian social panorama.

Keywords: Alien, Belonging, Panorama, Sensibility, Urban, Rural.

The Exact Name is Nissim Ezekiel's fifth volume published in 1965. The vitality in the world of human nature and affairs is more pronounced in this volume. Ezekiel the poet comes out as a keen psychologist who explores into human nature. At times he is torn between alien leanings and native forces. Born and brought up in India and being not in a position to retreat to his original root of being a Jew, the native force gets the upper hand and edges out the 'alien'. His search for identity in an Indian setting is the root cause of his subtle dealings with Indian social panorama. His poetic persona yearns to identify himself. His yearning pushes him ahead to go deep into the soul of Indian phenomena. Besides, Ezekiel's deep observation of the lower creatures of Nature is also spoken volume of in this collection.

Ezekiel's identification with Indian sensibility often appears to waver. But at a certain point of time his persona's oneness with the very essence of native intensity reaches to its climax when his identification with Indian milieu almost comes full circle. "Night of the scorpion", one of Ezekiel's finest poems, serves as a testimony to this revelation. The poet assumes the character of the speaker and narrates the myth appropriately Indian. The identify seeker in Ezekiel, in the guise of the speaker, identifies with what India is all about. S. N. Prasad observes, "In 'Night of the Scorpion' the poet not only looks with indulgence at, but identifies himself with, the simple-minded, superstitious village youth whose mother was stung by a scorpion on a rainy night"(Paniker 133).

The speaker, cast in a rural background, reminisces a certain night when his mother was stung by a scorpion. That the mother was stung by the scorpion of 'diabolic tail' was considered a devil's act:

"I remember the night my mother
was stung by a scorpion.
Ten hours of steady rain had driven him
to crawl beneath a sack of rice."

(*Night of the Scorpion*)

In an Indian rural setting neighbours or villagers are prompt to come in no time and help in God's name in chorus. They are always concerned about whoever the victim is. Their superstitions stimulate them into action:

"The peasants came like swarms of flies
and buzzed the name of God a hundred times
to paralyse the Evil one.

With candles and with lanterns
throwing giant scorpion shadows
on the sun-baked walls
they searched for him: he was not found.”

The passage reflects the typical rural setting of India, almost in totality. The images namely, ‘candles’, ‘lanterns’ and ‘the sun-baked walls’, connote the household articles of the rural India. Superstitious the villagers of an Indian soil may be, nevertheless they are honest and simple-minded. Ezekiel the poet, more than any other Indian poet, comes closer to perceive Indian social character as reflected in the following passage:

“May the sins of your previous birth
be burned away tonight, they said.
May your suffering decrease
the misfortunes of your next birth, they said.”

The superstitions of the villagers are obvious and evident; but underneath, the imagery of heartfelt concern for the victim as drawn in the passage is mind-blowing -- a typical Indian in its treatment and appeal. Besides, the concept of the ‘karma’ in Indian philosophy is manifest in the imagery concerned. Life is determined and destined by the ‘karma’ or the action done in the previous birth. The life-cycle -- birth, death and rebirth -- has been the traditional belief among most Indians. Here the poetic persona has caught the psyche of an Indian. Ezekiel the poet thus rises to his zenith when he dives deeper into the individual Indian mind which is a part and parcel of the collective psyche.

A contrast in treatment and appeal is recorded by the poetic persona when the ‘sceptic, rationalist’ father tried ‘every curse and blessing, powder, mixture, herb and hybrid’ and the holy man performs his rites to tame the poison. But when the mother gets herself concerned about her children ignoring her own pain, she represents all motherhood. Here she is the mother, not only of a city, not only of a village, but of India as a whole:

“My mother only said:
Thank God the scorpion picked on me
and spared my children.”

Thus Ezekiel has observed the revelation of India’s pride, thanks to his attempt of full identification with India’s root and ego. Surya Nath Pandey rightly thinks about Ezekiel, “His sense of peculiar involvement manifests itself in an apparently situations which engage his attention” (Pandey 77).

When Ezekiel turns to an Urban setting, he comes across India’s other self in the form of people down-trodden and exploited under the Indian sky as reflected in ‘In India’:

“Burnt-out mothers, frightened
Virgins, wasted child
And tortured animal,
All in noisy silence
suffering ... ”

The imagery drawn in the passage is one of the stark revelations of the penury and agony in an Indian urban setting. Satish Kumar makes an apt reference to Ezekiel, “He is ‘sharp, accurate, unsentimental’ grim and detached observer of the Indian scene. The callous dehumanisation of contemporary Indian life, especially urban life he has been living since his birth, bruises his soul as it does the sensitive poetic sensibility of many an Indian English poet” (Kumar 168). The religious diversity finds a full expression in these remarkable poetic lines:

“The Roman catholic Goan boys
The whitewashed Anglo-Indian boys
the muscle-bound Islamic boys
were earnest in their prayers.”

The boys are active in sports and mirth, but are never oblivion of ‘their prayers’. On the other hand, Indian wives are foils to their husbands. The duality in treatment and nature of genders comes to an impudent and shocking revelation:

“The men are quite at home
among the foreign styles

(what fun the flirting is!)
I myself, decorously
press a thigh or two in sly innocence.”

This is the picture very much common in an urban setting where the weaker sex is exploited. This impolite treatment meted out to the weaker sex cannot escape the cool and discerning eye of the poetic self in Ezekiel. Two contrary aspects of woman are exposed ironically -- simple and reserved, and carefree and pseudo progressive. One is naïve, the other being modern only in name. She is modern in being the secretary of her English boss who exploits her physically, who makes her the victim to his lust, to her disillusionment:

“He lent her a safety pin
Before she took the elevator down.”

Ezekiel in his campaign on searching for an Indian identity can see things how they are under varied situations. Cast in an urban setting Ezekiel’s persona occasionally misses the elemental charm he cherishes to relish. So he keeps his eye into the heart of Nature or to the edge of the city outside ‘human clamour’ where the ‘deaf can hear, the blind recover sight’:

“To watch the rarer birds, you have to go
Along deserted lanes and where the rivers flow
In silence near the source, or by a share
Remote and thorny like the heart’s dark floor.”

(Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher)

Indian social setting bears a raw aspect about it in the practice of superstition among common masses. Ezekiel has caught the imagination of an ordinary Indian stimulated by a superstition when he expects of the arrival of a visitor following the cawing of the crow three times, and he apprehends something ‘sinister’ to fall upon him:

“Three times the crow has cawed
At the window, baleful eyes fixed
On mine, wings slightly raised
In sinister poise, body tense
And neck craned like a nagging woman’s
Filling the room with voice and presence.”

(The visitor)

Thus the superstitious and feeble minded people in India do not act and think beyond ‘the miracles of mind’. ‘The ordinaries of most events’ tend to lead something unearthly to the unsteady minds in a typical Indian setting. The discerning eye of Ezekiel perceives this social phenomenon. M. Subba Rao pinpoints, “Ezekiel’s poetry is ‘criticism of life’ in the best sense of the phrase. That is why he often deals with the comic spectacle of man sulking or dreaming in a world, puzzled, and reveals a sceptical attitude to human pretensions and pretences. He can be serious and light, sardonic and intense at the same time. But his work has been the best when it has struggled to answer questions and reconcile differences.” (Rao 145).

Nevertheless, his mental sight comes to a position from where he looks back and looks forward and gets into the web of dilemmas. These dilemmas are traced in some compositions. Ezekiel’s search for a complete identity continues, though the voyager in him has already settled. He is not sure of his position so far his identity is concerned. Yet the surrounding outside is favourable; but he feels it not easy for him to correspond to it:

“Compared to my mind
rocks are reasonable,
clouds are clear.
It makes me mad
but that is how it is.”

(Transparently)

The setting is in the fitness of things. But he wavers; he finds himself solely responsible for his mind’s unsteadiness. He puts himself on the stockade of all queries undercurrent in him. However, he is roused to his self soon and sees things in their light. He comes to the fore and gives out his suppressed trauma:

“All I want now

is the recognition
of dilemma
and the quickest means
of resolving it
within my limits.”

Ezekiel resumes his search -- his mission of claiming for him a legitimate identity. He involves himself in the affairs, if possible, relevant to his cause:

“I act to end the acting
not to be known but to know,
to be new, to become a form and find
my relevance.”

(In the Theatre)

At times, his rebellious self stems out, disapproves settled things and enquires of his alien ‘obscurities’:

“...I’ll keep my nerve,
refuse the company of priest,
professor, commentators, moralists,
be my guest in my own
one-man lunatic asylum,
questioning the furies, my patron saints,
about their old and new obscurities.”

(A Small Summit)

Ezekiel’s persona approves the city; he was born in, as his ‘home’. But he is conscious of its incongruities that lend to his home an air of hell; nevertheless he is in a state of mind to consider odd things tolerable and ‘a cause for celebration’:

“I say to it and to myself:
not to be dead or dying
is a cause for celebration.”

(After Reading A Prediction)

Cast in ‘a kind of hell’ his persona gets odd things out and finds out Nature’s abundance that rewards him ‘a faithful friend’ out of ‘the fallen world’. Ezekiel now can adjust to and compromise with ‘the fallen world’:

“I seek on firmer ground
to improvise my later fiction,
the fallen world
a faithful friend.”

(After Reading a prediction)

He can now improvise a ‘firmer ground’ out of ‘the fallen world’ There is always a clash working perpetually in his consciousness that makes him at times doubtful about the identity of his self. The atheist self active in him, at that point of time, tends to make way to its counterpart -- the theist self -- so long suppressed, in the form of a prayer:

“I’ve stripped off a hundred veils
and still there are more
that cover your Creation
why are you so elusive?
Even as myself, my very own
incontrovertible, unexceptional
self. I feel I am disguised.”

(Theological)

A clash of doubts and beliefs is always at work in him. He gets ‘tired’ of this clash which is thereby conveyed to the knowledge of ‘Lord’ with a hope to get away from it:

“I am tired

of irony and paradox
of the bird in the hand
and the two in the bush
of poetry direct and oblique
of statement plain or symbolic
of doctrine and dogma”

So there are things varied, nature of which are beyond the adaptability of his ‘tired’ mind. So he takes to theology if it can help somehow. His self turns lenient to certain dogmas and values formerly he was averse to conforming to. Now he can identify himself with and adapt to the incongruous setting of the city he has settled in. Ezekiel sees the essence of things. The regenerate self so long ‘unredeemed’ can voice now:

“You may not see it happening
you only know the norm.”

(Testament)

When Ezekiel has settled and identified himself for time being with things active and dormant, he makes kinship with the senses of the world:

“I close the door and sit alone
in kinship with the world.”

(Happening)

Ezekiel’s self on its journey to its destination comes across things varied and diversified, active and dormant, exposed and hidden, natural and theological. In the process it undergoes trials never-ending, but never ends up much dejected and downcast, as it has to stand up and get ready for another clash. Ezekiel’s human self is always concerned for the poverty-stricken people. If he identifies himself with India, he cannot overlook the people belonging to the lower strata of the society. Ezekiel the poet marks his greatness as a poet of masses, as a poet of society, thanks to his keen observation and his discerning eye. He writes about poor Dhanya, a beggar:

“His old skin
is like the ground
on which he sleeps,
so also, his rages.

(The Truth About Dhanya)

Ezekiel’s keen observation finds Dhanya in a state of penury. Dhanya’s physical trouble too cannot escape Ezekiel’s discerning eyes. Dhanya makes his livelihood by means of ‘odd jobs’. Whatever he earns goes for tea and smoking. So Dhanya the beggar smokes; he is typical as well as particular. Nobody minds his presence when he stumbles around the place. People, of course, sympathise with him. They are concerned about him:

“We look after him
and he makes himself useful
That’s all the truth about Dhanya.”

The truth about Dhanya is the truth about people of lower section of the society. People belonging to upper section do not look down upon him. They rather ‘look after him’. That is all the truth about what India is all about. Ezekiel can perceive the soul of India. This self in Ezekiel is not only urban; he can see things irrespective of status, place and time. He possesses the impetus to identify the truth about India.

The city Ezekiel was born in and has settled in often excites in him something vigour he has left behind long since:

“The city queues are brightened
by the young lovers,
They dress their part. I hear
the beating of their insolent hearts.”

(At Fifty)

But he does not want to see things wiped out for him with even a little bit of compunction. His aged self does not want the ashes of old fire but the flame itself. He is one with all vigour and

vitality. He is always there to stand wear and tear beyond any exhaustion. He always goes for strength and vivacity. Such a man can roar:

“Given the choice, who would not
prefer to stay
among the growing shoots
instead of shedding leaves?”

This self in Ezekiel is conspicuous. The self can come out of all clash and conflict undercurrent in his struggle for an identity. Ezekiel’s aged and experienced persona looks at the world afresh in a new light. P.K.J. Kurup enunciates, “Behind the remarkably sharp, accurate, unsentimental and in some cases grim observation characteristic of his poetry, there is his tension between the poetic self and the context” (Kurup 13). Ezekiel’s poetic self at times becomes philosophical. He begins to recognise his other self hitherto undiscovered:

“And what am I doing here
pretending to be nice?
the sea-wave repeats itself;
a new idea burns the white
of my view to bloody red.”

(*Drawing Room*)

In the Journey to its destination the varied aspects of Ezekiel’s self are sprouted. Each aspect, this way or the other, contributes to his knowledge of the vision of life. Life is of varied shades and colours. In order to get aware of them one must continue to wake up. Ezekiel realizes that if lulled to sleep, his self will find itself left behind by a wrong time in a wrong place’:

“Half awakened
he looks again at his
wrong time, wrong place”

(*The Poet Contemplates his Inaction*)

While confiding to Eunice De Souza, Ezekiel himself makes some observations that “The unfinished Man” contains the first poems on the theme of coming to terms with Bombay, and “The Exact Name” contains the exploration. At the same time there is the need for some apartness too to survive. P.K.J. Kurup beautifully points out about the body of poetry of Ezekiel that his poetry is both the instrument and the outcome of his attempt as a man to come to terms with himself. Many critics of Ezekiel find in his poetry a personal quest for identity, commitment and harmony in life. It would, therefore, not be wrong if his poetry is viewed as his personal pursuit of self discovery, as his experiment seeking to dive deep into his own psyche. In this process Ezekiel concerns himself with the way art should relate itself to life’s problems. The strong ‘alien’ consciousness borne out of his Jewish descent is confronted with prevailing and overpowering native sensibility in Ezekiel’s most poems. The tension out of the clash between them appears to be one of the most striking features of his poems and this tension is resolved eventually with his growing and gradual consciousness of Indian social panorama and this is well reflected and embodied in his poetic volume *The Exact Name*.

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