

## Re- Reading Nissim Ezekiel through the Mirror of Post-colonialism

Goutam Karmakar

*Department of English, Bhagilata H.S, India*

In the genre of Indian English Poetry, Nissim Ezekiel stands as a flagship, founder and father of post-independence period. And any discussion regarding the poetic journey and development of Indian English poetry will definitely start with Nissim Ezekiel. He did the same thing what Walt Whitman did for American poetry. He is classified both as a modernist and post modernist poet. And this can be found in the first half of his poetry. But a close look to some of his poetry shows that his poetry manifests or reflect the gesture of post colonialism. Now-a-days cultural studies and theory of post colonialism become a fashion and also Nissim Ezekiel can be re-read by applying these cultural studies and post colonial theory to some extent. He wants to confirm his identity and also wants to hark back the colonial past of India. Not only this, he also uses myth in his poetry. This paper attempts to highlight those issues and aspects in the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel where he tends towards post colonialism.

*Key Words:* Identity, India, Myth, Post colonialism, Colonialism

### Introduction

“A writer needs a national or cultural identity, without that you become a series of imitations, echoes, responses, but you do not develop because there is nothing at the core to develop.” (Ezekiel, 89)

The above said lines by Ezekiel in an interview shows that he as a post colonial poet attempts to establish a native tradition by resisting the former colonizer and also at the same time tries to assert his national identity. Actually in the genre of literature, the term post colonialism brings forward the colonial literature and at the same time with the fluid identity regiment them and almost every nation wants to dispense with it in their own way. So post colonialism has a deep concern with the national culture and it is a state of consciousness with self awareness of cultural process. Post colonialism is nothing but cultural and political imperialism in a broader sense. So landscape, language, history, myth, national identity and quest for colonial identity are all comes under post colonialism and these are very well ingredients of post colonial literature.


What David Murdoch says about post colonialism is really noteworthy in this context. He says, “We must also pay attention to the cultural hybridity that is the natural feature of post colonial writing and that has become one of the most characteristic features of the modern world itself.” (Pandey,32). A brief look to the theory of post colonialism will clearly show that resistance to the former colonizer is the prime theme of postcolonial countries’ literature. So it is very obvious that the poets who write back to the centre gen-

erally represent their society’s people. Ezekiel’s poetry provides clear representation of native culture and indigenous tradition in a vivid way. His collection of poems include: ‘The Unfinished Man’, ‘Time to Change’, ‘Sixty Poems’, ‘The Exact Name’, ‘Hymns In Darkness’ show some of the characteristics of postcolonial literature.

Colonization means cultural marginalization and the people of former colonies find it difficult to match up with new world even though that have achieve freedom both politically and individually. So this people are helpless, alienated and think themselves as rootless. This identity problem and issues are shown in Ezekiel’s poetry. Many Indian English poets deal with this loss of identity issue in their works and Ezekiel is considered as the forefather of them. Quest for identity in this modern cruel civilization of post-colonial period is best captured by him. Actually as a postcolonial poet, he shows native country and its atmosphere which catch an oversensitive soul in its clutches with its tentacles. He is in some sort of dilemma and also he wants to solve it.

---

**Corresponding author.** Goutam Karmakar, Department of English, Bhagilata H.S, India, Raiganj, Uttar dinajpur, West Bengal, India. Email: [goutamkr@gmail.com](mailto:goutamkr@gmail.com)

 This article is distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use and redistribution provided that the original author and source are credited.

This is seen in ‘Transparently’:

*"All I want now  
is the recognition  
of dilemma  
and the quickest means  
of resolving it  
within my limits." (Transparently)*

His second volume of poetry 'Sixty Poems' shows his search for harmony and identity. Ezekiel is a crafty poet who explores the labyrinth of mind by twisting and delving the ego in order to define mankind including him. Sometimes it is issuing out from so many things as H. M. Williams says in this point: "Many of his poems derive their effectiveness from the poet's puzzled emotional reaction to the modern Indian dilemma, which he feels to be poignant conflicts of tradition and modernism, the city and the village: a somewhat obvious theme but treated by Ezekiel as an intensely personal exploration." (Williams, 116). As a postcolonial poet, he shows the difficulties faced by man in this period after their dark colonized past as they are being isolated and alienated by the city, society and surroundings. Ezekiel shows how he becomes disassociated emotionally from his Bombay city, his birth place. He wants to create relevance and order for his self in this featureless and irrational world. He shows the modern man's mechanical existence:

*"The city pressed upon me; shops, cinemas and  
business houses  
spoke in unambiguous accents. Only the people said  
nothing.  
They bought the evening papers, hurried to a tube  
station  
ceasing to exist." (Encounter)*

Modern man is now isolated and Dr. Shaila Mohan says in this connection, "The modern city has its humanizing effect. The place is not necessarily Bombay, but any place where man loses identity... The city emerges as an image of inferno where the modern city dweller is placed to suffer and carve his way out." (Mohan, 55). With the advent of technology, science and secularism, man is now separated and alienated to his surroundings and Ezekiel is no more exception in this case as his Jewish ancestry makes him alone in Hindu-Muslim society. In his famous essay, 'Naipaul's India and Mine', he throws light in his quest for identity and identity crisis, "I am not a Hindu and my background makes me a natural outsider. Circumstances and decisions relate me to India. In other countries I am a foreigner. In India I am an Indian." (Ezekiel, 88). And this search for identity and self is found in these following lines:

*"Confiscate my passport, Lord,  
I do not want to go abroad  
where I belong." (Hymns in Darkness)*

Modern man can not cope up with his city, its surrounding and these create oppression and pain in his mind and memory. Some typical queer feelings engulf his mind and he shows how the feelings of man changes and these are shown in this lines:

*"I am corrupted by this world, continuously  
reduced to something less than human by the crowd  
... corrupted by the world I must infect the world  
with my corruption." (Double Horror)*

Like other postcolonial poets, Ezekiel shows how urban life's rootlessness, impact of metropolis, agonies, pain and suffering in modern civilization make a man rootless, helplessness, lonely and this is shown by the poet in a vivid way in these lines:

*"My daughter tells my wife,  
who tells my mother,  
who tells me." (Collected poems, 200)*

Ezekiel feels pity and grief when he sees the condition of modern man finding his root, identity even in this post colonial period. It seems that the colonial past is still haunting them. Actually Ezekiel's description of post independence India and more precisely post colonial India is somewhat different from other poets. He sees it in a different way and he compares it with previous condition. In 'Urban' he shows how the people in Bombay dream of oppressionless free existence and also he shows man's failure to fulfil this dream. Man is failed to attain hope and this happens because of the mismatch between perception and action and city's cruelty. The poet shows:

*"The city like a passion burns.  
He dreams of morning walks, alone,  
and floating on a wave of sand.  
But still his mind its traffic turns  
Away from beach and tree and stone  
To kindred clamour close at hand."*

Nationalist writing is one of the prime characteristics of post colonial literature and Nissim Ezekiel like the poets of Caribbean, African and Australian countries tries to reconstruct and regain socio-political and cultural identity which were affected during colonial period. And in doing so, he considers in his mind racial, social, cultural and historical differences also. Like other post colonial writers, he also wants to show us the indigenous culture and his enduring love for the nation. Like Shiv.k.kumar, A.K.Ramanujan, Jayanta Mahapatra, R.parthasarathy, he also realizes that it is the best time to know and symbolize the identity. He also wants to forget the nostalgic past of colonial period. He makes a brave effort to interpret contemporary life and surrounding in his poetry as he feels the pulse of the world. He shows the present India and the suffering of human being. He feels disturbed by all these. In his 'A Morning Walk', he shows how the barbaric city's

bustle oppresses the poet's mind and memory. Bustle, dirt, noise and poverty all are seen here:

*"Barbaric city sick with slums,  
deprived of seasons, blessed with rains,  
its hawkers, beggar, iron-lunged,  
processions led by frantic drums,  
A million purgatorial lanes,  
And child-like masses, many tongued  
Whose wages are in words and crumbs." (A Morning Walk)*

It is also true that sometimes he is deadly haunted by the dark past of colonial period. And it is not the end but just the beginning as the present disturbed, unsettled and uncertain conditions add misery, pain, suffering and anxiety of the poet. The haunting past can be seen in 'In India' where Ezekiel presents the haunting urban picture of depravity of individual and doom of society. He shows his revulsion and disgust here:

*"Here among the beggars,  
Hawkers, pavement sleepers,  
Hutment dwellers, slums,  
Dead souls of men and gods,  
Burnt-out mothers, frightened  
Virgins, wasted child,  
And tortured animal,  
All in noisy silence  
Suffering the place and time,*

*I ride my elephant of thought." (In India)*

In the colonial period the world witness heroism and bravery as the people in that period fought against the colonial policy. But in the post colonial period these all are missing. Ezekiel takes very much pain by seeing all these as man is now fighting not for his country or oppression but for himself and for his family just in order to live and survive. Man is now facing financial crisis. Now the present generation fails to imitate their brave hearted ancestors. In his 'The Railway Clerk' he shows a lower middle class family and its fight for existence:

*"My wife is always asking for money,  
money, money, where to get money?  
My job is such, no one is giving bribe,  
While other clerks are in fortunate position,  
And no promotion even because I am not graduate  
I wish I was bird." (The Railway clerk)*

Ezekiel sees the present life, society and situation very carefully and describes social, economical and political scenario in a vivid way. He is conscious about the human being and concerned about their fate. He makes sufficient effort to depict the contemporary society, its dark and harsh realities and its bitterness. He shows how dirty, unhealthy and overcrowded city make the life of its dwellers miserable. In his 'The Truth about the Floods', he shows pov-

erty of flood affected people in Bihar on a large scale:

*"The villagers ran to them  
they slapped their bellies  
and whined:  
'I have not eaten for three days.'  
My husband has been washed away  
My parents have abandoned me  
My son is dying  
I cannot find my daughter." (The Truth about the Floods)*

Throughout his poetic career, he examines the society carefully and discusses on every object and element that come into his scrutiny. Even he describes the condition of women also in a vivid way. They are even in a colonized, marginalised and subdued condition in this post independence and post colonial period. They are originally treated as second sex. His shows how women are treated. Gender discrimination is found there. In his 'In India', he shows:

*"Burnt-out mothers, frightened  
Virgins, wasted child,  
And tortured animal,  
All in noisy silence  
suffering the place and time." (In India)*

Often Ezekiel is seen in a furious mood and satirizes the follies and foibles found in the bureaucracy. He makes comments on those who are indifferent on seeing everything and their fatalism and apathy come under huge attack. Even he comments on those so called religious person on who people depends for salvation. Those gurus are hypocrite, self-righteous, greedy and they are reduced to nothing due to their double standard of living and hollowness. In his 'Guru', he says:

*"But then we learn  
the saint is still a faithless friend,  
obstinate in argument,  
ungrateful for favours done,  
hard with servants and the poor,  
discourteous to disciples, especially men." (Guru)*

In spite of all these, Ezekiel seeks his root in India as he negates the central idea of all the sufferings, pain, misfortunes, helplessness and ready to accept the life, society and surrounding. He takes this city as his living place and begins his struggle to win over it despite the fear of loss. In his 'Background, Casually', he says that he has become the part of India and Indian landscape and it is not possible to leave it. This tendency is really a part of post colonial tendency as he says:

*"The Indian landscape sears my eyes.  
I have become a part of it  
To be observed by foreigners.  
I have made my commitments now.*

*This is one: to stay where I am,  
As others choose to give themselves  
in some remote and backward place.  
My backward place is where I am.” (Collected poems, 181)*

Despite his Ben-Israeli origin, Ezekiel is deeply rooted in India and especially to Bombay whole heartedly. Even when he visits Edinburgh, his memory related to Bombay remains alive and his knot with this city remains eternal. This is possible because of his acceptance of the city both mentally and emotionally and his ability to transform Bombay into a metaphorical object proves this. He says:

*“I have not come  
to Edinburgh  
to remember  
Bombay mangoes  
But I remember them,  
Even as I look  
At the monuments  
To Sir Walter Scott,  
but Bombay as the fruit  
on which I’ve lived,  
winning and losing  
my little life.” (Collected Poems, 293)*

Ezekiel always tries to keep him in touch with the common men and also in the common affairs of them. And he thinks that without this common touch and without his intimacy with the life of them, it is not possible to decolonize his poetry and his thinking about them. He says this in his ‘Prayer II’:

*“Let me not be isolated  
uninvolved in Man’s defeat,  
But know my love reciprocated  
dancing in the neutral street.” (Prayer II)*

Ezekiel’s outlook regarding the images of India is really postcolonial gesture and Gieve Patel says in this case in Collected poems of Ezekiel, “The poet’s continued identification with this country is seen to have been the correct choice for him, sustaining him as a writer and human being; ending with an acknowledgement that his own personal backwardness as a man, and the ostensible backwardness of the country, are one and the same thing.” (Patel, xxiii). With the help of this inwardness he comes closer to his native people and also helps him to understand them, their life, ego, pride and also his poetry. He wants to live among his people and this humanness is shown in ‘A Poem of Dedication’:

*“I do not want the yogi’s concentration,  
I do not want the perfect charity  
of saints nor the tyrant’s endless power.  
I want a human balance humanly  
acquired, fruitful the common people.”  
(A Poem of Dedication)*

In spite of his Ben-Israeli origin, he has a deep sense of rootedness to India. He wants to make his place an environment to live in and to make out a authentic meaning for him. He does not want to be imprisoned by idea, place and time and thus he loves India more to survive there. And what Shrish Chindhale says about him is really noteworthy, “He has made his commitments, chosen his islands, found his people and identified the five elements of sky, earth, air, water and fire. It is quite gratifying that God has granted him the human metaphor also to make his song good. This is not a mood of submission, or of resignation, or of alienation. It is rather the epiphanic moment of reconciliation, identification, discovery and achievement.” (Chindhade, 50). In his ‘The Egotist’s Prayers’, these are shown when he says:

*“Confiscate my passport, Lord  
I don’t want to go abroad.  
Let me find my song  
where I belong.” (The Egotist’s Prayers)*

Ezekiel in his poetic career adjusts so many issues and problems. He shows how the cities of India make the life of its people miserable and as a result search for identity is there. But he does not want to leave this country. And the mothers in his poet also do the same thing as they want to do well for their son in spite of the pain they receive. So the role of mother is actually the altar ego of Nissim Ezekiel. In his ‘Night of the Scorpion’, he shows how the mother shows her believe in God after getting so much pain:

*“My mother only said:  
Thank God the scorpion picked on me  
and spared my children.” (Night of the Scorpion)*

A close look to his poems shows that a maturity is shown in his poetry, in his way of thinking and way of perception. With this maturity and post colonial motives, he successfully projects the difference between good and evil and he also learns to look at the things in a more vivid and critical way. His ‘Latter-Day Psalms’ is the best example of it where he clearly feels as the significance of the ungodly presence. There he writes:

*“I laid me down and slept  
I awaked, for the Lord  
sustained me. Let every man,  
Woman and child sleep and  
Awaken, sustained by thee.” (Collected Poems, 254)*

Ezekiel as a post colonial poet tries his best to free himself from the limitations and he wants to identify himself in a new way. While the people of his country fail to identify their life, aim and motives, he tries to cleanse his self and thus the process of decolonization starts. In his ‘Enterprise’, he shows this as the poet’s friends at the end of the journey achieve nothing and also are not enlightened rather they become exhausted and tired. But with his out-

look and gestures of postcolonialism, the poet finds himself in a fine position from where he can feel his friend's spiritual bankruptcy and also able him to look without and within. The concluding lines of the poem offer a great deal of variety in theme and thinking as he wants to investigate the problem lies there in order to get solution in the name of redemption and he does not want to see this as a problem solving puzzle. This is definitely post colonial tendency and this alleviates the context and the poet. Here are the concluding lines which show all these:

*"When finally, we reached the place  
we hardly knew why we were there.  
The trip had darkened every face,  
Our deeds were neither great nor rare.  
Home is where we have to earn our grace." (Enterprise)*

Not only this Ezekiel also tries to use the word prayer, relevance of prayer, impact of God, philosophy of non-violence and truth in his poetry and thus he uses myth in his poetry. And if the creation of myth is the characteristic of post-colonial literature more precisely poetry then Nissim Ezekiel is really a post colonial poet in true sense of term. Actually Ezekiel is very much influenced by the Hindu thought mythology. Jussawala says in this connection, "It is surprising how often the word prayer occurs in the work of a poet whose approach to life far from being religious is one of philosophical humanism. His natural resource is not prayer." (Jussawalla, 9). Poems from 'Hymns in Darkness' and 'The Poster Poems' show that he wants the love of God earnestly even knowing that it is not possible for him to get that. So his use of myth is actually his view of God in his own way. In his 'The Poster Poems', he uses his Hindu and Judaic-Christian tradition to know the relationship between God and him"

*"No Lord,  
not the fruit of action  
is my motive  
but do you really mind  
half a bite of it?  
It tastes so sweet  
and I'm so hungry." (The Poster Poems)*

Indian mythology always is the source of appeal and interest to him. The Bhagwat Gita and Mahabharata cast a great influence to him. In so many poems he wants to show the truth that he finds in Lord Krishna's speech to Arjuna. The mystery of self and life lie there as the future life or worldly life do not appeal him too much. The following lines show how Ezekiel attempts to reveal the mystery of life that is told by Lord Krishna:

*"The secret locked within the seed  
becomes my need and so  
I shrink to nothingness*

*within the seed." (Collected Poems, 205)*

Since childhood more precisely from his school days he reads 'Upanishad' and 'Gita' and these books change his view on Hindu culture, tradition and mythology. These books also help him to attain true knowledge and these mythological books that he reads also find place in his poetry as he uses this in a vivid way. In a poem 'Tribute to Upanishad', he shows these impact and use of myth:

*"To feel that one is  
to drive oneself  
in a kind of hearse-  
the destination is obvious." (Tribute to Upanishads)*

After reading Gita, Upanishad and Vedic Hymns, he comes to the conclusion that only through total surrender one can realize the presence of God. Also the speech given by Lord Krishna to Arjuna cast a great influence on him and also he comes to the conclusion that rather than hundred thoughts a single decision is far better. And these are shown in his poems:

*"He has lost faith in himself  
And found faith at last  
All forms of God  
and God in all forms." (Collected Poems, 219-220)*

He wants to know the actual truth and wants to seek knowledge from God. He knows that God is the savior of all and he tells his people to be very arrogant and proud as only God is the master and controller of us:

*"You are master  
neither of death nor life  
Belief will not save you  
nor unbelief." (Collected Poems, 222)*

Actually he wants to merge himself with God and he realizes that only after total surrender with nature and its elements he will be able to achieve what he wants to achieve. To his goal in this post-colonial era he chooses God and nature as his medium of expression and also the source of his poetic inspiration and these are shown in the following lines from 'Morning Prayer':

*"God grant me certainty  
in kinship with the sky,  
air, earth, fire, sea,  
and the fresh inward eye.  
Grant me the metaphor  
to make it human good." (Morning Prayer)*

## Conclusion

In the concluding lines it can be said that Nissim Ezekiel's poetry shows his journey from modernism to postcolonialism. The present of India both mentally, psychologically and physically are very much

present in him and this poetry gives a new beginning in the era of postcolonialism which in later his younger contemporaries follow and they have also tried to move further in that direction shown by Ezekiel. The gestures, the themes and motives that are found in his poetry clearly project him as a true post colonial poet. He has a great desire to write about culture, indigenous tradition and also his attempt to create a new identity of the colonized people in this independent period establish his place among the post colonial poets of Indian English poetry. His poetry can be classified as indicative poetry as his works decolonize the custom, tradition and contemporary society and also his poetry as this poetry becomes the way of expression and a source of local habitation and international name in this post colonial era.

## **References**

- Ezekiel, Nissim. *Collected Poems 1952-1988*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, Ed. II, 2005
- Raghu, A. *The Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors, 2002
- Pandey, Surya Nath. *Writing in a Post-colonial Space*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors, 1999
- Williams, H.M. *Indo-Anglian Literature 1800-1970*. Madras: Orient Longman Ltd, 1977
- Mohan, Shaila. *The Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel*. Jaipur: Classic Publications, 2001
- Chindhade, Shrish. *Five Indian English Poets*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors, 2001
- Ezekiel, Nissim. Naipaul's India and Mine, *Journal of South Asian Literature*, Vol.11, No.3/4, Spring Summer, 1976
- Beston, John B. Interview with Nissim Ezekiel, *World Literature Written in English*, 1977
- Jusawalla, Adil. *Twelve Modern Indian Poets*, Ed. Arvind Krishna Meherotra, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992