
Nissim Ezekiel and Indian Theology

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Nissim Ezekiel is a well known name in the field of Anglo-Indian literature. Moreover, he is an Indian poet as far as his poetry is concerned. He is a master as far as his skill of evoking a typically Indian situation is concerned. Not only this, but the language he uses is also very much Indian. Despite being a “natural outsider”(Collected Poems,179) he faced all the troubles and ultimately “made” his “commitments”.

But there is one more aspect of his poetry, where another type of Indian thinking is penetrated. Ezekiel read the Indian scriptures during his childhood. All his religious poems owe the flavour of “Bhagwad Gita” and the Indian theology as well. The terms like “salvation”, “meditation”, “the mysteries of death and birth” are often talked about in his poems. Bruce king says that he is inspired by Vedic Hymns which Ezekiel read in English translation at the time of composition of these hymns.(p.54)

Not only this, but he has also presented the changing attitude of society towards religion and God. The chaos and confusion which is the by-product of the modern fastrack life is quite prevalent in his poetry. Ezekiel read the Hindu scriptures like “Gita” and “Upnishdas” when he was a school boy and his poem “Tribute to Upnishdas” (CP,205) is an undeniable proof of that. Here, he pays tribute to the Upnishdas which give true knowledge of the real self. He says:

To feel that one is
is to drive oneself
in a kind of hearse-
the destination is obvious.(CP,205)

Since he knows that by considering one’s worldly self as his true self, an individual is destined to be doomed, Ezekiel says:

I don’t want to be
the skin of the fruit
or the flesh
or even the seed,

which grows into another
wholesome fruit.(CP, 205)

Here, the poem seems to translate the preachings of Lord Krishna regarding the mystery of life and self. In the poem, he is neither concerned with the worldly life nor about the next life. But he is concerned with the mystery of life. As Lord Krishna revealed the mystery of life to Arjuna, Ezekiel seems to be telling his readers:

The secret locked within the seed
becomes my need and so
I shrink to nothingness
within the seed.(p.205)

Again, the echoes of Bhagwad Gita are to be found in “Hymns in Darkness”(CP,219).

The sequence deals with the religious and normal musing of the city dweller who is none other than the Ezekiel himself. The poem’s form, according to Bruce King, is inspired by Vedic Hymns which Ezekiel had read. The following lines echo the message of the Gita that God can be realised only through the absolute surrender to Him:

He has lost faith in himself
And found faith at last (CP,219).

While explaining the life of a worldly man, Ezekiel tries to be more authentic by using such words which are used by each one of us because we don’t want to accept our failures. Side by side, he also shows the path to come out of all the chaos just as Lord Krishna had shown to Arjuna by saying “a single decision is better than a hundred thoughts” And ultimately he says that

All forms of God
And the God in all forms.(CP,220)

Whether “Woman”, “Man” , “oppressor”, “oppressed”, “beggars”, “smells” or “unsmellable smells”, you should not be proud of yourself as He (God) is the only controller of yours and.

You are master
neither of death nor life.
Belief will not save you,
nor unbelief.(CP,222)

And the only thing you can realise is the ultimate truth, i.e., death.

In his poem “Theological” Ezekiel’s theological position is clearly humanistic. He has tried to be the everyman who is totally disillusioned by the fake, unsubstantial physical world. Here, Nissim has tried to restructure man’s relationship with God, Society and Nature. That’s why he says:

Lord, I am tired
of being wrong.(CP,156)

This feeling of exhaustion alternates with the realization that God’s truth is too important and great for man and therefore, it cannot be brought within the narrow framework of utilitarian objective. Therefore, Ezekiel further says:

Your truth
is too momentous for man
and not always useful.(CP,156)

Here Ezekiel become “everyman” and becomes conscious of the mask that is worn by each one of us. As worldly or physical existence is called “Mithya (Fake)” and “Moh-maya” (Worldly Attractions) in Hindu Vedas and scriptures strip off the mask of his wordly self in order to understand the nature of true divinity. He says:

Even as myself, my very own
incontrovertible, unexceptional
self, I feel I am disguised.(CP,156)

Ezekiel starts the poem “Counsel” (CP,229) on an Indian note where he addresses to “Shri Hari Ji” which is the Hindu (Indian) address to the Almighty. The whole poem is drenched in the Hindu theology. He addresses the modern man who is mostly a non-believer. Ezekiel says that it is only “faith” or “positive belief” in God that can do miracles in life. He says that man shouldn’t strive to “gain” the futile things. He doesn’t know what he needs and

Success at the moment
Is not in your interest.(CP,157)

Again, Ezekiel advocates the Vedic Preachings by saying that one should leave one's mask of false wisdom because our thinking is the product of the unripe fruit of knowledge which was tasted by by the first man and woman i.e. Adam and Eve. Here Ezekiel has made a reference to the story of Christian mythology.

Further, Ezekiel comments that they have undertaken so much amount of the food of wisdom that now, man should

.....Learn to fast
Do without, be absent,
Keep the eyes closed.(CP,229)

Actually, Ezekiel has tried to depict the hollowness and the meaninglessness of the physical world. In the following lines, Ezekiel hints at the Hindu views of selfless giving, i.e. "Dutta", "Daan", "Dadamya" to which Eliot has also referred to in his "The waste Land" as "Da". In the concluding lines of the poem, Ezekiel says:

Express your gratitude
By giving what you have to give.
You may get nothing in return.
And bear your restlessness with grace. (CP,229)

The references to Hindu mythology are scattered all over in his poetry. In his poem "Morning Prayer" (CP,122) while praying to God helps him to become a "good human", Ezekiel asks for:

.....Certainty
In kinship with the sky
Air, Earth, Fire, sea-
And the fresh inward eye. (CP,122)

The lines are nothing but a clear reference to the "Panchtatva" theory of Hindu Mythology.

The same reference is also present in his poem "The Cur" (CP,25) where he has referred again to the "panchtatva". Again, another poem of Ezekiel, i.e. "Enterprise" (CP,25) is also inspired by the Hindu theology, according to which God and Man are complementary to each other. If we have to feel the almighty, we do not need to visit any "Mandir", "Masjid" or "Gurudwara" because God is everywhere. The concluding line of the poem,

Home is where we have to earn grace (CP,25).

strikes the key note of the poem. God, if has to be searched, we should search Him in our ourselves instead of searching around. In Hindu mythology, this concept is often compared with the “Kasturi Mrig” as it keeps on searching for the source of the fragrance around. It doesn’t realise that the deer itself is the source of fragrance.

“Blessings”(CP,281), a sequence of fourteen short poems, constitutes a wisdom literature for the modern man. Like Christ’s beatitudes, these poems give advice to find salvation through one’s life, one’s spirit and one’s experience. Again Bruce King remarks that, “These Blessings like the saints’ poetry of medieval India and the English seventeenth century devotional lyrics are filled with word play and puns”(p.57).

Ezekiel is a true Indian not only in his theological approach but also in depicting the socio-religious attitude of the people who live around him. In “At Fifty”(CP.170) Ezekiel has tried to penetrate the mental dilemma of a middle aged man, who as everyman of the age finds himself divided into the material and spiritual world. He says,

I do not want the ashes
of the old fire but the flame itself.
Interest in the secret of renewal
is sign of age,
no longer secret.(CP,170)

Here, the term “renewal” refers to the concept of resurrection Eliot has referred to in his “The Waste Land”. Eliot has also taken it from Indian mythology.

In the poem “Guru”(CP,192), Ezekiel has tried to be satirical towards the society which is running towards these diplomatic fake “Gurus”. Ezekiel finishes the poem with a question:

If saints are like this
what hope is there then for us? (CP,192)

The poem “ Egoist Prayers ”(CP,213) is a satirical comment on the changed from of “prayer”. Here prayer has been reduced to an order to the Almighty. Here, the persona of Ezekiel seems to reject the Lord Krishna’s advice to work without worrying about the result. Instead of understanding his own responsibility, the man reminds God “what He should do and how”. All his wishes are a sort of order to God and in a very diplomatic way, he rejects his duty towards God by saying:

Do not choose me, O Lord,
to carry out thy purposes.
I am quite worthy, of course,

but I have my own purpose.

You have plenty of volunteers

to choose from, Lord

Why pick on me, the selfish one? (CP,213)

The poem is nothing but a comment on the decline of religious faith to the utilitarian level which is a truth of our present day society and equally applicable to each segment of Indian society.

Works Cited :

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