

The Influence of Modern English Poets on Nissim Ezekiel: A Study

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DOI: 10.53032/tcl.2020.5.4.12

Abstract

In the present paper it has been attempted to study the influences on Ezekiel. In his works there is a reflection of modern English Poets' perspective along with the style of their writing. Through references to various critics, the influences on Nissim Ezekiel and his poetic works have been shown. The modern English Poets like T.S Eliot, W.B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, Philip Larkin etc proved to be influential enough to Ezekiel and this has been shown here in the present paper through various quotes. He seems to be influenced by the great modern English Poets and ultimately emerging as a great modern poet himself left his fellow poets and readers much influenced with the power of his poetic charm.

Keywords: Influence, Modern, Reflection, Poetic

Nissim Ezekiel (1924-2004), a prolific poet of Post-Independence era of India, is known well for his noteworthy contributions to Indian poetry in English. He is acclaimed to be a great modern poet, having modern consciousness and concerns. He was fully devoted to poetry and it was his poetic genius that made him a poet of international standard. Bruce King in his book *Modern Indian Poetry in English* (2001), introduces Ezekiel in the following words:

Of the group of poets attempting to create a modern English poetry in India, Nissim Ezekiel

soon emerged as the leader who advised others, set standards and created places of publication. His main significance is not, however, as a promoter of poetry; it is in his will to be a poet, his continuing involvement in the poetry scene and the ways in which the developing body of his work expresses his personal quest for a satisfactory way of living in the modern world. Whereas previously Indian English verse was a hobby, something done in spare moments, Ezekiel made it central to his life. (91)

Ezekiel was a member of Marathi speaking Bene Israel community, born on December 16, 1924 and died on January 9, 2004. He was raised in Jewish background under the superb supervision of his father who was a professor of Botany and mother who was a teacher. He did not receive his early education from any lucrative school that candidates from high parentage generally receive; rather he studied in a general school run by Christian Missionaries. It seems, during his school days Ezekiel was greatly influenced by T. S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, Ezra Pound and Rainer Maria Rilke. Their influences are reflected there in many of Ezekiel's poetry. He got the degree of graduation in 1945 from Presbyterian Wilson College and later in 1947 took a degree of first class M.A in English literature from Mumbai University. For a short period of time, he got indulged in radical politics and then in the following year moved to London and studied Philosophy there, *A Time to Change* (1952), Ezekiel's the very first collection of poetry was published there at Fortune Press in London which is the outcome of his mixed experiences in London and his journey for searching identity there.

Of course, Ezekiel lived in different surroundings and atmosphere than his British predecessors but the problems confronted with these poets were almost the same that is loss of value and loss of life due to growing materialism in modern civilization and Indian

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was not untouched of it. In this regard the comment of Bruce King in his book *Three Indian Poets* (second edition) is of much significance. King says:

Ezekiel, however, remained a continuing influence on Indian poetry as a poet, literary critic, editor, publisher, teacher, adviser, and friend of poets. His first volume despite the small number of copies printed came to the notice of a generation of budding poets many of whom, like Kersey Katrak, would cite or reply to Ezekiel's work in their own poetry. It was modern, intellectual, showed the influence of such twentieth century (then still somewhat controversial) masters as W.B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, W.H. Auden in its dramatization of the self, purity of image and concern with technique, while sharing with the British Movement poets of the 1950s and anti romanticism and rational clarity, a commonsense sense view of life. (King, 30)

Sanjit Mishra's comment regarding the same in his work *The Poetic Art of Nissim Ezekiel* (2001) is also noteworthy. He says:

Nissim Ezekiel has palpably been influenced by the contemporary poets like T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, Ezra Pound and Philip Larkin these influences shaped his creative odyssey that stretches well over five decades. In fact, the huge bulk of his writing is creative as well as critical, evidences a receptive personality prove to assimilate various impacts. (13-14).

Coming to trace out the influence of T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats and Ezra Pound it may be said that Nissim Ezekiel was also a poet who was born a Jew and born in India with high poetic sensibilities. True that he seemed to be in the manner of Yeats and Eliot annoyed with the state of being in modern society. Whether be it Eliot's 'Gerontion' 'The Hollowman' or 'The Wasteland'; he laments the condition of human beings as a whole and European

civilization and culture, in particular. It is exactly with W.B. Yeats who was annoyed with human's shortcomings and failings that is revealed in his 'The Second Coming'- one of his most popular poems. He was so depressed with the fall of culture and civilization that he presented the image of 'Sphinx' and 'Spiritus Mundi' who could now come to save ailing humanity. Many more poems of Yeats like 'Sailing to Byzantium' or 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul' present the same experience of the poet where the poet seems to be annoyed with urban and artificial civilization and seems to favour the real civilization where humanity exists with its inherent virtues. T. S. Eliot wrote in 'The Wasteland' (1922):

Unreal City,
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,

I had not thought death had undone so many....(From *The Wasteland*, *The Burial of The Dead*, Lines 60-63)

Exactly in the same manner Ezekiel in his poem 'Urban' (*Collected Poems* 117) writes:

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 tone.
(13-18)

The influence is clearly visible. There are many lines in 'The Wasteland' [qtd. in *The Faber Book of Modern Verse*, 91] of T.S. Eliot which are reflected on the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel. The characteristic qualities of Madame Sosostris who had "a bad, cold, nevertheless./ Is known to be the wisest woman is Europe,/ With a wicked pack of cards" (qtd. in *The Faber book of Modern Verse*, 93), resemble the description of Ezekiel when he paints the ladies of the elite class.

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Ezekiel's expression in the following lines from his poem 'Drawing Room' (Collected Poems, 172) seems to represent the same spirit as that of Eliot in the above mentioned reference:

A grain in the wrong place
hurts the eye of God,
distorts the universe.

And what and I doing here
Pretending to be nice? (Lines 9-13)

Nissim Ezekiel like G.M. Hopkins was an inventor of style in the sense that he moulded a style which expressed the tension and disorder that he found inside himself. He was an outsider and a Jew and naturally was not a good fit in Indian society, and therefore he found himself closer to many European poets who were dissatisfied not only with the Victorian or romantic themes of writing rather they liked to concentrate on what for poetry actually meant to them. Indeed good poetry is more likely to be written about subjects which are, to the poet /writer important, than about unimportant subjects because only on subjects of personal importance to himself he feels the need for that accuracy of speech which itself lessens the tension which it describes. 'The conflict', as writes Michael Roberts, "may be the product of a fractured personality or a decaying society, or, like some of the 'problems' of academic philosophy, a result of the deficiencies of language" (The Faber book of Modern Verse, 4).

He further says, "The terms of the conflict may be intellectual, when people are torn between conflicting systems of ideas. They may be theological, when people argue that they themselves should be perfect, being the children of God, but are perplexed by the recognition that they are evil" (ibid.). Nissim Ezekiel wrote poems in independent India, and in the norms of Indian English Poets so he may be called a modern poet on whom Western poets made great influences than others.

Undoubtedly, his background was that of India and Indians, therefore, he could not isolate himself from the problems of India, but, the poet in him compelled him to do justice with the art which was for him of greater importance. No doubt, "the European poets were aware enough of the social world in which they were living they also criticized it, of course in a satirical rather than in an indignant manner. They adjusted themselves to it, they were interested in the accumulated store of music, painting, sculpture" (Michael, 7).

Roberts Michael is in the opinion of that "Every vital age, sees its own time as crucial and full of perils, but the problems and difficulties of our own age necessarily appear more urgent to us than those of any other, and the need for an evaluating, clarifying poetry has never been greater than it appears to be today" (The Faber Book of Modern Verse, 8).

Both, Pound and Eliot were much concerned about the perils of their age and through their poetry they expressed the disorder of their age which they experienced. The same has been the theme of their poetry. Eliot's *The Wasteland* is the best example containing such theme. Even W.B. Yeats also expresses the failings and disorder of his age. His poetry, too, deals with the same theme. He finds the older tradition to be significant enough. In his poem, 'The Second Coming' (1919), he says:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere

The ceremony of innocence is drowned.... (W.B. Yeats: *The Second Coming*)

Post Independence Indian English Poets were greatly influenced by these British and American poets and writers. Particularly Ezekiel's poetry shows their impact on Ezekiel to a greater extent. In the 'Introduction' to the

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Collected Poems of Nissim Ezekiel, John Thieme writes, "Certainly Ezekiel was influential and his reaction against the dominant modes of earlier Indian Poetry in English did involve a change of direction" (XIX). He was closer to these modern poets than any other religious tales of ancient India.

One may compare the craft of William Carlos Williams which he has used in his poem 'This is just to say'

I have eaten
The plums
That were in
The icebox
And which
You were probably
saving
for breakfast
Forgive me
They were delicious
So sweet
And so cold

(qtd. In The Faber Book of Modern Verse, p. 286)

Ezekiel wrote his poem "Cry" (Collected Poems, 178) with more economy of words in a single sentence and the influence is quite evident:

Breath
My breath
And let me
Breath yours,
Bodies
Savouring
Phenomena,
Sifting
Passion
To the fine
Point
Of penetration,
Obscene
Noumena,
Breath
Of my

Breath of my

Being. (Collected Poems, 178)

Acknowledging the style of William Carlos Williams, Ezekiel himself wrote a poem on his style. The poem is titled as 'For William Carlos Williams':

I do not want
To write
Poetry like yours
But still I
Love
the way you do it.
Something comes
Through and through,
I hear the music of it,
I hear the meaning too.
I feel the flesh
Of the poem
Firm
And the bone hard.

It comes to me
Beloved poem
I love it

And then I let it go. (Collected Poems, 45-46)

Such a style of writing could never have been seen in the Indian English Poetry before the revival of modernism in England, and Ezekiel did not copy the style blindly rather he added something of his own which was related to his individual perception and talent. William Carlos Williams has used, 1,2,3 words stanza. Ezekiel also has used, 1,2,3 words stanza, maximum he has used one word stanza. Carlos Williams has written this poem in four lines stanza while Ezekiel has written the whole poem in a single stanza.

The similarity of expression with W.H. Auden's poem 'Sir, No Man's Enemy' can be seen in Nissim Ezekiel's last four lines of 'Morning Prayer' (Collected Poems 20). The last four lines of W.H. Auden's 'Sir, No Man's Enemy' are :

Publish each healer that in city lives

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Or country houses at the end of drives;
Harrow the house of the dead; look
shining at

New styles of architecture, a change of
heart. (qtd. in The Faber Book on
Modern Verse, p.232)

And the last four lines of Nissim
Ezekiel's 'Morning Prayer' (Collected Poems
20) are:

Unveil, expose, expound
Your metaphors of meaning,
And let them know lucidity,
White wings of morning. (Collected
Poems 20, lines 13-16)

Both the poets appear to believe in
living life at whatever position it has offered to.
The expressions 'New style of architecture', 'a
change of heart' (qtd. in The Faber Book of
Modern Verse, p. 232) and 'let them know
lucidity/ white wings of morning' (Collected
Poems, p.20) are relevant and meaningful from
the viewpoint of comparison.

The influence of Philip Larkin may be
seen on Nissim Ezekiel so far as the use of
symbols, stanza patterns and sound patterns are
concerned. Philip Larkin's poem 'Next, Please'
(qtd. in The Faber Book of Modern Verse, p.
363) and Nissim Ezekiel's 'Subject to Change'
(Collected Poems, 177) the stanza pattern of
both the poets may be compared as example:

Only one ship is seeking us, a black-
sailed unfamiliar, towing at her back
A huge and birdless silence. In her
wake

No waters breed or break. (Philip
Larkin's 'Next, Please', qtd. in The
Faber Book of Modern Verse, p. 363,
lines 21-24)

The people walk and eat. The waves
Rise and fall like nightmare graves
That cannot hold their dead. The sky

is smaller than this open eye. (Nissim
Ezekiel's 'Subject to change' Collected
Poems, p. 177, lines 17-20)

Here the study of mood and rhythm of
the poems where the one line rhyme with the
other may compel us to draw a conclusion how
much there was influence of early twentieth
century British poets on Ezekiel. It was a
departure from the style of writing poetry as
written by Pre-Independence Indian English
Poets.

Indeed Ezekiel wrote poems with
universal themes and human history just as
Dylan Thomas wrote some of the poems. The
influence of Dylan Thomas also may be traced
out on Nissim Ezekiel. One may compare the
following two poems of Dylan Thomas and
Nissim Ezekiel. Dylan Thomas, in his poem, 'A
Refusal To Mourn the Death by Fire of A Child
in London' (qtd. in The Faber Book of Modern
Verse, p. 276), writes:

Deep with the first dead lies London's
daughter,

Robed in the long friends,

The grains beyond age, the dark veins
of her mother,

Secret by the unmourning water
of the riding Thames.

After the first death, there is no other.
(Ibid. lines 19-24)

And Nissim Ezekiel, in the poem
'Creation' (Collected Poems, 79)
writes:

Child of flesh and fancy,

Be equable, as the sages recommend,
And God-like make a universe

From chaos,

Of fire and air and earth and water.
(Lines 19-23)

From the viewpoint of comparison the
following lines from Eliot's 'The Wasteland'
may be taken into account:

Unreal City,

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Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge,
so many,

I had not thought death had undone, so
many...

(From The Burial of the Dead, Lines
60-63)

Eliot is talking about spiritual
degeneration throughout 'The
Wasteland' so does Nissim Ezekiel in
'The Double Horror' (CP 7).

The same predicament of Ezekiel has
been expressed in the poems, 'On Meeting a
Pedant' (Collected Poems, 8): "I swear I will
not argue any more./ Do not be combative, my
heart; rest or ride/ Superbly with the senses,
send out songs" (Lines 20-22).

The feeling of emptiness combined
with depression appears in the poem 'In
Emptiness' (Collected Poems, 11):

.....Let me always feel

The presence of the golden mean

Between the elan of desire

And the rational faculties,

Brooding on design and colour

Even in this emptiness.

(CP 12, Lines. 23-28)

Ezekiel appears to have no lost of hope,
for he is ready to "Broad on design, and colour"
(Collected Poems, 12) even in 'emptiness;. In
'The Wasteland' Eliot also sees hope in
quotation from 'Upanishad', 'Datta,
Payadhnem, Damyanta'.

Again Ezekiel's poem, 'Enterprise'
(Collected Poems, 117) has got similarity of
thoughts with Eliot's 'Journey of the Magi' and
Yeats' 'Sailing to Byzantium', Ezekiel in
'Enterprise' (CP 117) writes:

It started as a pilgrimage,

Exalting minds and making all

The burdens light. The second stage

Explored but did not test the call.

The sun beat down to match our rage.

(Collected Poems 117, Lines 1-5)

The theme of Eliot's 'Journey of the
Magi' (qtd. in The Faber Book of Modern
Verse, p.104-105), is almost the same but with
some difference. Ezekiel talks 'Home' as "a
place to earn grace" (Collected Poems 118) and
Eliot also talks of "returning to our places"
(qtd. in The Faber Book of Modern Verse, 105)
but without ease. T.S. Eliot says in Journey of
The Magi:

We returned to our places, these
kingdoms,

But no longer at ease here, in the old
dispensation,

With an alien people clutching their
gods,

Should be glad on another death. (qtd
in The Faber Book of Modern Verse, p.
105, lines 41-44)

Thus, to a large extent Ezekiel was
influenced by the modern English poets and
with that influenced mind he appeared to be a
great modern Indian English poet who has a
deep sense of social conscience and who
secured a position in modern era. His poetry is
remarkable and admirable and reveals the ills
of the society in proper manner.

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