

The Spirit of Humanism in the Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel

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Abstract

Nissim Ezekiel, the legendary Indian English poet has presented a wide range of subjects and themes in his poetry. But the 'leit motif' of his whole poetic career is the feeling of human predicament in general. How to live happily, calmly and ethically as an integrated human being, seems to be the basic concern of his poetic expressions. The basic tenet of humanism the dignity of human will, moderation, sense of permanent values both individually and collectively, negation of dogma and superstition all find beautiful expression in Ezekiel's poetry. 'A Time To Change', 'A poem of Dedication'. 'In the Theatre', 'Commitments', 'Hymns in Darkness', 'Later Day Psalms', 'Blessings', are some of the important poems which express the poet's desire and belief of achieving humanity through ordinary means without resorting to super human or sub-human distortions of life's facts. So the aim of my article shall be to probe the dictum of Ezekiel "human balance humanly acquired"

Keywords- *Humanism, Urban life, Colloquial Rhythm, Desires, Corruption*

Introduction

Humanism essentially means a rational outlook or thought which gives prime importance to human beings rather than divine or supernatural matters. It prefers critical thinking and evidence over acceptance of dogma or superstition. In late nineteenth century New Humanism was a movement of literary and social criticism championed by leaders like Babitt, Paul E. More, Norman Forester etc. It was Matthew Arnold whose literary and social theories sought to recapture the moral quality of past civilization in an age of materialism, industrialization and relativism. He laid emphasis on moderation, the dignity of human will, sense of permanent values both individually and collectively. Continuing this humanitarian tradition, Nissim Ezekiel, the legendary Indian-English poet, play-wright, critic and academician has undoubtedly infused new vigour to it.

On his comeback from London, Nissim Ezekiel made up his mind to make Bombay, the city of

his birth, the centre of his poetic sensibility. The cultural variety and multiplicity of this metropolitan city fired the instinctive zeal of the poet. It undoubtedly helped him to become the poet who introduced originality and modernity in the history and development of Indian English literature. He not only dealt with typical Indian beliefs, situations and contemporary society but also introduced new craftsmanship to Indian English poetry. One can find a wide range of subjects and variety of themes in his poetry. Urban life, poverty, love and marriage, sexuality, the need to overcome alienation, religion, theological musing, existential dilemmas are some of the notable themes of his poetry. For him life is essentially a quest for whole, for intellectual and spiritual satisfaction through the path of physical and social experience. It is basically concerned with how to live happily, calmly and ethically as an integrated human being.

In course of his own journey by local trains in Bombay, Ezekiel encountered many people of different levels or classes-from a typist to a drunkard, from a beggar to harlots etc. These recollections and his mature musings gave a fine sense of structure, a logical evolution to his poetry. "A Time To Change", divided into five sections reveals the poet's frustration, quest for identity and his faith in human relationship. The feelings of human predicament form the 'leit motif' of his whole poetic career.

The line, "*I want a human balance humanly/ Acquired,/ fruitful in the Common Hour*"...¹ expresses the poet's desire of achieving humanity through ordinary means without restoring to super-human or sub-human distortions as one finds in Marlowe or Shaw. He neither aims to be a human like the 'Yoga' nor inhuman like the 'tyrant'. Through the poems like 'Commitment', "A Poem of Dedication", "In the Theatre" etc he expresses his humanistic vision in very clear terms. The concern for the common man and his life make him utter:

A bit of land, a woman and a child or two Accommodated to their
needs and changing moods

Practicing a singing and talking voice Is all the creed a man of God
requires

(A Time to Change)

To Ezekiel the city of Bombay looks like decomposed garbage in tune with London of Eliot's "The Wasteland". The growing population caused by indigenous job-seekers, the suffering masses, the confused voices make him describe it as a,

Barbaric city sick with slums, Deprived of
seasons, blessed with Rains, its hawkers, beggars iron

Lunged, Processionled by frantic drums. (2)

The more a man tries to free himself from the humdrum of city life the more entangled he gets. His morning walks instead of reinvigorating him brings him face to face with stark realities of suffering

humanity. He is moved at the miserable plight of a beggar. For the beggar Dhanya, he is full of sympathy and describes him evocatively:

His old skin
Is like the ground Onwhichhesleeps, So also hisrags
He cannot stand upright
..few coins everyday
(*The truth AboutDhanya,1-13*)

These lines instantly remind us of Nirala's (Suryakant Tripathy 'Nirala', the famous Hindi poet) moving description of a beggar. Why only human beings, Ezekiel is moved with pity for animals and birds alike. At the sight of a dog 'with a vicious crawl ' and 'Gangrenous in a vital limb', he expresses:

I too am life
Theimage seemstosay, Air, earth, fire,water,
Joie de vivre- remembers me ..." (The Cur 16-19)

The poignant lines resonate with philosophical musings upon the elemental basics of human life. Even the death of a hen 'swept aside by a passing car' makes him hold his breath. Like a true humanist the poet declares:

The food I eat Cannot nourish me
UnlessIlovethehumanface.
I close the doorandsit alone In kinship with the world.
(Happening 37-40)

"Happening" is an important poem, which according to V.A Shahane expresses Ezekiel's philosophical humanism in a forceful and emotive language. It also succeeds in expressing his existential dilemmas.

By birth, Ezekiel was a Jew, by conviction a Marxist, but by religion, we can say that he was a true humanist. In his poetry one also finds an undercurrent of Buddhism as well as 'karmic' philosophy of Hinduism. His basic belief was that what we do in our life, either it is true or false, is destined for us by the Almighty. The Poem "An Atheist Speak" expresses this very well:

He divided me
Onepart longing forwisdom, Theother for folly.
Hemadeusanimals Grunting and rutting
He made maya
W ith nothing behind it.

It is quite heartening to note that, if on the one hand Ezekiel discusses religion and philosophy on the other, he discusses sex and sensuality in daring manner. Through his " Passions Poems" and

“Nudes 1978” he undermines Puritan criticism and succeeds in envisaging that sensual love and passion are, after all, basic human instincts. It is something not to be evaded but celebrated in the way the ‘Lila’ of Radha-Krishna is celebrated in the whole range of Indian love-tradition.

The discussion of Ezekial’s humanistic spirit would not be complete without discussing the conversational tone and colloquial rhythm of his poetry. The language of the common man in common situation is recreated by him in such a manner that they are saved from becoming unkind caricature of people. They exude warmth and sensitivity in such a manner that it “alleviates the grotesqueness of poverty, squalor, and brutishness”. (3) Unlike Jayant Mahapatra, R. Parthasarathi, A.K Ramanujan and Kamla Das, Ezekiel does not labour to suit his poetry to the indigenous tradition of English language. Instead he related it to the contemporary beliefs, situations and society and created a typical new Indian ethos. His well known poem” The Night of the Scorpion” is quintessential example.

The peasants camel like swarms of flies and buzzed the name of God

a hundred times to paralyze the evil One with candles and with

Lanterns throwing giant scorpion Shadows on the sun-baked walls

They searched for him

And lastly:

My mother only said Thanks God The scorpion picked on me and Spared my children

(The Night of the Scorpion”)

The poem is highly admired for its vivid account of common Indian picture, realistic imagery, juxtaposition of contrasts and above-all for the warmth of human love and affection. Ezekiel’s humanism and deep sense of devotion impels him to pursue the path of righteousness. In “Transparently” he utters, “Who wants experience? At the cost of achievement”

For the poet now the end justifies the means. The rest is unimportant. The neo-humanist in him is convinced that age, experience, physical appearance, marital status, profession, social position- all are no pointers to understand the nature of man. Like Alexander Pope he also believes that “proper study of mankind is man” Likewise in his “Hymn in Darkness” he has taken a character a modern middle aged man- who is an individual as well as a type The poem progresses from ‘he’ to ‘I’ and finally to ‘you’ which means universal man. From Section 1 to 16 passing through several dilemmas, paradoxes, ironies, revelations and realizations the poet comes to the conclusion that all we can do in this world is to have a sense of reality. No myth or metaphor puts a man towards better understanding of man. Consequently instead of it Ezekiel created his own concrete psalm for a better understanding of mankind. In “Latter Day Psalms” he says:

Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly,

nor standeth in the way of sinners...

Blesses is the man that walketh
Not in the counsel of the conventional, and is at home with
Sin as with a wife...

The poet is advocating involvement in the worldly desires and temptations instead of running away from them in fear. In other words experience and enjoyment of worldly desires means a better understanding, tolerance, reason and finally salvation of human beings.

In "Latter Day Psalms III" Ezekiel goes even further and transcends the individual 'self' to human being in 'general' and expresses concern for the suffering of common people:

I worship the God who regards
the prayer of the destitute, Who hears the groaning of the prisoner and of those who are
appointed to death.

The poet does not approve of the man-made division of human beings on the basis of faith and virtue. To him all human beings are one and same irrespective of faith and artificial divisions. God is manifested even through the wicked and the ungodly soul. That's why the poet says that "I do not need a cup that runneth over..I accept the condition of humanity". To seek the divine one need not be a 'Yogi' and shun the world but try to find it in the ordinary people. One need not run after happiness for it is to be found 'in your normal pursuits'.

The poet further reiterates that human beings have been denied perfection by the creator and any attempt to gain it as such is near impossible. Man is a mixture of God and evil together and one should try to understand man from this angle:

The pure invention or the perfect poem,
....
Flawless doctrines, certainty of God,
These are merely dreams but I am human
and most testify to what they mean
(A time to change)

Far from being perfect, human beings in fact cannot escape being corrupted as he lives in a vicious and corrupt world. Consequently he gives the world what he receives: "Corrupted by the world I must infect the world with my corruption..". Ezekiel, thus neither idealizes life nor denigrates it. In fact he views it in totality and steadily. He appears before as an admirer of peace and universal brotherhood. Like Pope he affirms that

It's not the artifice, it's the art that finally entrances reason
and makes us human
(In the theatre)

Wishing the readers a balanced human life, Ezekiel almost utters in Blakean tone:

May you read Wisdom books

In the spirit of the comics And the comics

In the spirit of the wisdom books. (Blessings, 1-5)

His concept and spirit of humanism is essentially rational and quite. At the same time, Ezekiel is successful in conveying the point of view that a poem need not deal with great and philosophical truths. A poem dealing with the ordinary human relationships with the day to day situations of the common life can be equally great and revealing. Actually a poem becomes the source of life and wisdom when it conveys the warmth of human relationship in equally vibrant language.

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