NISSIM EZEKIEL: THE ALIENATED SOUL
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ARTICLE INFO
Article History
Received on 28th February 2017
Received in revised form 4th April 2017
Accepted on 19th April 2017
DOI:10.18231/2455-9342.2017.0005

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Nissim Ezekiel (1924-2004), the leader of the ‘new poets’, emerged as the founding father of the Indian English poetry by enriching it with his plethora of poetic works. His outstanding anthologies that include A Time to Change (1952), Sixty Poems (1953), The Third (1960), The Unfinished Man (1960), The Exact Name (1965), Hymns in Darkness (1976) and Latter-Day Psalms (1982) exhibit variety of themes and styles and invite our attention to them. The stock themes of his poems are life in the city, love, marriage, sex, Indianness, spirituality, etc. But the major shaping factor of his poetry is the theme of alienation.

It will not be an exaggeration to hold that the theme of alienation plays a major role in the poetry of the postcolonial writers like Nissim Ezekiel, Kamala Das, Jayanta Mahapatra, Monohar Shetty, Gieve Patel, Chitre and others. K. Raghabendra Rao in his article entitled “The Alienation Games: The Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel” defines alienation as such:

By alienation, I imply a condition for a being in that being is separated from that without which that being cannot remain wholly itself. Thus alienation is a condition of loss of an essential part of the self, a condition of fragmentation leading to the diminution of the self. It is, therefore, a condition in which the self is placed in a position of insecurity, anxiety, anguish, loss of identity and loss of self-authenticated authenticity.” (Niak, 1984: 99)

Ezekiel experiences three types of alienation: First, there is ethnical alienation resulting from his being born in a Bene-Israel family. Secondly, there is non-religious alienation. Finally, there comes religious alienation.

According to M. K. Naik, the theme of alienation is central to Ezekiel’s poetry. His “Background, Casually” gives an emphasis to his social and cultural alienation from the country to which he does not really belong but which he has adopted as his own. In that poem he tells us that he had to go to a Roman Catholic School where he had to be a victim of biased behavior:

I went to Roman Catholic School
A mugging Jew among the wolves.
They told me I have killed the Christ.
That year I won the scripture prize. (CP, 179)

As he was a Jew the Christian blamed him to be a member of that community which had crucified Jesus Christ. But ironically again, he was given scripture prize for having read the Christian scriptures well. S. N. Pandey observes:

The context of sensitive details implies that for want of a Judaic institution this mugging Jew was admitted to a Christian School and subjected to all sorts of physical and emotional humiliations at the hands of his Hindu, Muslim and Christian mates. (Pandey, 146)

This is the background of a Jew in an overwhelmingly non-Jewish environment. He is an alien among his class-fellows who were Christian, Muslim and Hindu. It seems logical that the poet should physically flee from the unwanted scene and run to dear
old London. It does not work. London not only oppresses him but it also further alienates him:

> The London seasons passed me by.
> I lay in bed two years alone. (CP 180)

At the same time, Ezekiel has been feeling alienated from his own Jewish ethos too. At home on Friday nights, prayers were said, and that his morals having been low, he could not have any conviction that he could grow up into a rabbi saint:

> I heard of Yoga and of Zen.
> Could I, perhaps, be rabbi-saint? (CP 179)

The poet could not even feel easy because of the obnoxious attitude of the Hindus. He thinks deeply about the reason of this hatred and concludes that it is most certainly because of his racial difference:

> My ancestors, among the castes,
> Were aliens crushing seeds for bread
> (The hooded bullock made his round) (CP 180)

It is evident that his forefathers could not make a progress. In an interview with Eunice De Souza Ezekiel says:

> The community existed at a present level in the early years and must have found it necessary to be isolated for survival. It was small, insignificant and just about kept the rituals going. (The Bombay Literary Review, 72)

A second alienation game into which the poet finds himself drawn is the alienation internal to modern urban Indian life. In fact, this alienation appears to be a more accepted condition, a non-alienated alienation, characterized by a rooted rootlessness. For Ezekiel, this alienation is an intellectualized experience. As for most middle class Indian intellectuals, alienation is less a subjective experience than an objective experience. Ezekiel has reacted in various ways in various poems to his experience of alienation. “The very Indian Poems in Indian English” are outstanding examples of this attitude. The characters who speaks in these and similar poems are an Indian patriot, a retired professor and the office bearer of a college teachers’ association in the poems “The Patriot”, “The Professor”, “Good bye Party for Miss Puspa T. S.” respectively. The poet’s alienation appears in the way he has depicted the condition of life in this city. There is the Guru who totally lacks all the virtues of a saint in the poem of the same name in which Ezekiel asks:

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

The gap between what people say and what they practise is brought home through the employment of irony as rhetoric in “Jewish Wedding in Bombay”:

> Her mother shed a tear or two but wasn’t really crying. It was a thing to do, so she did it, enjoying every moment. (CP 234 - 35)

And his alienation from his own communities is clear in this poem. There is the prostitute on Bellasis Road on whom the poet’s final comment is:

> I cannot even say I care or do not care
> Perhaps it is a kind of despair (“On Bellasis Road”: CP, 189)

India is a land of poverty, ignorance and illiteracy. The unfortunate helpless people are:

------------- the beggars,
Hawkers, pavement sleepers,
Hutment dwellers, slums,

All in noist silence. (CP 131)

A close study of Ezekiel’s poetry reveals a third type of religious alienation. The God who suddenly used to turn up in early poetry as a personally constructed necessity, becomes in his latter poems, “Latter-Day psalms”, an engulfing presence, crushing the poet and his poetry. In this third alienation game Ezekiel finds himself out of his depth, seeking self-oblivion:

> It’s the will to pass
> through the eyes of a needle
to self-forgetfulness. (“Minority Poem”.CP, 236)

The final alienation game is an end-game and Ezekiel finds himself helpless in playing it. His efforts to seek an outlet in public language and image did not seem to have satisfied him, and hence this final plunge into the sea of eternity: “All you have/ in the sense of reality, / as it yields its secrets / slowly / one / by / one” (CP 225)

Recollection of childhood became a means of calming his restless soul in some of his works. Sometimes, the poet felt lonely in a crowd and this sense of his fragmented self frightened him:

> I have heard the endless silent dialogue
> Between the self-protective self
And the self naked  
I have seen the mask  
And the secret behind the mask. ("What Frightens Me": CP 106)

To overcome these alienations Ezekiel adopted three strategies namely, a protective assumption of easy superiority expressing itself in surface irony, a fatalistic and contemptuous acceptance of the present environment and rendering himself the testimonial of being a good native. His poem “Island” appropriately conveys his thoughts about the city of Bombay:

I can not leave this island,  
I was born here and belong. (CP 182)

He accepted the city of Bombay with its “squalor, slums, heartlessness, brutality and destruction of human potential.” London not only materially oppresses him but it also further alienates him. So the poet understandably performs the journey back to his original alienation:

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. (CP 181)

It is worth noting here that the poet accepts fatalistically the ‘home’ and ‘root’ in India, without necessarily celebrating them or welcoming them. The poet is conscious of the critical eyes of the home as a ‘background place’ that he quite ambiguously shares. Ezekiel also confesses in an interview taken by John B. Beston:

My background did make me an outsider, but it’s too easy to talk of being an outsider. I don’t want to remain negative: I feel I have to connect, and turn the situation to the positive. (Sinha 44)

So we can accept what S. Z. H. Abidi says about Ezekiel:

The fact is that there is no question of alienation for Ezekiel despite his foreign origin. This is a distinguishing feature of his poetry as a whole, the originating impulse behind which is one of affirmation of the Indian milieu with all its paradoxes. (Abidi, 82)

Ezekiel’s sense of alienation was stronger in his pre-1964 poems. Later he became reconciled to his fate as his feeling of alienation forced him to come to terms with his inner-self. The alienation motif in Ezekiel’s oeuvre can be discerned as follows:

Earlier, he (Ezekiel) had lamented, ‘I am writing now in emptiness/Annulled, cancelled, made a blank’ (“Emptiness”, 1952’); almost thirty years later, we find him – telling himself, ‘Polish up your alien/techniques of observation’ (“Minority Poems”, 1982) (Naik and Narayan: 143)

Thus the theme of alienation is central to Ezekiel’s poetry. Though the writers like Ramanujan, Parthasarathi and kamala Das have also dealt with the theme of alienation they differ with Nissim Ezekiel on this point. And to deal with the theme of alienation Ezekiel has used choicest diction and superb technique that make his poems outstanding.

References


