



# POSTMODERN INDIAN ENGLISH POETRY AND NISSIM EZEKIEL'S CONTRIBUTION: A CRITICAL STUDY

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## ABSTRACT

*Nissim Ezekiel heralded the postmodern era in the history of Indian English poetry. He occupied a prominent place among Indian English poets for his excellent creative skill and memorable poems which can move any first-time reader with simplicity, authenticity and lucidity of presentation. Designated as the 'harbinger of postmodernism' Ezekiel got to fame with his poem collection like Hymns of Darkness, Latter-Day Psalms, Collected Poems etc. He was also the recipient of the prestigious Sahitya Akademi award in 1983. His poems basically portray typical Indian characters and culture. Although Ezekiel's writing phase collides with modernism and postmodernism both, traits of postmodernism are effortlessly evident in his poems. This research paper intends to shed light on Ezekiel's contribution to the development of postmodern Indian English poetry.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Postmodernism, Provinciality, Urbanity, Disorientation, Inconclusiveness, Globalization, Social Realism*

## INTRODUCTION

Evaluating the vast arena of Postmodern Indian English literature requires an arduous research and minute observation on the behalf of the evaluator. The date and nature of the subject under discussion raise a lot of question to be debated and clarified. The Indian literary scenario after 1980 is generally considered postmodern. There are a number of books written by literary stalwarts like M. K. Naik, C.D. Narasimhiah, Srinivasa Iyengar etc. explaining the beginning and development of Indian English literature up to 1980s. The nomenclature Indian English literature specifically points to the literature originally written in English by Indian writers including the Indian expatriates. Now the question that naturally comes to one's mind is what does the term postmodernism mean in literature. Postmodernism is a term used to define the late 20<sup>th</sup> century style and concepts in arts, architecture, criticism and culture. Postmodernism broadly refers to a socio-cultural and literary theory and a shift in perspective that has manifested in a variety of disciplines including the social sciences, art, architecture, literature, fashion, communications, and technology. It is generally agreed that the postmodern shift in perception began sometime back in the late 1950s, and is probably still continuing. Postmodernism can be associated with the power shifts and dehumanization of the post-Second World War era and the onslaught of consumer capitalism. The very term Postmodernism implies a relation to Modernism. Modernism was an earlier aesthetic movement which was in vogue in the early decades of the twentieth century. It has often been said that Postmodernism is at once a continuation of and a break away from the Modernist stance. But Postmodernism is a cultural movement in its own right. Considering it solely as a successor of modernism, thus putting it as a hyphenated word,

i.e., post-modernism, would be reductive and misleading, and would do gross injustice to its unique richness and complexity. Postmodernism shares many of the features of Modernism. Both schools reject the rigid boundaries between high and low art. Postmodernism even goes a step further and deliberately mixes low art with high art, the past with the future, or one genre with another. Such mixing of different, incongruous elements illustrates Postmodernism's use of light-hearted parody. Postmodernism also means the celebration of fragmentation, the negation of any specific meaning or absolute meaning, the blurring of high culture and low culture etc. The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms (1990) explains the term postmodernism and its features in the following way:

Post modernity is said to be a culture of fragmentary sensations, eclectic nostalgia, disposable simulacra, and promiscuous superficiality, in which the traditionally valued qualities of depth, coherence, meaning, originality, and authenticity are evacuated or dissolved amid the random swirl of empty signals.... Postmodernism may be seen as a continuation of modernism's alienated mood and disorienting techniques and at the same time as an abandonment of its determined quest for artistic coherence in a fragmented world: in very crude terms, where a modernist artist or writer would try to wrest a meaning from the world through myth, symbol, or formal complexity, the postmodernist greets the absurd or meaningless confusion of contemporary existence with a certain numbed or flippant indifference, favouring self-consciously 'depthless'



works of fabulation, pastiche, bricolage, or aleatory disconnections described above ... (174-175)

Though both Modernism and Postmodernism employ fragmentation, discontinuity and de-centredness in theme and technique, the basic dissimilarity between the two schools is hidden in this very aspect. Modernism projects the fragmentation and de-centredness of contemporary world as tragic. It laments the loss of the unity and centre of life and suggests that works of art can provide the unity, coherence, continuity and meaning that is lost in modern life. T. S. Eliot laments that the modern world is an infertile wasteland, and the fragmentation, incoherence of this world is reflected in the structure of the poem. However, *The Waste Land* tries to recapture the lost meaning and organic unity by turning to Eastern cultures, and in the use of Tiresias as protagonist. In Postmodernism, fragmentation and disorientation is no longer tragic. Postmodernism on the other hand celebrates fragmentation. It considers fragmentation and de-centredness as the only possible way of existence, and does not try to escape from these conditions. Inconclusiveness is the hallmark of postmodernism. The postmodern narrative not only problematizes the Aristotelian formula of a chronological and tripartite division of a plot (beginning, middle, and end); more fundamentally, it subverts the idea of "narrative closure" by evoking the possibility of multiple endings. Postmodernism questions the notion of a singular "centre." For instance, there is no central meaning to a text; a text is always already open to multiple readings. Since the notion of an "authorial intention" promotes the idea of central meaning, the institution of the Author, with an upper-case "A," is declared dead. Postmodernist characteristics in literature include irony, black humour, intertextuality, pastiche, playfulness, metafiction, fabulation, temporal distortion, magic realism, hyperreality, fragmentation, paranoia, minimalism as well as maximalism. For instance, a postmodern literary work highlights in a celebratory mood the idea of incoherence of meaning, fragmentation, inconsistency and rejects any staunch belief and norms. Postmodernism considers human condition as essentially unstable, internally contradictory, ambiguous, indecisive, inconclusive, fragmented and open ended with multiple possible meanings. Reader, as opposed to Author, becomes a crucial site for meaning production in postmodernism. The reader is not just a theoretical discourse for a Roland Barthes or a Stanley Fish but, both in personal and impersonal terms, he/she/it remains a constant point of reference in postmodern texts. In his *Reflections on 'The Name of the Rose'*, the novelist and theorist Umberto Eco explains his idea of postmodernism as a kind of double-coding, and as a transhistorical phenomenon:

[P]ostmodernism ... [is] not a trend to be chronologically defined, but, rather, an ideal category – or better still a *Kunstwollen*, a way of operating. ... I think of the postmodern attitude as that of a man who loves a very cultivated woman and knows that he cannot say to her "I love you madly", because he knows that she knows (and that she knows he

knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland. Still there is a solution. He can say "As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly". At this point, having avoided false innocence, having said clearly it is no longer possible to talk innocently, he will nevertheless say what he wanted to say to the woman: that he loves her in an age of lost innocence. (64)

Apropos of what is said as of now, it may be derived that Postmodern literature is literature which seeks to deconstruct commonly held views of humanity, the world, or theory while integrating ideas of tradition and modernity in the same space to create a new understanding of the times. After the modernist movement which sought a complete break with tradition, postmodernism seeks to examine past modes of thought and expression in order to gain understanding so that history does not get caught in an inevitable cycle of blind repetition (Lyotard 1466). What has been historically accepted as a norm is called into question under postmodernism.

## GENESIS AND DEVELOPMENT OF INDIAN ENGLISH POETRY

Henry Louis Vivian Derozio is considered to be the first poet in the lineage of Indian English poetry but the pioneering figure of postmodern Indian English poetry is Nissim Ezekiel with the publication of his poem *A Time to Change* in 1952. In between Derozio and Ezekiel there are a few Indian English poets such as Rabindranath Tagore, Kasi Prasad Ghosh, Michael Madhusudan Dutta, Aru Dutta, Toru Dutta, Sri Aurobindo, Harindranath Chattopadhyay and Sarojini Naidu. The early Indian English poetry, though imitative of the manner and method of English romantic and Victorian poetry, mainly dealt with the Indian or oriental themes. Derozio, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Soshee Chundur Dutt, Ram Sharma, R. C. Dutt, Kashi Prasad Ghose, Manmohan Ghose and B. M. Mlabari were the trend setters in Indian English poetry of nineteenth century. Derozio's poetry was basically constituted of "Indian nationalist thought besides revealing the high source of patriotism". His finest work "The Fakir of Jungheera" is full of Byronic echoes but expresses Derozio's ardour for social reformation. Kashi Prasad Ghose's memorable work *The Shair and Other Poems* (1830) shows the influence of Scott's *The Lady of the Last Minstrel*. Michael Madhusudan Dutt's *The Captive Lady*, a long metrical romance, presents the love story of Prithviraj and Sanyukta. Manmohan Ghose's "Love Songs and Elegies", replete with melancholy, is a collection of lyrics on love, nature and death. Again his "Songs of Life and Death" and "Selected Poems" are imbued with classical spirit and abound in classical allusions. Swami Vivekananda was endowed with a sharp aesthetic sense which found a meticulous expression in the flawless craftsmanship of his poetry. His command over English imparts simplicity, clarity, gracefulness, picturesqueness and suggestiveness to his poetic style. Some of his memorable mystical and vedantic lyrics are 'An Interesting Correspondence', 'The Blessed Dream', 'The



Living God', 'To An Early Violet', 'Kali: The Mother', 'To the Awakened India' and 'The Song of the Sanyasin'. Toru Dutt portrayed the glorious vision of her motherland in *Ancient Legends and Ballads of Hindustan*, published posthumously in 1882. In *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields*, she translated about the hundred fifty-seven poems of about seventy-five French poets. Tagore was the first Indian writer who gained for modern India a permanent place on the world literary map. He wrote mainly in Bengali but translated many of his Bengali poems and plays into English. His English renderings, also called transcreations, consisted of *The Crescent Moon*, *The Gardener*, *Fruit Gathering*, *Lover's Gift*, *Crossing*, *The Fugitive and Other Poems*, and *The Gitanjali*. Being a poet par excellence, Tagore's poetry reveals a high personal quest for the Divine, characterized by a great variety of moods and approaches, ranging from the height of ecstasy to the depths of despair. His *Gitanjali* is mainly a collection of lyrics of devotion in the great Indian tradition. Sri Aurobindo is a poet-philosopher-prophet and visionary par excellence in Indian English poetry. His early poems show the influence of English decadent poets and have little mystical and spiritual appeal but they are remarkable for chaste diction, vivid image and spontaneity of expression. Poems composed by him between 1900 and 1910 have streaks of mysticism and spirituality. 'Urvashie' and 'Love and Death' are mystical love poems of a high order. *Ahna*, *Rose of God* and *Savitri* have been composed in an entirely new world of poetic inspiration and fulfilment with the aim of stirring the human soul with the deepest delight. Sarojini Naidu, "a dreamer, born in a dreamless age" and "an ardent, versatile and dynamic genius," is unsurpassable for her sweet and melodious songs, which are superb in the entire range of Indian English poetry. Her poetry is a magnificent and colourful portrayal of Indian life. 'Ode to H. H. The Nizam of Hyderabad', 'The Pardh Nashin', 'Wandering Beggars', 'The Prayers of Islam', 'The Old Woman and Imam Bara' etc. testify to this fact. She began composing poems at the age of twelve. Before leaving for England in 1895 she had composed many poems, including *Lady of the Lake* of 1300 lines. At Cambridge, she came in contact with Sir Edmund Gosse, who recognized her poetic talent and advised her to seek inspiration from India and not from England. Her first volume of poems *The Golden Threshold* (1905) was dedicated to her mentor, Sir Edmund Gosse. Her other volumes of poetry are *The Bird of Time* (1912), *The Broken Wing* (1917) and *The Feather of Dawn* (posthumously) published in 1961. Her poetry is suffused with Indian atmosphere and sensibility. Her poems always remind us of the India of palanquin bearer, corn-grinders, wandering beggars, pardah nashin, of meditation, love and solitude. Sensuousness and picturesqueness, profusion of colourful imagery and radiant diction, love of nature and humanity, mysticism and vivid recreations of Indian ethos are some distinctive romantic characteristics of her poetry. Her vision of life, which is romantic and imaginative, is neither pessimistic nor optimistic. Her poetry is embellished with various figures of speech, especially simile and metaphor, which are highly imaginative, picturesque and suggestive.

The new Indian poetry began with the attainment of independence in 1947. The new poets got rid of the stigma of writing under English influence. In this post-independent India, poetry is not imaginative and romantic as was the poetry of previous generation. It is remarkable for fecundity, originality, experimentation and the vivid presentation of contemporary reality. Indianness is permeated in modern poetry. The poets have evolved a distinct idiom to express their voice. They have succeeded to nativize or Indianize English in order to reveal typical Indian ethos, sensibility and situations. Post-independence poetry is no longer imitative. It is no more an echo but a voice worth listening to. It has emerged as a distinct reality and has acquired an identity of its own.

### NISSIM EZEKIEL: THE PIONEER OF POSTMODERN INDIAN ENGLISH POETRY

Let's now start with Nissim Ezekiel who heralded a new era in the genre of Indian English poetry with his publications like *Hymns in Darkness* (1976), *Latter-Day Psalms* (1982) and *Collected Poems 1952-88* (1989). The writers like Rilke and W.B. Yeats influenced Ezekiel. Like Yeats, he considered poetry as the reservoir of human feelings and emotions. But Ezekiel gave post-independent and postmodern Indian poetry a direction, a name and made it popular at home and in abroad. Ezekiel is one of those poets who have used Indianized English for which R. Parthasarathy said: "The poems of Ezekiel imitate the idiolect features of English used by Gujarati speakers. Some of these features are also present in other Indian languages: the use of the present progressive tense for the simple present tense, un-English collocation of lexical items, and literal translation of phrases and idioms" (R. Parthasarathy, 1976). Ezekiel's poetry indicates his growth as a poet-critic and shows his personal importance. He was awarded the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award in 1983 for his collection of poems titled 'Latter-Day Psalms'. Ezekiel has been applauded for his subtle, restrained and well-crafted diction, dealing with common and mundane themes in a manner that demonstrates both intellectual perception and an unsentimental, realistic sensibility, that has become the hallmark of succeeding Indian English poetry. Ezekiel enriched and established Indian English language poetry through his modernist innovations and techniques, which enlarged Indian English literature, moving it beyond purely spiritual and orientalist themes, to include a wider range of concerns and interests, including familial events, individual angst and skeptical societal introspection. Nissim Ezekiel's poetic oeuvre is mainly centred on three elements-erotic, realistic, and humanistic. Being a conscious artist, Ezekiel deals with love and sex directly without any inhibition. Like Yeats, Ezekiel writes in such a way in which sense and spirit merge harmoniously and are exploited to the full:

This longing is for nakedness  
Soul naked, body naked...

And let him understand, that in the working  
Of his mind, the body takes a hand. (Nakedness)



Again, he emphasizes the fulfilment of love can only be materialized through marriage:

Life can be kept alive  
 By contact with the unknown and the strange  
 A feeling for the mystery  
 Of man and woman joined, exhaustion

At the act, desire for it again. (To a Certain Lady)

Ezekiel's poems like 'Healers', 'Hangover' and 'Very Indian Poems in Indian English' are superb in expression, highly eloquent and enjoyable no doubt. Ezekiel in some poems emerges as a poet of province par excellence. The way he connects and expresses his global thoughts in local context induces critics to relate him with postmodernism. John Press sheds light on a poet's provincial status in the following words: "... who is primarily concerned with the values of his own cultural society, and who is largely indifferent to what lies beyond the world that he knows first-hand. Thus, he cares very little for the poetry and the civilization of the other ages and other countries. . ." (Day, 1987: 85). Nissim Ezekiel's anti-modernist attitude finds expression in a poem composed long back titled "The Double Horror". In it he finds his life alongside other modern fellows reduced to

Newspapers, cinemas, radio  
 features, speeches

Demanding peace by men with  
 grim warlike faces,

Posters selling health and  
 happiness in bottles,

Holidays in Rome for writing praise  
 of toothpastes, (CP 7)

In his urban poems like 'Background Casually' he expresses his commitment towards the city, unlike Naipaul:

I have made my commitments now.

This is one: to say where I am,

... My backward place is where I am. (CP 181)

'The Indian Landscape Seers My Eyes' is a poem where the poet like a detached observer describes things happening surrounding him. Indian lifestyle, rituals and everyday reality have become a common subject in Ezekiel's poems. Sometimes in mock serious tone he asks: "Friends, Romans, Countrymen, I am saying/ to myself/ Lend me ears/ Everything is coming/ Regeneration, Remuneration, Contraception/ Be patiently, brothers and sisters" while at times, he chides us for our folly:

These are the days of our family planning  
 I am not against. We have to change with times  
 Whole world is changing. In India also  
 We are keeping up. Our progress is progressing  
 Old values are going, new values are coming  
 Everything is happening with leaps and bounds.

'In India' published in the volume *The Exact Name* (1965) presents several pictures of disgust and revulsion adding "up to a haunting urban picture of societal doom and individual depravity" (Nair, 123). Ezekiel becomes brutally honest while focusing his poetic lens on poverty, misery, squalor and the wretchedness suffered by the economically weaker section of

people in a city like Bombay where money and power go hand in hand:

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. (CP, 131)

In "Island" Ezekiel describes the city as an island of slums and skyscrapers and he envisions India through eyes of Bombay. People living in here cannot escape and are bound to stay here alongside all mishaps of life. Ezekiel writes:

Unsuitable for song as well as sense,  
 the island flowers into slums  
 and skyscrapers reflecting  
 precisely the growth of my mind

I am here to find my way in it (CP 182)

John Thieme justifiably comments: "Ezekiel's deployment of the trope of the city in later volumes remains textualized, but in more complex and less derivative ways, and by the time he wrote *The Unfinished Man* (1960), in which *Urban* appeared, he had moved beyond a Modernist, London-centred version of the city toward a more local, if equally metaphorical representation" (CP xxiv). Despite the disheartening condition and the sickening ambience of the cities, the poet doesn't want to leave the city, rather wants adjustment. He knows very well that "home is where we have to earn our grace" (CP 118). His non-condemnatory tone anticipates postmodernism. As in the poem "Urban", the poet juxtaposes besmirched city and pure nature:

The hills are always far away.

He knows the broken roads, and moves

In circles tracked within his head.

Before he walks and has his say,

The river which he claims he loves

Is dry, and all the winds lie dead.

.....

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

A way from beach and tree and stone

To kindred clamour close at hand

"A Morning Walk" published in the volume *The Unfinished Man* (1960) deals with Bombay city and its corrupt and filthy atmosphere. It is one of Ezekiel's typical realistic poems. In the very first stanza, the city is described as "cold and dim/ where only human hands sell cheap". In the third stanza the poet sees the city as a living pandemonium:

Barbaric city sick with slums,

Deprived of seasons, blessed with rains,

Its hawkers, beggars, iron-lunged,

Processions led by frantic drums,





A million purgatorial lanes,  
 And child-like masses, many tongued,  
 Whose wages are in words and crumbs. (C119)

The above passage gives an authentic picture of utter gloom and poverty prevalent in the city. The dreadful atmosphere compels the poet to ruminate whether he has done anything of worth and value, or just passed his time and life. With a despondent undertone, the entire poem is a thorough reflection of the poet's sense of utmost frustration on behalf of the whole generation.

Parody, pastiche, irony and satire are abundantly used by postmodernists writers in their works. Ezekiel is no doubt a mastercraftsman in projecting irony in his poems. He used it to highlight shams and hollowness, lie and artificiality of human beings. For instance, Nissim Ezekiel in poems like 'Very Indian Poems in Indian English', 'Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.' etc. becomes a parodist and ironist. In "Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.", Ezekiel uses rambling pointless monologue to acclimatize with Indians speaking English. The farewell address begins in eulogy, but in middle lapses into a detail about the speaker's tour to Surat:

Her father was renowned advocate  
 in Bulsar or Surat,  
 I am not remembering now which place.  
 Surat? Ah, yes,  
 Once only I stayed in Surat  
 with family members .... (CP  
 190)

Such speech rhythm and tempo are typically Indian. Ezekiel dexterously employed Hindi and Urdu words like 'burkha' (How the English Lessons Ended), 'Chapati', 'paan' (Ganga), 'mantra', 'kundalini', 'shakti', 'bhikshuks' (Rural Suite) etc. to nurture his pidgin English or Babu English. Such deviations from the Standard English are decisive points to be called Indian English. Ezekiel's poetry is a veritable symbol and dramatization of various personalities through passion and affirmation. His characters like Miss Pushpa T.S., the Railway Clerk, the Professor, Ganga, the maid-servant and a host of others symbolize the individual as well as the types with a specific characteristic of their own. The world of Ezekiel is not only dynamic and palpable but his characters are also relatable, vibrant and authentic. Like Eliot, Ezekiel has brought everyday conversational language into the realms of poetry. He acts as a liberating force and encourages his fellow poets to popularize free verse in Indian English writings.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it may be said that Nissim Ezekiel successfully portrayed the ambience and characteristics of post-Independence and postmodern era in India. His poems, reflective in nature and authentic in tone, present a genuine picture of human condition in the then society. His poems adroitly employed the postmodernist traits like provinciality, mini-narratives, reader consciousness, irony, parody, satire etc. and also lend an informal touch to standard pattern of English. The uniqueness and conviction with which he has used Indian English or provincial English contributes to

enhance the readership of Ezekiel beyond the Indian subcontinent.

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