



AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ELEMENT IN THE POETRY OF NISSIM

EZEKIEL

Dr. Ashok Kumar

Principal, Mukand Lal National College, Radaur

INTRODUCTION

Nissim Ezekiel is one of the greatest poets of Indo-Anglian literature which grew during the last century. Some of the writers, who could with felicity use English as a medium of expression in their creative writings, created a kind of awareness about the Indian social problems. Indo-Anglian literature contributed its share in the Indian consciousness. The term Indian consciousness means the awareness that India historically has her cultural identity. By Indianness, we mean a subject that suits the Indian sensibility and most part of the Indo-Anglian literature is concerned with one or the other aspect of Indian-sensibility. The works of Nissim Ezekiel are not an exception to it. His works bring a typical incense of Indian tradition, culture and day-to-day life.

Nissim Ezekiel was born on 16 Dec., 1924 in Bombay of Bene-Israel parents. Both of his parents were devoted to education. His father, Moses, was a professor of Botany and Zoology at Wilson College; his mother, Diana, was a school teacher. Later, not satisfied with the education system, she founded a Marathi-language primary school. Both of them were English and Marathi speaking Bene-Israel Indian Jews. As a boy, Nissim started his schooling in a small school run by Christian Missionaries which was known as a Convent of Jesus and Mary. In 1934, he got admission in Antonio D'souza High School. At this school, teachers encouraged him to write, and read poetry loudly. The story of his first poem has often been told by him. In 1936, when he was 12yrs old, he wrote his first complete poem. The female teacher, to whom this poem was shown, recognized the talent of the forthcoming great poet and exclaimed:

“Ah, ha, listen all of you we have a poet in the class.”¹

And at that point of time, he decided that he was going to be a poet whether good or bad. So, it becomes clear from the incident that he nourished a keen desire to become a poet from his childhood. After passing his matriculation in 1941, he graduated from Wilson College where his



father used to teach. Being a brilliant student, he got scholarship for the full four years of his graduation. In 1945, he completed his B.A. with a first class. Then, he got his name registered for M.A. in English literature at Wilson College. In 1947, he not only passed his M.A. with a high second class, but also topped the university, and won a coveted prize, the R.K. lagu Prize. Because of his keen interest in political thought, he got influenced by N.N.Roy and became an active member of his Radical Democratic Party. From 1947-48 he taught literature at Khalsa College, Mumbai and published literary articles and reviews in a number of Indian newspapers and magazines. With the help of his friend Abraham Elkazi in Nov. 1948, he went to England for about three and a half year. It was the longest time when he was away from Mumbai.

In London, he studied Philosophy at Birkbeck College under C.E.M. Joad and others. To earn his living he did poor jobs as a clerk and a dishwasher. But as he wanted to spend his time on writing poetry, he gave up his clerical job. In London, he lived in a basement room where “Philosophy”, “Poetry” and “Poverty” were his three companions that shared his basement room. Krishna Paigankar, who was his friend from India was a great help to Nissim who went out to work like a husband and Nissim did cooking for him like a wife.

After living in such conditions Ezekiel was filled with a sense of frustration. He says, “I could no longer remain a wanderer; I decided to return to Bombay- to my roots.”² The same thing, he has mentioned in his poem “Background, Casually” also, where he says:

Philosophy,
Poverty and Poetry, three
Companions shared my basement room
The London seasons passed me by.
I lay in bed two years alone.
And then a woman came to tell
My willing ears I was the Son
of man. I knew that I had failed
In everything, a bitter thought.³

Ezekiel had great love and a keen passion for his country. Though he was an outsider (Bene-Israel) and he was considered the same by the native Indians, he realized that he could not remain



aloof of his environment. He says, “A man can do something for and in his environment by being fully what he is, by not withdrawing from it. I have not withdrawn from India.”⁴

In 1952, he left England and came back to India. His friend i.e. Krishna Paignakar made his passage home by working on a warship carrying ammunition to Indo-China. The voyage was of forty eight days. Nissim mentioned the same in “Background, Casually”:

So, in an English cargo-ship
Taking French guns and mortar shells
To Indo-China, scrubbed the decks,
And learned to laugh again at home.⁵

In the meantime, Fortune Press London published his first compilation of poems **Time to Change** (1952). In this collection the poems are personal rather than political because while living in London he experienced a new kind of reality in which he was trying to find his personal voice. Nissim received copies of it at Marseilles, where the ship was docked. On his return from England he was appointed as a sub-editor of *The Illustrated Weekly of India*. He remained with the editorial staff for about two years. The year 1952 was important for Nissim as he got married to Daisy Jacob on 23 Nov., 1952. His poem “Jewish Wedding in Bombay” gives a complete account of the marriage events. In Dec. 1953 he published his second collection of verse **Sixty Poems**.

After leaving *The Weekly* he associated with *Shilpi Advertising* as a copywriter in 1954. In 1955, he became the first editor of bi-monthly “Quest” and continued with it for several years as a review editor. As a manager of “*Shilpi*” he was sent to New York for six months. There he visited some universities. In 1958, he published his third collection of poems but due to some reasons he could not give this book a regular name and simply called it **The Third**. After leaving his job from *Shilpi*, he remained unemployed for some time but then he became the general manager of *Chemould*, a manufacturing company to Keku Gandhi. In the office and factory, he composed the poems of his fourth collection **The Unfinished Man**. The book was completed by 1959 but it was published by Writers Workshop, Calcutta in 1960.

He joined Mithibai College, Bombay in June 1961, as the Head of the English Department and remained there till 1972. Nissim enjoyed this job and said:



When I went back to my college teaching, I felt this was an important change in my life (for the better). I made up my mind never to go back to another kind of job, even if it meant more money. Teaching came to me much more simply and naturally. I enjoyed it immensely.⁶

In 1964 he was invited to lecture at the University of Leeds where he delivered lectures on Indian writings in English. On his trip to London, he took Daisy along with him for the first time. He also worked as an art critic in *The Times of India* from 1964 to 1966. In 1965, his fifth volume of poems, **The Exact Name** was published by Writer's Workshop, Calcutta. He also worked as an editor of *Poetry India*, a quarterly and brought out six issues during 1966-67.

According to Gieve Patel, there are two major events in Nissim's life that are responsible for the change of his personality. One is his relationship with Linda Hess and the second is LSD (Medi.). He knew her long before she actually visited India between 1967 and in 1972 he took LSD, a drug which affected him to such an extent that he gave up his atheism but he believed that LSD did not change his poetry for the better or worse. Apart from the teaching at the university and writing poetry, there was the Indian PEN i.e. Poets, Essayists and Novelists, an international organization, that kept him busy. He worked as the secretary of the organization for a very long time and edited two PEN conference volumes. He also worked as a Joint Executive Editor of the Indian PEN in 1972. In 1972 he was appointed a Reader in American literature in the English Department of Bombay University.

The gloomy side of Nissim is the failure of his marriage that ended up in separation. Daisy continued to live in Kala Niketan with the children- Kavita, Kalpna and Elkana. He himself moved back to *The Retreat* and stayed with his mother until her death in 1974. He was invited by U.S. Govt. to tour the States for a month and it was in November 1974 that he went there. He also went to Hawaii in 1976. He received *The Excellence Award* for his contribution to poetry on 30th April, 1976. Nissim was a star of 70's. He published a lot of critical articles, journals and reviews. A new poetry magazine i.e. *Kavi India* was started in Bombay in the mid 70's and Nissim accepted its consulting editorship. In his curriculum vitae, he called himself a "Radio and T.V. Columnist" between the year 1973 and 1978. His last book got published by Oxford



University Press in 1982 with the name *Latter Day Psalms* which involved his theological approach and it became a proof of his knowledge of Hindu, Christian and Judaic scriptures. The publication brought him the *Sahitya Academy Award* in 1983. He retired in the year 1984 after serving the Bombay University with full responsibility and dedication. Then, the year 1988 came with another success in his life, when his contribution to Indo-Anglian literature got rewarded by *Padam Shri Award*. The award was also a sign of recognition and appreciation of Indian government to his sincere efforts to the development of “Indian Literature in English.” But the great poet and a good individual who won so many awards, lost his prolonged battle with the disease “Alzheimer” in the year 2004, a new era of Indo-Anglian literature came to an end on January 9, 2004 in Mumbai when Ezekiel closed his eyes from this physical world.

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