CHAPTER – IV
THE SOCIAL EZEKIEL

Ezekiel's poetry is as much about him as about his environment. He is a poet of the ordinary and day-to-day life. A sensitive soul who observes everything around him and uses the experience to mould into poetry, Ezekiel is a poet of the everyday life and ordinary humanity. As he has written, “The true business of living is seeing, touching, kissing, / The epic of walking in the street and loving on the bed” (CP 97). Here the poet himself reveals the two aspects of his poetry. The poet persona walking in the street is the social being who likes to be part of the environment, comment on what he sees around; the other is sensual being who marvels at and revels in the wonderful pleasures life offers.

Nissim Ezekiel is the first major Indian English poet who is socially aware and engaged with his immediate environment. The pre-independence Indian English poets were shackled by the idea of a country that was under foreign rule. So the India that we find in their poetry is glorified and deified India. They sang the glory of India in the most patriotic manner. Mother India was a symbol of glory and pride for them. Whenever they wrote about India in their poetry, they talked about mother India as a goddess. Everything was pristine and their approach was emotional. The India they depicted was bucolic and ideal. Alternatively, they talked about India’s glorious past that was lost under the monstrous British rule. Moreover, their only concern was freedom of their beloved country.

In fact, pre-independence Indian English poetry reveals two tendencies. One is lyrical romantic poetry. This poetry is about nature, love, beloved, relations, nostalgia, and love for country. Right from Derozio to Sarojini Naidu, we find poets writing about landscapes, emotions, relations, objects of nature, and other philosophical musings. Derozio, for instance, wrote such poems as Evening in August, Morning after a Storm,
Dust, Night, To Night, The Golden Vase, To the Moon, To the Rising Moon, Poetic Haunts, A Dramatic Sketch, A Walk by Moonlight, Leaves. Toru Dutt’s two sonnets have become very famous because of its nature poetry. Baugmaree describes the garden house in which Toru Dutt lived. Describing the ecstatic beauty of the garden Toru Dutt writes:

One might swoon

Drunken with beauty then, or gaze and gaze

On a primeval Eden, in amaze.(poetrycat.com)

In a graceful and serene manner the poet describes a sea of green, contrasting colours, tamarinds, mangoes, palms, seemuls, bamboos and lotus. The other poem, The Lotus, is a fairy tale like story of the birth of the flower lotus. Love comes to Flora to ask for a flower that is the undisputed queen of flowers. The stakes were high between rose and lily and the raging strife between the two was settled by Flora who created lotus which has the redness of rose and whiteness of lily and which is delicious as rose and stately as lily.

Sarojini Naidu was a poet of love and nature. Sarojini is a romantic poet and she is moved by the sight and sound, colours and odours of nature. Unlike Tagore, Sarojini delves deep in the sensuous appreciation of nature completely devoid of the former’s mysticism. The Songs of Springtime has some of the best nature poems of Sarojini Naidu. Even when various people belonging to the various professions appear in Sarojini’s poems, her treatment of these poetic personas is never analytical or she does not deal with the problems and concerns of these people. Her attitude is that of a romantic looking at them as people living in an ideal world of countryside.

The other strain is that of philosophical and mystical poetry. Shri Aurobindo and Tagore are the most prominent examples of this kind of poetry. The spiritual strain in their poetry is other worldly. Though they were not apathetic to the common masses, their concern was not the everyday problems and concerns of the common masses. The
common humanity with their mundane concerns and cares, aspirations and frustrations were outside the purview of these poets. Aurobindo, Vivekananda, and Tagore were the three important poets of the spiritual school who wrote poetry in the Indian Philosophical tradition. Aurobindo’s *Savitri* is an epic, a magnum opus, which narrates the story of Satyavan and Savitri.

The third important strain in the pre-independence poetry is that of patriotic and nationalistic poetry. Most pre-independence poets wrote poems about India singing paeans of its glory. However, what is remarkable is that most of patriotic poetry of the pre-independence period falls short of any kind of revolt against the British rule. They sing the glory of mother India but hardly talk about the tyranny of the British rule. One reason why pre-independence Indian English poetry had no connect with the life and time of the period was because of this total disconnect with the prevailing mood in the country. Even when India was fighting for its independence, the Indian English poets do not reflect the aspirations of the nation in their poetry.

It was after independence that the poets, writers, and thinkers became aware of the problems of India and started voicing their angst and concern. Ezekiel enumerated three qualities of a good poet in an article in *The Times of India* as literary stamina, intellectual strength, and social awareness. So for Ezekiel, a poet who is completely cut off from his surroundings cannot write good poetry. Social concern was essential for the poet to write good poetry. He was not a poet writing poetry from the ivory tower of his imagination. He was a poet of the common humanity. He was very much a part of the social and cultural ethos of the time and place in which he lived. Ezekiel’s poetry is thus an example of how the three motives of Taine’s theory of race, milieu, and moment operate in a poet’s work.
Ezekiel comments about India as an insider who is part and parcel of whatever he observes. His attitude is of humane acceptance. He uses irony and sometimes—even satire. But he is never an embittered critic of the scene. He feels for what he sees. The poverty, the squalor, the social inequality, the superstitious behavior, the hypocrisy everything is recorded with faithful observation but never with a malice or contempt. In spite of all the problems he sees around, he feels at home where he is. He writes in *Background Casually*, ‘The Indian landscape sears my eyes. / I have become a part of it’ (*CP*181)

Ezekiel has the credit to make the Indian English poetry truly modern. He was very clear about what he wanted to do in poetry. He was the first poet to take poetry seriously. It was not a pastime or a hobby. It was a full time lifelong commitment for him. As Bruce King appreciates Ezekiel’s art, “Others wrote poems, he wrote poetry. The difference is reflected in his craftsmanship and purposefulness; this is as much a matter of will as of talent.” (91) He made poetry central to his life. He transformed Indian English poetry by making it contemporary in manner and matter. India for him was the India of city where a new middle class was fast emerging. He writes about the city life and the problems of modern day India. Ezekiel believes that true spiritual being is one who feels joy in being a part of the common humanity. Environment in which he lives is a part of him and he is a part of his environment. In *Naipaul’s India and Mine*, Ezekiel 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.”(*SP* 99)

Ezekiel is poet of the city and life in the city features quite often in his poems. His attitude to city is enigmatic. It is a presence that he cannot escape nor reckon with. The corrupting, dehumanizing influence of city life with all its horrors is too much for the poet who feels being reduced to less than life. At the same time, he understands that he cannot escape the blame for the dehumanizing influence of the city life. In *Double Horror* the
poet writes, “I am corrupted by the world, continually / Reduced to something less than human” (*CP* 7). The modern commercial world with all its ugliness is staring threateningly. This is a reality for the multitude of humanity which crowds the city occupying small cramped dwellings or footpaths, pavements, parks, stations or roads. People who left their villages and towns to come to city to find some livelihood and are forced to lead a life of destitution and deprivation. The city – Mumbai in the case of Ezekiel – bursts under the stress of unending flow of people. Ultimately it becomes a hell, a purgatory which completely drains one spiritually.

He brings out the dehumanizing influence of the city life by cataloguing the symbols of modern commercial world. He writes, “the crowd, / Newspapers, cinemas, radio features, speeches / Demanding peace by men with grim warlike faces, / Posters selling health and happiness in bottles, / Large returns for small investments, in football pools / Or self-control, six easy lessons for a pound, / Holidays in Rome for writing praise of toothpastes” (*CP*7). The simple cataloguing of the symbols of the city is a powerful reminder of the inscrutable instruments of corruption that the city employs. The overpowering influence of the commercial world is like a wild beast prowling secretly to pounce upon the easy, helpless pray. The poet writes, “The jungle growth of what so obviously intends to suck life from life, leaving you and me corrupted” (*CP*7). The callousness and sham of the modern commercial world has turned the man in to unfeeling heartless spectator. He is not perturbed by the massacres and devastations around. The hypocrisy of the public life makes the poet wonder what the influence of the world has made of him. In the same poem, Ezekiel writes:

Those who say Comrade are merely slaves and those
Who will not be my brothers share the acrid shame
Of being unwanted, unloved, incompetent
As leaders, disloyal servants, always alone. (*CP* 8)
The poet persona in the poem says that though he is unpolitical, he still embraces the “sterile whore of private politics” *(CP 8).* Ezekiel uses irony to highlight the dehumanizing influence of the world on a sensitive individual when he says:

. . . . I agree

Something must be done but secretly rejoice

When fifty thousand Chinese have been killed,

I who, as a child, wept to see a rat destroyed. *(CP: 08)*

The poet laments the fact that the consciousness of being a part of this corruption hurts. He says, “Corrupted by the world I must infect the world / With my corruption” *(CP 8).*

This double horror of being corrupted by the world and at the same time infecting the world with his corruption is the destiny of the modern man living in the modern world. He is a victim as well as a perpetrator of the heinous evils of this dehumanizing world.

His agony is aptly expressed in the following words,

This double horror holds me

Like a nightmare from I cannot wake, denounced

Only by myself, to others harmless, hero,

Sage, poet, conversationalist, connoisseur,

Of coffee, guide to modern Indian Art

or Greek antiquities.

Only being what I am

Hurts, and hurts the world although it does not know. *(CP: 08)*

The all encompassing presence of this invisible monster of callous commercialism and corruption is a presence no one can escape. The awareness of being a part of it both as a victim and as a perpetrator is agonizing for the poet. The world and the individual, life and soul, the universal and the personal are inseparably intertwined and destined to be like that. The last line of the poem, *The Double Horror,* reads, “Between the world and
me there is a frightful / Equipoise, as infected I corrupt the world”. (CP 08) Niranjan Mohanty writes in his article: “Despite the infectious nature of urban life, despite its odd clamour and movement, the poet endears it, acknowledges his allegiance to it. He accepts Bombay as his home, the abode of his dream, becoming and reality.” (52) In *Something to Pursue*, Ezekiel says, “To save myself / From what the city had made of me, I returned / As intended to the city I had known / Pity for myself suggested this / And pity for the world.” (CP 19)

For most creative writers, the locale or the geographical place where they have lived for a long time plays a significant role. The place, the people, the environment, the natural flora and fauna, the important monuments and landmarks they all exercise a tremendous influence on the creative mind. Many of the places have become immortal by their association with the creative writers who used them in their writing. Malgudi, though fictional, has become immortal because of R. K. Narayan and Hardy and Wessex are inseparable. Similarly North of Boston is a lingering presence in Robert Frost. If we wish to find a similar parallel in Ezekiel, we can say that Bombay is a persistent presence in Ezekiel’s poetry. It is this place where Ezekiel has lived for the most part of his life except some three and a half year stay in England where he went for study. In his poem, *Mangoes* he says:

Perhaps it is not the mangoes
that my eyes and tongue long for
but Bombay as the fruit
on which I have lived,
winning and losing
my little life. (CP 293)

Bombay has fascinated almost all poets and creative writers and thinkers who have lived there. Many other poets also have written about Bombay. Most of them have a
paradoxical attitude to them. They love the city and they hate it at the same time. Dom Moraes looked at Bombay as a cave that is daunting because of its savageness and primitiveness. The city looms large leaving an oppressive feeling of decay and spiritual starvation. Gieve Patel writes about the Bombay Central railway station in his poem *From Bombay Central*. The smell of the city is an eternal station odour which hits every nostril relentlessly. The city with its dirt, squalor, and putridness is a symbol of decay and rottenness of human existence in an industrialized world.

Ezekiel makes it very clear that he is a poet of the city and especially Bombay. When he was asked in an interview if living in a city like Bombay has affected his poetry in any significant way, Ezekiel replied:

“I feel I am Bombay city poet, can’t imagine living long anywhere else. I lived in London for 3 ½ years. 1948-51, but never thought of myself as a Londoner except that the Movement was alive then and I had a live contract with it. I am oppressed and sustained by Bombay”. (Chindhade 157)

The poet’s paradoxical attitude to city is clearly articulated by the poet here. He is both oppressed and sustained by Bombay. He cannot imagine living anywhere else. It is the city that has nurtured him. It is Bombay that has shaped his sensibility and poetic personality. Bombay is the term of reference for Ezekiel to understand India and it is through Bombay that he reflects upon India. His idea of India is with reference to Bombay. What was even more important for Ezekiel was the fact that he was a Jew living in India. In *Egoist’s Prayer*, Ezekiel makes his allegiance to Bombay explicit, “Confiscate my passport, Lord. / I don’t want to go abroad. / Let me find my song / Where I belong” (*CP* 213)

Ezekiel was in a situation that gave a special status to him. He was a Jew living in a Hindu majority India. However, this does not make him an outsider altogether. He was not an alien also in the environment in which he was living. His ancestors had come to
India before almost two millennium and lived and thrived in India. It was a home for him. He had nowhere else to go to call it a home. He has emphatically made it very clear that India he felt at home, everywhere else he was a foreigner. But his Jewish background made it possible to look at Hindu majority India as an outsider. Another important factor about Ezekiel was that he was a linguistic minority also. English was the language spoken in his home. Though he knew Marathi and could speak it well, it was not his mother tongue making him a linguistic minority in a Marathi speaking Bombay where he lived. So this special status that the poet enjoyed saves him from the unfettered enthusiasm of the native who is firmly rooted in his environment making his view of his environment parochial and partial. At the same time he is saved from the bitterness and alienation that an outsider feels in an alien environment.

What Ezekiel could achieve from this special status that he enjoyed is that he could analyse critically the social scene he saw around. However, Ezekiel's criticism is an insider’s criticism. He felt very much at home in his environment. He could sympathise with the large mass of humanity he saw around. His attitude is that of amusement and irony. He writes about people he knew and identified with. Therefore, his criticism is not a result of bitterness. In Naipaul’s India and Mine which is his passionate reply to Naipaul’s condemnation of India in his novel An Area of Darkness, Ezekiel writes:

He (Naipaul) writes exclusively from the point of view of his own dilemma, his temperamental alienation from his mixed background, his choice and his escape. That temperament is not universal, not even widely distributed, that choice is not open to all, the escape for most is not from the community but into it. (SP 86)

Ezekiel accepts India with a reconciliation which comes with a sense of belonging. The character and temperament of Bombay is reflected in his poem, Island, in which the poet says:

Unsuitable for song as well as sense
the island flowers into slums
and skyscrapers, reflecting
precisely the growth of my mind. (CP182)

The poet relates to the image of Bombay and it seems to reflect his own growth as an individual. It is a very personal relationship between the poet and the city. Both affect each other. The city has moulded the poet. The poet has accepted the city, Bombay more precisely, as his destiny and he says, “I am here to find my way in it” (CP 182). The poet’s identification with the city is complete because in the noise of turmoil of the city the poet finds an echo of his own ambiguous voice. But the city is also frightening to the poet because he says he hears echoes of dragons claiming to be human. Ezekiel is not critical of the city in the traditional sense of the term. The paradoxical attitude to city reflected in the poem The Double Horror is also present here. The city is nothing but a ‘distorted echo’ (CP 182) of his ‘own ambiguous voice’ (CP 182). The city is in this an extension of poet himself. He is not separate from his city. All the horrors of the city, its dehumanizing soulless presence is an extension of poet’s self.

The city is where he was born and it is this city where the poet says he belongs. It is in this city that the poet has to find his own salvation. Bombay is a city where the past and the future live side by side separated by an invisible wall; Bombay is a city where glamour and squalor sit side by side oblivious to the existence of each other when the city ‘flowers into slums and skyscrapers’ (CP 182). The poet sees his own image in the city as he tries to come to terms with his own monsters lurking in his heart. However, he is also reconciled that he has to ‘delight the soul with absolute sense of salvation’ (CP 182) in this soulless city. Ezekiel amazes at the little miracles that life is in its everyday business. His absorption in the city is complete as he has acquired the art of surviving in the city by learning to mind the ways of the island. With a little touch of irony, Ezekiel says:
Even now a host of miracles
hurries me to daily business,
minding the ways of the island
as a good native should
taking calm and clamour in my stride. (CP 182)

The typical Ezekielian style of juxtaposing paradoxes achieves a superb effect here as he brings out the two faces of his beloved city. The island itself becomes a metaphor of loneliness and separation written in the destiny of the dwellers of this city. Ezekiel captures his own little failures and foibles while writing about the city which is a metaphor for the inner landscape of the poet. The two merge into each other. The landscape without and the landscape within are not different. They are the mirror images of the same. The struggle of the poet to come to terms with himself is also the struggle of the city. The all encompassing and overarching presence of the city invades the poet from all sides and he is:

. . . forced to listen

to a dozen film songs,
to see
a score of beggars,
to touch
uncountable strangers
to smell
unsmellable smells,
to taste
my bitter sweet native city. (CP 224)

The city has completely usurped the senses of the poet. There is no way to escape from the city. In A Morning Walk, Ezekiel gives a damning picture of the city:

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. (CP 119)

This city does not give any respite to the poet persona who is troubled by the dream. The poet persona is not able to shun his native place but ultimately it is this city where he belongs. Though the city is ‘cold and dim’ (CP 119), it is his hope.

Ezekiel is a keen observer of life. The persistent and pressing immediate environment compels the poet’s attention and he observes with a critical and compassionate eye. The shams, the hypocrisies, the superstitions, the corruption – both material and spiritual – they all are catalysts for the poet and the reaction is always one of gentle humour and irony. In poem after poem, Ezekiel reveals the ills of the society. It could be very simple ordinary incident of giving English lessons to a neighbour’s daughter but the poem, How the English Lesson Ended, which results from this experience, is deep with observations about the society, cast, religion, human psychology and adolescence. The restrictions placed on the Muslim girl at home in the form of burkha and the girl’s natural liveliness suppressed under the restrictions are delineated in her description when the poet says that she comes and sheds her burkha. The stanza below is an example of the poet’s minute observation and ability to convey significant truths in seemingly simple language:

She’s very serious – for ten minutes,
then she smiles, and smiles some more.
In half an hour she giggles. I learn,
giggling is what she’s really good at,
with plenty of practice, not home. \textit{(CP 200)}

The poet’s daughter who is sixteen becomes friends with the nineteen year old Muslim girl who takes the former to her home and shows her pictures in ‘a certain kind of book’ \textit{(CP 201)}. When the Muslim girl comes again for her English lesson she realizes that the poet knows about the book and the pictures and stops coming. The Muslim neighbour thinks the poet made advances to the girl and almost hints as much. The poet’s mother fumes at the ungratefulness of the neighbour and curses the girl.

Though the poet never passes any kind of judgmental comment on either the community or the customs, the poem is a revealing commentary on the social customs and practices. The only aim of the neighbour is to get his daughter married because she is nineteen already. The \textit{burkha} is a symbol of restrictions placed on girls in conservative Muslim society and the girl’s gigling and secret picture book are symbols of natural desires of the girl. Ezekiel’s mastery in understatement is in full display here. The simple incident turns into a telling commentary on social customs, place of girls and women in society, human psychology and family system. The girl, the neighbour, the poet’s mother, the poet’s daughter all are captured with a single stroke of pen.

Ezekiel’s superb use of mild irony makes his poetry a pleasure to read. In yet another poem, \textit{Ganga}, Ezekiel draws a beautiful picture of a maid servant at same time throws a scathing glance at the hypocrisy and selfishness prevalent in society. The generosity is shown to the maid servant in the form of a cup of tea which was preserved for her from the previous evening or a chapatti, stale but ‘in good condition’ \textit{(CP 202)}. The poet exposes the double standards of the society when he says that:

\begin{verbatim}
We pride ourselves
on generosity

to servants. The woman

who washes up, suspected of prostitution
\end{verbatim}
is not dismissed. (CP 202)

This is author’s mild irony at play. The inhuman treatment meted out to the servants and poor people in the society is presented in the society. The reference to the gift given to the maid servant in the form of an old sari and a blouse which has a tone of friendly humour verges on to genial satire when the poet says that we could easily have exchanged the same for a plate. While the reference acquires a satiric tone, it also tells the readers about a common phenomenon in Indian home where the old clothes are exchanged for a couple of utensils. The scene would not be unfamiliar to anyone living in that age. It is this ability to capture the humdrum reality that makes Ezekiel's poetry so distinct especially when he started writing. The last lines of the poem, Ganga, reveal the smugness and hypocrisy of the society:

She brings a smell with her
and leaves it behind her,
but we are used to it.

These people never learn. (CP 202)

The lines reveal the utter disrespect and contempt for the working class people that bourgeois middle class shows. It is Ezekiel's greatest achievement that he could create genuine poetry from the everyday commonplace experiences and people. He has that uncanny knack for creating poetry from the most unpoetic experiences and incidents. His advice to young painter is testimony to his own attitude to art. He says in Advice to Painter, ‘Be voracious with your eyes and appetites’ (CP 205).

In life, as in poetry, Ezekiel abhors that which is fake or not genuine. For Ezekiel, a life lived in isolation from the common humanity with false claims of authenticity is the most detestable thing. In Night Piece, he says, ‘And in the verse or friends I make / To have no truck with what is fake’. (CP 55)Time and again, Ezekiel espouses the idea of genuineness and is critical of anything that is sham or fake. In another poem, Prayer,
Ezekiel says, ‘Let me dream the dream of Man . . . . Let me not be isolated / Uninvolved in Man’s defeat’. (CP 55) In Declaration, Ezekiel says, ‘I have stood in the empty room / And gazed at the crowds in the street, / Longing to be absorbed’ (CP 94). In a poem, entitled A Conjugation, Ezekiel reveals his dislike for pretence in a playful manner. In the first three stanzas of the poem, the poet stresses the universality of pretence through conjugation of the verb ‘to pretend’ in present, past and future tense forms. Then, the poet denies pretense in the last two stanzas. The poet concludes the poem with ‘No more pretence. An end to pretension’ (CP 146).

Ezekiel's poetry is also a commentary on the superstition and irrationality in life. When dealing with superstition, Ezekiel loses his genialness and becomes straightforward. In one of his most famous poems, The Night of the Scorpion, Ezekiel gives a vivid picture of the superstition and blind faith prevalent in the society. The poem deserves a close scrutiny to fully understand Ezekiel's art. The poem begins with a simple statement of facts on how his mother was stung by a scorpion on a rainy night. The scorpion, the mother, the father, and the peasants all are observed with a neutrality of a reporter. Ezekiel does not allow sentimentality to intrude the mildly ironic mode of depiction in the poem.

The poem is built upon contrasts between the good and the evil, between superstition and rationality, between light and darkness, between faith and doubt. If the scorpion is a symbol of the evil, mother’s selfless love is a symbol of good. If the peasants represent blind faith, the poet’s father represents rationality. The reference to peasants is also symbolic of their role in the poem. The poet writes, ‘The peasants came like swarms of flies’ (CP 130). They offer their prayers and remedies and try to mitigate the mother’s pain by their simple consolations. The peasants are referred to as a collective entity and they become representatives of the Indian rural people. They emphatically
create an authentic picture of masses with their superstitious beliefs and genuine concern and empathy for the sufferer. The poet’s rendering of their gestures and beliefs are noteworthy:

With candles and with lanterns
throwing giant scorpion shadows
on the sun-baked walls
they searched for him: he was not found.
They clicked their tongues.
With every movement that the scorpion made
his poison moved in Mother’s blood, they said.
May he sit still, they said.
May the sins of your previous birth
be burned away tonight, they said.
May your suffering decrease
the misfortunes of your next birth, they said.
May the sum of evil
balanced in this unreal world
against the sum of good
become diminished by your pain.
May the poison purify your flesh
of desire, and your spirit of ambition,
they said, . . . (CP 130)

The rationale to extensively quote this poem is to bring out the breathless cataloguing of the reactions of the illiterate villagers to the pain and suffering. The long delineation reveals the essential tenets of Indian philosophical discourses in the simple language of the illiterate peasants. The theory of *Karma*, rebirth, role of suffering in human life and its impact on accumulated *Karma*, the world as *Maya* and negation of desire and ambition
are some of the basic tenets of Indian philosophy and the peasants understand them in their simplistic way and try to solace the suffering mother with their genuine feelings. William Walsh points out that ‘the choric they said, they said, they said, implies something of the ancient, sophisticated ritual of the chanting as against the primitive quality of its content just as it points up the ironic detachment of the poet’ (133).

There is also a marked contrast in the way in which the reactions of the peasants and the reaction of the father are recorded in the poem. The peasants look at the pain with a certainty of faith: ‘they sat around / on the floor with my mother in the centre, / the peace of understanding on each face’ (CP 130). The father on the other hand, being a rationalist, is agitated and restless. The poet describes, ‘My father, sceptic, rationalist, / trying every curse and blessing, / powder, mixture, herb and hybrid’ (CP 131). The tone and diction also changes and we almost feel the agitation of the man. The whole poem transcends the present and takes us to some primeval time with its references to lanterns, shadows, and sun-baked walls. The poem captures the unmistakable Indianness of diction and style when the poet describes the peasants and their reaction to the scorpion sting. Throughout the poem Ezekiel has maintained a detached irony which gives the whole poem a touch of authenticity. Rajeev Taranath and Meena Belliappa observe that, ‘the observer’s neutral attitude to the scene balancing the superstitious with the presence of the father, sceptic, rationalist’. (16) Christopher Wiseman described The Night of the Scorpion as ‘a very valid poem continuing a fascinating tension between personal crisis and mocking social observation’. (247) However, one would wish to differ with Wiseman about the presence of mocking attitude in the poem. It is no mocking of the social observation; rather it is ironic presentation with a touch of mildly humourous, large hearted acceptance of the genuineness of their concern for the suffering mother. Chetan Karnani has rightly observed: “The theme of the poet’s mother stung by a scorpion is
given multiple treatment, bringing in its sweep the world of magic and superstition, science and rationality and maternal affection.” (82)

_The Night of the Scorpion_ is a favourite poem of the anthologists and text book writers. It is one of the best known poems of Indian English poetry. The poem is very significant because in theme and treatment it is a kind of poem that can be written by an Indian poet only. It is a poem that is steeped in Indianness. Commenting on the Indianness of the poem, M. K. Naik rightly observes:

It is a poem which only an Indian English poet (even though he is largely alienated from the Indian ethos, for his alienation itself is a source of poetry), could have written, since the experience and the response to it recreated here are rooted in the modern Indian situation. And an art rooted in the soil has a freshness and a vigour which no amount of clever pastiche dressed up in sheer technical virtuosity can ever hope to possess.(71)

This poem is also a telling illustration of Ezekiel's attitude to India. In _Naipaul’s India and Mine_, Ezekiel boldly proclaims:

I believe in anger, compassion and contempt. They are not without value. I believe in acceptance that incorporates all three, makes us of them. I am incurably critical and skeptical. This is what I am in relation to India also. And to myself. It does not prevent the growth of love. (_SP_ 99)

The poet has shown similar critical objectivity in this poem also.

Superstition and religious malpractices and shams are treated by Ezekiel in many poems. Just as in life and poetry, Ezekiel cannot stand pretensions and corruption in religion also. In fact, his attitude to religion has been one of skepticism in the beginning and after his LSD trip to America he left his atheism. But his idea of religion is more humanitarian and less orthodox. He cannot accept any mediator between him and his creator. Gurus and god-men receive considerable flak from him. In _Rural Suite_, Ezekiel
drabs the mendicants for shamelessly exploiting the innocent villagers for their superstition. There are few instances in Ezekiel's poetry when he almost throws away the garb of poetry and becomes direct and vehement in his criticism of religious superstition and exploitation by the religious god-man. Ezekiel writes:

Because of the superstition
rampant in these villages,
they’re royally treated –
may well be God testing their people –
and carry away huge quantities of rice,
chillies, fruit and nuts.
It’s a shameless exploitation
of the people’s ignorance.
It’s not even as if they need the food,
most of them are wealthy farmers
from the neighbouring villages
with a taste for hoarding gold (CP 197)

The language here is direct. It reads almost like prose. There is no characteristic Ezekielian irony or understatement. It’s a direct matter of fact depiction of greedy exploitation of the villagers by the cunning farmers who come there as Bhikshuks to dupe villagers of the goods. However, Ezekiel’s ire is on the dupes and not the gullible villagers who become prey to the mendicants who come begging even when they don’t need to beg. Ezekiel’s understanding of the Indian psyche is revealed in the brief statement he makes in the parenthesis ‘may well be God testing his people’ (CP 197). Indians believe that the beggars should never be turned away from the door because it may well be God testing people of their generosity. The typical Indian love for hoarding gold is also captured in the last line of the poem.
Ezekiel's scathing satire for the religious hypocrites is best expressed in *Guru*. The poem begins with a statement of how the Guru who is a saint now was a sinner once. Ezekiel does not find anything surprising in it. He says we may grow up like him one day. Then, in the second stanza, Ezekiel lays bare the true character of the Guru. The saint is still a faithless friend. He is obstinate in argument and ungrateful for the favour done. The catalogue of the vices of the sham Guru continues and Ezekiel wields his unfailing irony to expose the meanness of the so-called guru. The lines are worth quoting here:

- hard with servants and the poor,
- discourteous to disciples, especially men,
- condescending, even rude
- to visitors (except the foreigners)
- and overscrupulous in checking
- the accounts of the *ashram*.

He is also rather fat. (*CP* 192)

Through brilliant use of parenthesis, Ezekiel invokes the power of ironic understatement to reveal more. For instance, the ‘especially men’ is deliberately insinuating to suggest that the guru’s attitude to women is different and it says volume without explicitly saying anything. Similarly, ‘except the foreigner’ given in the parenthesis is an astute reminder to the reader that the guru is very courteous to foreigners because they offer more money than native people.

The poem begins with an introduction of the saint as someone who once lived a life of sin but is now a saint. The poet says that there is nothing spectacular about it. He writes, ‘We smile, we are not surprised’. But after cataloguing of the vices of the saint, the poet says that we no longer smile. The final stanza is characteristic Ezekiel closing lines:

*Witnessing the spectacle*
We no longer smile
If saints are like this,
what hopes is there then for us? (CP 192)

The attitude in the beginning of the poem is that of a mild playful disrespect and skepticism. But at the end of the poem, the tone of the poet is that of hopelessness and disappointment at the depravity of the guru. The ‘we smile’ of the first stanza turns into ‘we no longer smile’ in the last stanza. The poem concludes with the tone that if god-man are like this, what is the hope for common man? In other words, there is also an understanding of the personal limitations of the poet. The poet does not expect the guru to be like a god, but he is rather disappointed that the guru is not even a good human being.

Ezekiel has treated the subject of spiritual healing and the business some people have made of it. Ezekiel's spirituality is spirituality of inner peace achieved through a perfect harmony between the mind and heart, between the senses and reasoning, between the demands of the body and the claims of soul. He believes in human balance humanly achieved. Truthfulness to self, integrity of thought and deed, honesty of purpose and practice these are the qualities that Ezekiel preaches for spiritual wellness. In Healers, Ezekiel makes a mockery of the so-called spiritual healers who attract the gullible masses in the hope of finding a panacea for their spiritual malaise. The very first line of the poem is pointedly sharp which brings out the ills of the modern man’s spiritual starving. Ezekiel writes, ‘The unplanned city has a death-wish’ (CP 231). Everybody is hankering after buying some cure for their death-wish. The city attracts droves of healers who come with their fares to cater to the needs of the city. Everyone has a concoction of mantras and rituals to offer the soul starving people spiritual salvation. Their prescriptions vary and everyone has a trick or two up their sleeves to save the damned soul. Ezekiel writes:

Sex is prohibited or allowed.

Meat and drink are prohibited
or allowed. Give up

everything or nothing

and be saved. (CP 231)

The cure all formula offered by the master will help irrespective of whether your marriage is arranged or not, or whether you love your wife or not. It does not matter. God’s love is for everyone. Mimicking the cacophony of these phony healers, Ezekiel uses the clichéd expression to highlight the hollowness of their claims:

Know you mantra, meditate
release your kundalini
get your shakti awakening
and float with the spirit
to your destination (CP 232)

The soil to which Ezekiel is rooted is India. He has made it abundantly clear that India is where he belongs and it is his home. India figures prominently in many of the poems of Ezekiel. Ezekiel is a poet of Indian sensibility. But when one says that, s/he confront a question: what is Indian sensibility? Ujjal Dutta, in an article titled Indo-English Poetry and ‘Indian Sensibility’ published in Indian Literature, remarks that Indian English poetry has not developed a tradition on which an Indian English poet can rely. Dutta observes that he Indian English poet has to turn to Yeats, Eliot, Pound or Plath for inspiration. According to Dutta, Indian English poetry shows two lines of approach in terms of cultural affiliations. One is India’s traditional religious culture drawing from the Vedas, the Upanishads, or the Vaishnavite or Shaivite traditions; the other is secular modern tradition. However, a culture is a far more complex phenomenon. Even if one is avowedly secular, it is absurd to think that the prevalent religious ethos will not have any influence on him. Ezekiel considered himself to be atheist for a good part of his life, but his poetry shows influence of Indian religious philosophical traditions. However, Dutta makes a
pertinent point when he says that since the medium of the Indian English poet is English, there is bound to be global influences working on the poet. What is significant is that the modern sensibility should blend seamlessly with the Indian sensibility. Dutta gives the examples of Parthasarathy, Ramanujan and Kolatkar and observes that they display modern sensibility and make it play upon the Indian background. The influence of the modernist poetry can be traced in Gujarati, Bengali or Marathi poetry but the poets of these regional languages are firmly rooted in their native tradition. One finds in this regional poetry presence of certain themes or idea or certain modes of experience and expression which are by and large associated with modernism in poetry. For instance, one finds poets employing alogical structure instead of traditional linear structure, or preference for free verse technique, startling use of myths and images, the urban bias, frankness about eroticism, etc. But in regional languages, there is the influence assimilated to the native tradition. Indian English poets find it difficult because they are not firmly rooted in the native tradition.

Ezekiel had the artistic skill and philosophical synergy to be a representative of the long, age-old Indian poetic tradition and coupled with this was his sense of being a part of Indian ethos which gave him an astute understanding of that hard-to-describe Indianness. Certainly, there is an authentic and faithful depiction of India in his poetry in all its myriad vividness. His poem, In India, is a collage of four vignettes capturing the unmistakable Indianness. The first is a reference to its noise and commotion in the city life. The poet describes India as ‘always in sun’s eye’ which is a reference to the scorching summer of India. Then the usual Indian scenes of beggars, hawkers, pavement sleepers, hutment dwellers, and slums follow. Ezekiel says the streets are littered with:

Dead souls of men and gods,
Burnt-out mothers, frightened
Virgins, wasted child
And tortured animals (CP 131)

And they all suffer the place and time in noisy silence. Reference to ‘burnt-out mother’ reminds the readers the horrific killings of women by immolation. ‘Frightened virgins’ is a reference to constant fear of sexual harassment and persecution that Indian girls feel and ‘wasted child’ implies the malnutrition among the children in India. By brief strokes of his pen Ezekiel creates a picture of India’s squalor and poverty and social discrimination and cultural fault lines. The stanza ends with: “I ride my elephant of thought, / A Cezanne slung around my neck. (CP 131) The metaphor of elephant of thought is also reminiscent of India. The tone in the last two lines is mock heroic as if the very act of thinking was a mockery of itself.

The next is a picture of school children. The poem is unmistakable for its autobiographical tone. The reference to the religion of the children in the school is a reflection on India where an individual’s identity is determined on the basis of the religious group or caste to which one belongs. This deeply ingrained trait of Indian society is skillfully captured by the poet. The phrases used to describe the various ethnic or religious group are also drawn from the social stereotypes prevalent in Indian society. ‘The musclebound Islamic boys’ (CP 132) were earnest in their prayers and they bullied and stole in pairs. They carved the tables and broke the chairs but never missed their prayers. ‘The whitewashed Anglo-Indian boys’ (CP 132) confessed their games with high-heeled toys. The last stanza of the second section of the poem is a reminder of the unity in diversity of India:

The Anglo-Indian gentlemen
Drank whisky in some Jewish den
With Muslims slowly creeping in
Before or after the prayers. (CP 132)
The third section of the poem is about the year-end party. Twenty three men and women representing six nations gather to celebrate the year-end. The conservative nature of Indian women is reflected thus:

The wives of India sit apart.
They do not drink
they do not talk
of course, they do not kiss’. (CP 132)

Ezekiel, however, hurries to add that men are quite at home in the party. The men in the party are happy to flirt with the foreigner ladies and take liberty slyly whenever opportunity permits. The poet writes, ‘I myself, decorously, press a thigh or two in sly innocence’ (CP 133) and declares that ‘The party is a great success’ (CP 133). Ezekiel has mastered the subtle art of understatement which captures the message in a succinct and penetrating manner.

The last of the four sections of the poem talks about the near seduction of an Indian working lady by her English boss. The woman is impressed by the western lifestyle and glitz. The poem ends with characteristic Ezekiel wit when he says:

The struggle had been hard
And not altogether successful
Certainly the blouse
Would not be used again
But with true British courtesy
He lent her a safety pin. (CP 134)

Ezekiel reveals his characters in brief lines of penetrating insight. The poem begins with:

This, she said to herself
As she sat at table
Is IT. (CP 133)
The emphasis on ‘it’ reveals that the woman had been dreaming of such a meeting for a long time. She had thought of a romantic meeting with the boss in a large apartment with cold beer and western music and talks of art and literature. However, in the second meeting, things go astray and the boss tries to seduce her. All four are realistic portrayals of the life in Indian society. The four scenes are arranged as general to personal. The first picture is more general and reflects the scene of India anywhere. The second is a bit more particular as it is a picture of adolescent boys. The third one is even more particular as it captures the experience of a group of people who are highly westernized intellectuals. The fourth is a personal experience of a woman. Though the pictures have a different range in terms of social representation, they are typical and not individual experiences.

Ezekiel's preoccupation with the immediate environment led him to observe all the manifestations of living culture including the use of English language. A living culture is constantly in a flux and keeps changing, evolving newer forms of expression for the changing realities. The culture of a people finds manifestation in their customs, rituals, behavior, preferences and priorities. Language is one of the most potent tools for cultural expression. In fact, language and culture have a direct and intimate relationship. One cannot understand a culture without interacting with the language of that culture. Culture and language have a complex interrelationship. Language is shaped by culture and culture is created through language. This homologous relationship between culture and language has led some scholars to identify language as culture. Both language and culture have evolved simultaneously affecting and influencing each other in the course of their evolution. Their courses have run concurrently. Language also is not a static or homogeneous entity. It is intensely personal, social and cultural. In this sense, a given language has many variations in terms of personal, social and cultural varieties.
English in India also has acquired certain peculiarities of usage. That is why it is often referred to as Indian English. However, it can be argued that Indian English is not a homogeneous entity and not every distinct feature of Indian English is used by every speaker of Indian English and there exists a great deal of regional, educational and social differentiation. This, however, is true of every language. Ezekiel observed the use of English in certain typical ways and spotted certain mannerisms that he found to be amusing. Ezekiel wrote some poems in what he calls ‘Indian English’ in Very Indian Poems in Indian English. Ezekiel was witty and had a good sense of humour. He wrote these poems in humorous vein to capture that flavor of Indian English that anyone in India has come across in their day to day conversations and interactions. This unique way of using English is very well captured by Ezekiel. He has very minutely observed the mannerisms and oddities of Indian English. He used these mannerisms in his poems to create delightfully humourous pictures of individuals and typical Indian social behavior patterns. It is neither satiric nor condescending. It is mildly amusing picture of life that Ezekiel saw around. Gieve Patel, in his Introduction to Collected Poems: 1952-1988, says that one characteristic that permeates Ezekiel's poetry is friendliness:

We see friendliness redeeming most of the sexual encounters. It redeems also the

Very Indian Poems in Indian English, prevents them from becoming unkind

caricatures of people who do not know the language they use, in fact gives their

language warmth and a kooky status. (CP xxvi)

Ezekiel was a professor of English and, hence, does not approve or use himself the kind of English used in these poems. In all other poems of Ezekiel, we find good standard English. There is no trace of any kind of adulteration of English with Indian elements except such words or phrases which have no English equivalents or which are accepted additions to English language. But in his Very Indian Poems in Indian English, he deliberately uses English the way a section of Indian population use in their day to day
interactions. These very people, when they write, use different kind of English and certain
typical mannerisms and peculiarities do not figure there. So what Ezekiel was trying to do
in these poems was to capture the peculiar flavor of Indian way of speaking. That is why
these poems are poems about the speech acts of individuals depicted in the poem. In
*Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T. S.* Ezekiel depicts the protagonist as speaking in the
farewell party of one of the colleagues. In this sense this poems are genuine and
authentic. They are not a result of his contempt for the incompetent speakers of English.
Ezekiel was just experimenting with the language which is a powerful medium for the
poet. In this poems Ezekiel is trying to capture a slice of everyday conversation in Indian
situations. They are not even caricatures because Ezekiel has not exaggerated or
deformed the characteristics of this kind of language. They are real and anybody living in
India comes across such speakers who use English like these imaginary speakers do in the
poems.

These poems are Ezekiel's way of marking the essential Indian attitudes and
behavior in a humorous way. However, it is needless to say that Ezekiel did not think
using ‘Indian English’ to be the sole or even significant marker of Indianness in poetry.
But Ezekiel's keen observation and sense of humour left him intrigued and bemused at the
typical way in which a large number of Indians use English. To some extent, these poems
in fact feel the gap in Indian English poetry without which the typical flavor of language
used by a large number of people in India would have remained unnoticed. Moreover,
when Ezekiel uses the term ‘Indian English’, he does not mean just the grammatical or
lexical characteristic. ‘Indian English’, for him, means all these and even the typical
idiomatic expressions and typical Indian way of speaking.

In *Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T. S.*, even the title also has Indian flavor. It is
not a farewell party but a ‘goodbye party’. In the beginning of the poem Miss Pushpa is
referred to as ‘our dear sister’ (CP 190). This is typical Indian way of referring to women as sisters and men as brothers. Even the style of the speaker which is conversational though he is making a formal speech is typically Indian and interpolations appear in it naturally. This may not be wholly typical but it is not completely without a touch of reality. Personal references are normal in Indian conversations. The reference to the speaker’s visit to Surat where he stayed with family members of his uncle’s old friend is an example of Ezekiel’s sense of observation. It is perfectly normal for Indians to go and stay with someone who is a very distantly known. In fact, staying in hotel is considered to be rather unusual and only done as a last resort. Further reference to Miss Pushpa’s lineage is also typically Indian. Family background is very important in India. India is a hierarchical society and families and social identity is high or low. India is a strongly collectivist society and we tend to judge people on the basis of their group identity. In Indian society, status is the identity of an individual. Another feature that we can associate with Indianness is glorification of softer qualities of individuals. Indian culture puts more emphasis on being sweet, gentle, helping, accommodating and qualities like assertiveness, competitiveness, and strong individuality are not valued. So Miss Pushpa T. S. has ‘external sweetness’ (CP 190) as well as ‘internal sweetness’ (CP 190). She is very popular because she never says no if anybody asks her help. This is a kind of dramatic monologue of in a unique way. The poet has realistically captured the living speech of a section of society. The brief poem in the form of a monologue vividly creates a picture of the speaker as well as Miss Pushpa. Bruce King has rightly remarked that there is some kind of double meaning implicit in the reference to Miss Pushpa being the a ‘yes’ woman and to her popularity with both men and women. Also one can read a slightly sneering
A typical Indian feature that Ezekiel has captured here is the use of continuous tense even when it is incorrect. The whole poem is written in continuous tense. This is a characteristic mistake that many people make in India, especially those who learnt English at a later stage of their life. One more feature of this variety of English used in India is that some phrases or expressions are literal translations of the native or mother tongue of the speaker. This is found in *Very Indian Poems in Indian English* also. Poems written in this style are meant to be funny. The poet is not sarcastic here nor is he disparaging the idiosyncrasies and oddities of Indians. It is not just the typical usage of language that he captures but also typical Indian attitudes and thinking. The usual sense of pride in the ancient Indian wisdom, the nagging about erosion of Indian values among the youngsters, the pride in the unity in diversity in India, and a habit of holding a moral high ground and sermonising about everything all these are captured vividly in these poems.

These poems are as much authentic as any other poem of Ezekiel as they capture the essential Indian sensibility and reality. The unmistakable flavor of Indianness wafts in these poems also. A small poem like *Irani Restaurant Instructions* also reveals the social mores and attitudes of Indian society:

- Do not write letter
- Without order refreshment
- Do not comb
- Hair is spoiling floor
- Do not make mischief in cabin
- Our waiter is reporting

- Come again
- All are welcome whatever caste
If not satisfied tell us
Otherwise tell others
God is great (CP 240)

This eight line poem reveals certain typically Indian attitudes and situations. The first instruction, for instance, forbids the customers from sitting and writing letters without ordering anything. In an over populous country like India space is a scarce resource and the owner cannot afford to allow the customers to sit without ordering anything. The same scarcity of space is a cause for many people to use cabins and restaurant cubicles for their intimate needs. The ubiquitous social reality of caste and its many operational manifestations are an unmistakable Indian phenomenon. The instruction to allow entry without any discrimination of caste is a common phenomenon that we find in many hotels and restaurants. Ezekiel observes everything with a wry sense of humour and depicts in his poetry with a skeptical, rational, analytical temperament.

Ezekiel has been accused of elitism because many critics believe that Ezekiel mocks at simple Indians who cannot use English as efficiently as convent educated foreign returned people like Ezekiel do. However, these poems are not a result of contempt for India and Indians who use English in a peculiar way. It is rather an acceptance of the usages captured by Ezekiel. He believes that language is a living thing and keeps evolving. This variety of Indian English is as valid and authentic as any other ‘standard’ variety of English. Ezekiel's ability to capture and record vividly the flavour of Indian English is a proof of his sharp observation. It also exhumes a distinct sense of empathy for the speakers with whom Ezekiel finds a sense of belonging. His humour is not born of derision and contempt but of good natured, genial comradeship. He laughs with them and not at them.

A detachment born out of skepticism and intellectual rigour is Ezekiel's strength. He held his own poetry to such critical intellectual scrutiny and believed that writing
poetry is a serious business. He loathed shams and quakes in the guise of poets also. In sonnet no. 2 of Warning: Two Sonnets, Ezekiel writes –

Who says he is a poet? How much
does he really know, or is he
one of those who cheat with words
instead of money? Counterfeiters
cought by critic-cops at dead of night. (CP 233)

Ezekiel was a very conscious poet. He thought deeply about his art and about poetry in general. There are five articles in a section called On Poetry. Here, Ezekiel delves deep in his idea of poetry. All the articles are an interesting read for they provide us an insight into what Ezekiel thinks about his own art and the medium he has chosen i.e. poetry. Ezekiel’s idea of poetry is reflected in his essays like How a Poem is Written and To Revise or not to Revise. In his essay How a Poem is Written which was first published in 1976, Ezekiel sounds like a romantic poet when he says:

There is only an absorption in something else which may lead to conception, there
is a surrender to a power greater than the individual and a sense of that surrender,
of being used by forces essentially mysterious for their own ends. (SP 11)

Ezekiel says that the process of writing a poem may start involuntarily and ends even before the poet realizes. Ezekiel differentiates between how to write a poem – which is more about the technique of writing of a poem and which presupposes that if one knows how to write a poem, one may write it – and how a poem is written. The later foregrounds the idea that the poet himself may not always be aware of the process. It is an experience that the poet can claim to have. Ezekiel uses two words for the poet who has the experience: the protagonist or the victim. That is again to emphasize the involuntariness of the experience. Ezekiel refers to the statements made by various poets about the nature of poetic process and says that they are useful in understanding the poetic process.
However, Ezekiel warns against blindly accepting what the poets have said about the poetic process because there is a possibility that the concerned poet may, advertently or inadvertently, deliberately or otherwise, not be accurate in describing his experience. So Ezekiel says; “It is also right, in my view, to be skeptical such statements since there is no way of checking their accuracy.” (SP 12)

Ezekiel also does not assign much importance to emotions as an essential prerequisite of writing poetry. Refuting Sidney’s claim, “Fool! said my muse to me. Look in thy heart and write”, Ezekiel says that “One may doubt whether a heart full of feelings and a head empty of ideas is the ideal cooperative agency for the writing of poetry.” (SP 13) As in everything else, Ezekiel believes in the purity of aims and methods. Ezekiel's dislike for sham and hypocrisy is an all pervading characteristic in his poetry also. The urge to write poetry should not stem from vanity or ambition. The poet should write because he has to write. The poetic process begins and then the poet just stands aside and allows the mysterious force to take charge and ‘not to interfere with the direction in which it drives ideas and feelings’ (SP 15).

It is essential for the poet to be able to keep himself aloof in the process of writing a poem. He has to surrender to the spirit of his art. W. H Auden said to an enthusiastic youth aspiring to be a poet not to write poetry because you have something to say. Ezekiel also advises the poet to be a listener rather than a speaker. Ezekiel writes: He learns to be less obstinate in saying what he wants to say and more willing to say has to be said in the particular poem he is writing at the moment. He talks less and listens more as poet; he subordinates his ideas and feelings to the spirit of his art (SP 15). Jagdish Dave observes:

On both the counts, self revelation and inspiration, Ezekiel might sound like a Romantic poet of Western canon. Yet he is not a Romantic, but an Indian poet.
whose consciousness cannot be indicated by any alien appellation. Inspiration kindles in him a rational lucidity, not winds of passion. The self that appears in his poetry is not Shelleyan ‘Drunken Boat’ of Northrop Frye’s description. (163)

Ezekiel rejects Eliot’s idea of impersonality. For him poetry is not an escape from personality, it is rather a revelation of personality. Ezekiel's poetry is nothing if not self revelatory. However, it is not self indulgence. It is self assessment and scrutiny. He looks at himself with a detached rationality and puts himself at the stringent scrutiny. Ezekiel rejects Eliot’s impersonal view of poetry which demands complete separation between the mind that suffers and the mind that creates. For Ezekiel, the two are not separate but harmonized into a complete harmony. However, he believes that it takes long spells of preparation, spells of aridity or near aridity, disturbed by occasional ‘grasshopper like leaps’ (SP 16) of imagination which, if followed, would produce inferior poetry. But the execution after the preparation time is exceptionally fast, so fast that the poet even does not realize sometimes and the poem is written. So he says that a poem is written down rather than written. But the poet has to resist the temptation of succumbing to the ‘premature grasshopper like leaps’ (SP 16) of imagination failing which he would end up writing a bad poem. Ezekiel aptly records:

In going out energetically for expression, it may lose the profounder rhythm of the innermost being. Every poet knows what it is to be delighted with the poem he has written, while at the same time the misery of at the thought that a better poem was sacrificed to it. He knows also the danger of losing both the poem he can write and the poem he can’t. He walks on this tightrope fearfully as well as confidently, and gets to the other side by the grace of God, that is, by faith, patience and persistence. (SP 16)

Ezekiel differentiates between the good poem and bad poem. He says a good poem ‘is heard as a silent voice easily drowned by the normal voices of the world and of the poet’s
self, his ego or his superego’ (SP 16). For Ezekiel, inspiration only is not enough for writing a good poem. He believes that a genuinely inspired poem can be equally bad. For this he puts emphasis on craftsmanship. The poet has to build a poem painstakingly with constant craftsmanship.

In another essay, *To Revise or not to Revise*, Ezekiel emphasizes the need for revision. He says even an inspired poem may need some revision. He warns that there cannot be an absolute rule about whether to revise or not to revise. There may be poems which need revision and there may be poems where little revision is required. He shares his experience with Ramanujan where the later advised Ezekiel to cut out the first nine lines and the last fourteen lines of a 35 line poem. Ramanujan said that the remaining 12 lines were inspired and the 23 lines should either be removed or revised. Ezekiel finally revised the 23 lines and the final poem was of 19 lines. He gives another example which is about how his famous poem, *Night of the Scorpion*, which was written when he was in Leeds in 1964. Ezekiel had to read some poems at a party and he wanted to read some hitherto unpublished poems and he wanted to read poems with Indian ethos. He did not have enough. He decided to wait for a poem to come. He had no luck till lunch time not even till tea time. It was 6 pm and he had no luck since morning. His wife reminded him that soon they will have to leave for the party. In a fit of desperation he started writing ‘I remember’ (CP 130) and suddenly he wrote ‘the night my mother was stung by a scorpion’ (CP 130). In as time as it would take to make a copy of the poem Ezekiel completed the poem. Ezekiel says the only revision he did to the poem was adding extra space between the body of the poem and the last three lines.

Ezekiel is a poet of lucidity and simplicity and he vociferously rejects the modern fetish for revision in order to make a poem more complex. He says, “A poem should never be revised to accommodate mannerisms but to eliminate such as have crept in”.

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Ezekiel rejects the two extremes about this question of revising a poem. He rejects the idea that a poem once written is a product of inspiration and must not be tempered with. He also rejects the idea that a poem is never complete and there is an endless possibility of revision but there comes a time when the poet ‘abandons’ the poem rather than competing it. He rejects the proverbial middle way also because there is no such middle way. Ezekiel believes that a poet learns with experience and practice whether a certain poem needs revision or not. Ezekiel ends his article with the following argument:

It would of course be disastrous if the reaction were in favour of spontaneous poetry, free from any formal discipline, a purely arbitrary outflow that is never checked for the sake of art but allowed to continue in the name of emotion. I am reminded of one Indian English poet who claims that she doesn’t even read other poets any more because she doesn’t want to be influenced by them. That way lies the death of poetry as an art”. (SP 28)

Poetry, for Ezekiel, is also a mode of knowledge. His faith in poetry is central to his understanding of himself as well as world around him. Poetry for him is a powerful tool of self revelation and self knowledge. In Introduction to Selected Prose Adil Jussawalla remarks:

This belief in poetry, that is crucial to an understanding of ourselves and the ‘deepest truths’ is central to Ezekiel's thinking on the subject and I consider the essay Poetry as Knowledge to be a seminal one, both in terms of understanding Ezekiel's practice as a poet and as a uniquely compelling defence of poetry(SP 04).

Ezekiel compares the experience of a poet to that of a mystic. He says it always eludes to convey what it feels like to have the experience depicted in the poem. Even more eluding is actually feeling it. He advises the poet:

He must at least try to see it in his own special way and not adopt the theoretician’s position, even when he theorizes. Otherwise, he is likely to do
badly what the theoretician does well. He must insist on the integrity, the uniqueness, the primacy of his experience in poetry, which is the experience, so to speak, of being on fire and not the experience of studying the flame that has cooled down (SP 30).

Ezekiel rejects C Day-Lewis’s claim that poetry provides us knowledge of a certain mood. For, according to Ezekiel, knowledge of a certain mood is no knowledge at all. Ezekiel also rejects the claims made by certain apologists of poetry that poetry gives knowledge in the conventional sense of the word. Nobody would go to poetry to get knowledge about history or laws of nature. Similarly, Ezekiel is skeptical about the poetry of propaganda also. Marxist poetry is more Marxist than poetry and religious poetry is hardly ever good poetry. For Ezekiel, “To be good, poetry has to be an independent art”. (SP 34) Ezekiel also could not agree with I. A. Richards who said poetry is pseudo-statement as opposed to true statement of science because Ezekiel’s preaching and practice as a poet is based upon truth. He rubbishes T. S. Eliot’s assertion that neither Shakespeare nor Dante did any real thinking.

Ezekiel believes that the ends of poetry are ‘meaning, knowledge, and truth’ (SP 40) with knowledge ‘at the centre of the trinity’ (SP 40). Ezekiel puts knowledge at the centre because it is the source of strength for the other two. Ezekiel says, “You can have meaning and truth in a poem without knowledge or with a minimum of it, but to that extent the poem lacks weight. Its magical and miraculous power enervates instead of energizing, charms and delights but does not nourish. Who can say that good poetry is of that kind?” (SP 40)

Thus, Ezekiel’s poetry deals with his environment as much as about himself. He has written extensively about the life around him. He writes about the city in which he lived. He writes about the problems of modern India and about the aspirations and
frustrations of modern India. This aspect of his poetry reveals the same Ezekiel that we come across in his poems of love and sexuality and in his poems of God and spirituality.

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