CHAPTER – V
THE SPIRITUAL EZEKIEL

Nissim Ezekiel's poetry is poetry of quest, quest for a balance in life, quest for a balance within oneself for a spiritually peaceful life. He is a poet who shows a complete harmony between his life and art. His poetry is self-revelatory. Ezekiel's poetry is about himself. His poetry emanates directly and intimately from himself. There is a complete harmony between Ezekiel the man and Ezekiel the poet. His life and his work can easily be replaced. He always aimed at a complete harmony between his thought, word and deed. His poetry shows a constant desire for a life of integrity and honesty. One thing that can be seen in his poetry right from the beginning to end is his dislike and even contempt for hypocrisy and sham. Ezekiel's poetry is a prayer and a cry for such a life which is lived with integrity and truth. Genuineness is the whole mark of test for poetry for Ezekiel.

Ezekiel was born in a Bene Israel family and brought up by modern educated parents in Hindu environment. He was brought up in secular environment by a science enthusiast rationalist father and a teacher mother. Ezekiel considered himself an atheist and turned to religion only at a later stage in his life. Though born a Jew, he was always a rationalist and a sceptic. He looked at life and poetry with a detachment coupled with a questioning attitude and analytical approach. His poetry is a valid document of his quest as a modern Indian living in an urban landscape. Ezekiel's predicament also makes him a particular minority. He was a Jew born and brought in a Hindu dominated society by rationalist parents. Ezekiel was another minority also as he was an English speaking minority living in a Marathi speaking environment. Ezekiel was a poet writing in English at a time in a country that had just become independent from English speaking colonisers. To write in English was itself an act of
sacrilege at the time because nationalism was at peak and everything British was looked upon as unwanted residue of colonial slavery. This complex identity with which Ezekiel lived makes his quest for a spirituality complex.

A person’s spiritual quest is determined by his sense of identity and belongingness. Ezekiel begins with a desire to escape his Indian identity. His travel and stay in England is important for his realization that he belongs to India and his identity is Indian first. This leads him to pronounce:

I have made my commitments now
This is one: ‘to stay where I am,
As others choose to give themselves
In some remote and backward place. (CP 181)

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). India is where he found his sense of belonging. He could find his roots in India. This was the place which he embraced wholeheartedly with all its ugliness, darkness and shortcomings. That is the difference that he highlights when he launches a scathing attack on Naipaul. The reaction is of a person who feels to be a part of India.

India is not just a geographical territory. A country is more than geographical territory; it is a completeness comprising of people, traditions, customs, way of life, attitudes, cultural preferences, values ingrained in the social psyche, behavioral patterns, etc. Indianness refers to this cultural identity and its depiction in various forms. The cultural identity determines the way one looks at life, relationships, sense of being, idea of happiness, sense of fulfillment, etc. Culture is, in a sense, a collective programming of mind of a group of people which distinguishes the members of that group from others. For instance, an Indian Jew is more like an Indian Hindu than like
an American Jew. In other words, religious or linguistic identity is secondary and subservient to cultural identity. In spite of apparent dissimilarity among the Indians in terms of their religion, language, or caste, they are more similar than their religious or linguistic counterparts from other cultural backgrounds. An expatriate Indian Muslim would have a more affinitive feeling with an Indian Hindu there than with an Arabic Muslim. The experience is not uncommon. Culture is something deeper and more subtle than its apparent manifestations such as religion or language. The most obvious and visible aspect of culture is cultural artifacts such as language, clothes, customs, dance, music, monuments, etc. These are tangible aspects of culture. This tangible culture is just the tip of the iceberg. The large part of the iceberg is beneath the surface which is difficult to be perceived and grasped by someone who is not a member of the cultural group.

A culture has many subcultures. Indian culture, for instance, has subcultures depending upon various markers such as language, religion, caste, gender, prosperity, educational status etc. All these subcultures have certain characteristics which make them different from other subcultures. However, all these subcultures are part of what can be called Indian culture or, in other words, Indian culture comprises of all these subcultures. Just as it is difficult for outsiders to understand the meaning of cultural significance, it is also difficult for the members of the cultures to truly understand and appreciate the culture. The relationship between the culture and the members of that culture is like that of the fish and the water. The fish does not know the water until it is out of water. Similarly the member of a cultural group may not be aware the culture in which one is living until s/he goes out of that cultural environment. Something similar happened to Ezekiel when he went to England. He realized that he belongs to India in a way that makes them inseparable.
What is the significance of the term Indian? In general sense the term Indian is applied to anything that is within India and anything that is born or made or grown in India, so one can talk about Indian city or Indian cricket team or Indian product. However, when one uses Indian for a work of art or for an artist, the term Indian acquires a deeper significance. It is not just the matter of time one has lived in India or just the accidental fact of being born in India. Ezekiel, for instance, rightly refuses to consider Ruth Prawer Jhabwala as Indian writer though she lived in India for more than twenty years. Similarly, he considers Dom Moraes an Indian poet because of the fact that he was born and brought up in India and went abroad and returned to India to live for so many years. Thus, what is important is that an artist is rooted in the culture in which she or he was born and brought up and in which she or he passed the formative years. It is in this sense that an Indian writer is Indian.

What, then, is Indian sensibility? How can Indian sensibility be defined? Is Indian sensibility different for an Indian Jew and for an Indian Hindu? Or is it something that is over and above these distinctions? Sensibility of a national culture is far more deep and subtle than the superficial differences that one comes across. The Indian sensibility is a result of long process of evolution which covers centuries. Ezekiel was well aware about this which led him to confess that Sanskrit poets were his poetic ancestors. When he said this he was acknowledging the long tradition of Indian sensibility of which he was a part. This is what T. S. Eliot meant when he said that a tradition is an ever flowing stream which remains ever the same though assimilating newer elements in the course of its evolution. Though India has various religious communities living together for centuries, and practicing their religions independently, it is inevitable that the dominant Hindu culture has exercised its influence on the practices of these religious communities. It is in this sense that one
can argue that an Indian Christian has more affinitive feelings for an Indian Hindu than a western Christian.

One of the oldest civilizations of the world, India has always triumphed in its constant struggle with its destiny, achieving marvelous standards in the fields of art, culture, civilization, spirituality, and knowledge. This civilization excelled in art and culture on the one hand and soared equally high in the realm of knowledge both spiritual and sacred. Its scholars explored the remotest regions in the space and tried to understand and explain the material world around them. Inclined to systematic inquiry—a consequence of long traditions of disciplined scholarship—its rishis and scholars were scientists and researchers who dedicated their lives to unravel the mysteries of the universe. On the one hand they tried to understand the nature of the matter and, on the other hand, they tried to understand and master the power of the mind. Being a very ancient civilization it has evolved its powerful and sustaining traditions in the field of arts, literature, philosophy, religion, culture, and social life assimilating and absorbing influences and elements from other civilizations with which it came into contact during its long history. However the glory of the Indian civilization lies not in its many-coloured traditions; it lies in its ability to synchronize mind and matter, spirit and sense, sacred and secular. It was warm-heartedly responsive to the pleasures of the senses; and it was equally conducive to the perfection of the spiritual. It has long drawn traditions of music, arts, literature, warfare, statecraft, religion, philosophy, and knowledge. Over the centuries there evolved a way of life that was truly holistic and conducive to individual freedom and progress. Its fine arts were means of entertainment and mediums of spiritual ‘sadhana’. Music was not only for the gratification of the senses; it was also a way of worshipping; it was one of the many ways of achieving union with the absolute.
Musicians and dancers enjoyed the status of the gurus and temples had regular performances of dance and music. Spirit and sense were not considered mutually exclusive and conflicting.

Ancient Indian culture prided in a unique mixture of spiritual and material. While it had had a long drawn tradition of spirituality reflected in the Vedas and the Upanishads, it also had given the status of a rishi to Vatsayana whose Kamsutra, an exemplary work of scientific nature on the art and science of sex, enjoyed the reverence accorded to the Vedas. The ancient Indian spirit of life was sensitive to the beauties of life and responded equally whole-heartedly to the call of spirituality. The spiritual and the mundane existed side by side in harmony with each other. In the Vedas and Upanishads time and eternity, body and soul, sensuous pleasure and spiritual bliss do not appear opposed but integrated in one cosmic and comprehensive vision. Hence the presence of love poems and religious poems in poets like Ezekiel is not altogether surprising to an Indian reader though it might seem to be so to a foreign reader. There are already poems like Geetgovind, which are both spiritual and sensual.

The history of Indian sensibility does not show a negation of the world. The great rishis and the thinkers were not like the ordinary sadhus preaching the meaninglessness of life and negation of the world. They were humble householders who embraced life and tried to sublimate it by remaining inside it. There was a spirit of liberty and inhibition of any sort was unknown to it. There was the freedom to express views contrary to the established ideology and a healthy discussion and debate between the opposite schools of ideologies was a part of the intellectual environment of the country. Liberal debates, polemics, analysis, criticisms and classifications etc. have been some of the most significant features of its philosophical
and literary heritage: these methods to acquire and refine knowledge are valid even today, and very much part of an enlightened Indian mind.

The Hindu view of life was based on the four ‘Purusharthas’ namely Dharma, Artha, Kama, and Moksha. The world has fewer cultures in which such a balanced view of life is so healthily advocated. The first one Dharma was to guide man in the harmonious existence with the society. It instructed him to live and behave in such a way that his life as a whole was in keeping with the social and moral good of the whole society. A life of perfect harmony with the common good--that was the ideal behind the observation of Dharma. It did not mean, as its English equivalent might wrongly suggest, the faith in a particular religion or worshipping a particular god. It was a way of life that emphasized one’s duty to himself, to the society, and to one’s country. It was a code of moral behavior and this morality was not only ethical, it was more or less a social morality.

Artha means the economic behavior of an individual. Man must earn enough money to look after the welfare of his family and to cater to the needs of the family and he must do this keeping in mind the other three—Dharma, Kama, and Moksha. If the manner of his economic activity was not consistent with the precepts of Dharma and Moksha it was sure to fail him in the attainment of his liberation. Rightfully earned wealth was not considered unworthy. In fact, Arth is given second place in the quartet of Purushartha immediately after Dharma because Karma was the central principle of the ancient Indian ideology. Nowhere in the Vedic thought does one find a renunciation of the worldly endeavour.

Kama means the sensual behavior of an individual. He must channelize his sexual energy to perpetuate his clan and the gratification of sexual desire is to be attained keeping in mind the other three functions. The glory of the Indian civilization
lies in the fact that the physical—Kama—effortlessly finds a respectable place beside the spiritual—Moksha. It being the third important Purusharth, sex has always been looked upon as a manifestation of the universal creative force. Even the places of worship were decorated with elaborate carvings of the sexual activity. Far from being a taboo sex has always received a healthy respect in Indian society. In fact the understanding of the brahmcharya as a total negation of the sexual activity has crept into Indian mind some time afterwards may be under the influence of the Muslim invaders or the Christian colonizers. Brahmacharyashram was the period of a man’s adolescence and adulthood when he devoted himself to study and observed celibacy after which he would marry and enter the grahsthashram.

Moksha is the last of the four but it is not the least important of them all. In fact it is the most important of all because it is the ultimate aim of an individual’s life upon this earth. The final goal of an individual’s life is Moksha but it was not to be attained by renouncing this world but by accepting it with all its pleasures and pains, temptations and trials, responsibilities and rewards and thus use this life as an opportunity to attain oneness with the ultimate soul – Parmatma. One has to be in the world but not attached to it; one has to live the life like lotus in the water which grows and remains in the water but remains detached from it; there is healthy acceptance of the pleasures of life but not a slavish submission to it.

Even religion remained more or less a personal matter in the ancient India. It was not an institution, like certain other religions of the world such as Christianity and Islam, interfering with the individual freedom of a person and proselytizing certain dogmas by force. There was no church to punish the deviant from the faith. We do not have here a dogma or an authoritative text which cannot be questioned and which has to be followed blindly. Without a founder or an absolute prescriptive text Hinduism
has evolved into a colossal faith with numerous off shoots like Jainism, Buddhism, Sikhism etc. Ancient Indian spirituality was pantheistic; it was anthropocentric with man and individual human consciousness always occupying the central position. It does not preach an individual to lead a life of religiosity so as to be worthy of His mercy; the emphasis is rather on an individual’s capacity to be Him. An individual does not get salvation only; he has the potential to be one with Him. The Vedic calls *Aham Brahmasmi* and *Shivoham* are confident assertions of man’s capacity for spiritual upliftment. The man and his Maker are not different; they are one and the same. This *Adwaitavad* is a powerful spiritual philosophy in India. The absolute is known –if at all –in and through the ‘finite center’ of the single human consciousness.

The meaning of the ‘self’ in Indian way of thinking does not imply a self-centred individual only in relation to the physical world: it involves, above all, self-knowledge, respect for other ‘selves’ and a consciousness of the universal self. This non-dual or ‘advait’ awareness of the thinking ‘I’ is important.

This was not just a bookish philosophy. It has percolated into the deeper most recesses of the Indian psyche. Even an illiterate common man in India has this in his consciousness that this material world is nothing but a manifestation of the spiritual. All animate forms are manifestations of the eternal spirit. This *Advaitavad* has affected the Indian sensibility far more strongly than any other ideology. On the one hand it has made it difficult for an Indian to understand ‘self’ and on the other hand it has practically deprived him of the idea of the ‘other’. An Indian does not have a very strong sense of the ‘other’. Viewing every form of life as a manifestation of the same spirit, for an Indian an animal and a man both have the same divine presence in him or her. The much-eulogized tolerance of the Indian is probably an inevitable result of this belief in *Advait*. Resistance or rejection presupposes an awareness of the
otherness of the other. The history of the Indian civilization bears testimony to this. After initial attempts at repulsing the invaders it has absorbed them so much that now it is not even prepared to call them others. However the rigid caste system is also a reason why a Hindu cannot think a Muslim or a Christian or a Jew to be the other in the same way as any member of these communities would do. It is an enigmatic paradox that Hindus, on the one hand believed in Advaitvad and also had a social system based upon the exclusivist caste system. Hindus are divided into an infinite number of castes and sub-castes and hence their view of the world is radically different from that of any other community.

The sensibility of a nation is reflected in the literary tradition of that country. In fact what we call a literary tradition is the history of national sensibility which is ever the same through ever-newer forms of cultural expression. Hence Eliot’s view seems relevant that a literary tradition is a stream of communal consciousness flowing along time from its own distinct origin, gaining in new elements but never forgoing the traces of the past, adding more colours and lines to the existing pattern, and constantly reorganizing itself to incorporate changes without loss of overall identical features. Indian poetic tradition was naturally affected by this national sensibility which looked with equal respect to man’s spiritual as well as sensual activity. There are many number of poets and men of letters in the regional languages of India who will provide us ample examples of this. There are poems especially ghazals which talk of ishq-e haqiqi and ishq-e-mijazi – poems pertaining to spiritual as well as sensual matters. Many poetic traditions sing of the almighty as a beloved. In fact one of the nine forms of worshipping (Navadha Bhakti) was premlakshana bhakti in which god is looked upon as a lover or a beloved. Even otherwise spiritual inclination did not mean an aversion to the beauties of the world. The example of a modern poet like
Tagore whose *Gitanjali* stands side by side to his other love poems some of which are religious in tone. The Indian poetic tradition in the ancient times shows this characteristic feature; it exulted in the beauties of life and equally whole-heartedly responded to the call of spirituality. Nissim Ezekiel belongs to this tradition and hence is a truly representative poet of the Indian sensibility.

In his *Introduction* to the poet’s *Collected Poems*, Gieve Patel observes, “Notwithstanding the regularity with which the words like ‘God’ and ‘soul’ occur in these poems, Ezekiel is not primarily a religious poet” (*CP* xvii) What Patel seems to suggest is that we cannot consider Ezekiel to be a religious poet as some of our saint poets are. None can have any quarrel if Patel means only this. Ezekiel is not a religious poet as Mira or Kabir or Narsimh Mehta is. But Patel’s objection to Ezekiel that the poet ‘holds discomfiting trucks with matters concerning this world’ (*CP* xvii) and that ‘sexual passion compulsively holds sway and is often given full rein’ (*CP* xvii) seems to suggest that anyone having any spiritual inclination cannot and should not have anything to do with the matters concerning to this world. In fact, Ezekiel takes a step further that tradition of Indian poetry in which there is room enough for spiritual as well as for sensuous; a tradition to which belongs such great Indian poets as Bhartrihari, Jaydeva, and even Tagore. Bhartrihari, a Sanskrit poet has written वैराग्यशतकम्, नीतिशतकम्, and श्रृंगारशतकम् and as the very titles of the works suggest they are on subjects which would appear to be mutually exclusive and contrasting to someone who is not aware about the Indian tradition. Here we have a poet who is writing about ethics, asceticism, and sensuality. He is in fact a perfect example of that Indian tradition which achieved marvelous heights in spirituality and was far from looking upon man’s sensual behaviour with a sneering contempt. Patel writes rather disapprovingly when he comments on Ezekiel’s religiosity that “The
daily business of living, day to day mundane irritations, large and small angers, large and small enjoyments, moral quibbles and philosophy of the hour share equal space with God.” (CP xvii) However one would not feel thus exasperated when one contemplates that our great rishis and sages were man of the world, humble householders who performed all their domestic duties and yet had achieved spiritual height. If we find in Ezekiel poems about God juxtaposed by the poems of day-to-day life, it is because Ezekiel, like our ancient rishis, has understood the multiplicity of existence and seen unity in them. For him, as for our ancient thinkers, nothing stands apart from God.

Man’s sensual behaviour has never been a taboo in Indian intellectual and literary life. In fact, eroticism has long been a part of Indian literary and cultural-intellectual tradition. *Encyclopaedia of Indian Literature* traces a long tradition of eroticism in ancient Indian literature and culture:

The learning of kamashastra was taken up as seriously as that of dharmastra and arthashastra and was incorporated into the educational curriculum in ancient India… The knowledge of the sixty-four accomplishments mentioned by Vatsyayana was considered as a qualification of a learned man…. In Sanskrit literature patronized by the ruling classes, eroticism had become so much the fashion and convention that the Jainaacharyas and monastic scholars enjoyed and wrote erotic poetry without the least sense of transgression or incongruity, without deviating from a puritanical doctrine and ascetic life on any other way.” (1202-05)

For Ezekiel, as for any Indian, everything is a manifestation of *Leela* of the God—a kind of play in which He indulges. All things animate and inanimate are manifestations of the one and infinite reality. He is not something to be forgotten in the midst of the mundane. He is as much there in the mundane as He is there in the
sacred. So no wonder if, as Patel observes, “He remains a persistent presence, coming up every few pages later, just as we and the poet had all but forgotten Him” (CP xvii). The reader may have forgotten Him but not the poet.

However Patel is right about the religion of Ezekiel’s God that He is not an invariably Jewish God. Patel is also right when he says that Ezekiel’s God is a friendly one and may be addressed with reasonable familiarity. What is more striking in Ezekiel’s poetry is a strong tendency for spiritualism reaching up to mysticism which results from an inward light, peace, and humility. These characteristics of Ezekiel the man are reflected in his poetry so fully and so explicitly that it can be said that the poet’s life and poetry are so closely united that one could easily stand for the other. The poetry gives us a feel of the serenity and calm that results from the total and unquestioning submission to the Divine will; a submission which is not servile and which is not a result of helplessness but a submission out of love. Lucidity, quiet rhythm and a subdued tone so characteristic of Ezekiel’s poetry reflect this inner calm. It is in view of this that Ezekiel’s poetry never gives an impression of alienation. Ezekiel always retains his essential faith even when he is complaining to his master.

So there seems to be a harmony in the entire creative output of the poet. The several themes of his poetry look like the various beads of the same rosary strung together by the single thread. His poems concerning the day-to-day life are equally expressive of his personality as his Latter-Day Psalms. All things here are organically related to one another and form an impression of a complete whole. Unless Ezekiel’s poetry is understood in the light of this Indian spiritual tradition which is comprehensive, it will be difficult to explain his quest. In Form and Value in the Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel Anisur Rahman writes:
Without any conscious striving for a philosophical dimension or a religious pattern, Nissim Ezekiel exhibits a deeper religio-philosophical awareness of the world and the tortured self. He is neither a saint negating the sensual pleasure nor a Yogi wondering in the thick jungle to attain light, but a man of parts, a being of the world – participating and belonging. (27)

In fact, Ezekiel's poetry exhibits three chief concerns: the Woman, the God, and the City. The three aspects of his poetry reveal three facets of his personality i.e. the sensual, the spiritual, and the social. These three aspects of a man’s life are about the three purushartha of a man’s life, namely, Dharma, Artha, and Kaam. A harmonious blending of the three in the life of an individual leads to the attainment of the fourth purushartha i.e. Moksha.

A Time to Change depicts Ezekiel's central concerns very adequately. He is uneasy about the idea of flesh defiled with desire and a sense of sin weighs him down but he never, like Donne, wants to be purged of the evil, of the flesh. The world and the flesh do not repel Ezekiel. On the contrary Ezekiel reaffirms his faith in the flesh again and again. The body is not something from which he wants freedom, it is something through which he seeks salvation. In a letter to Vasant A Shahane, Ezekiel commented upon his position:

I am not a religious or even a moral person in any conventional sense. Yet, I've always felt myself to be religious and moral in some sense. The gap between these two statements is the existential sphere of my poetry. (261)

Ezekiel's spiritual quest is that of a person who constantly puts himself under scrutiny and watches every action of himself with the detachment of a Yogi.

One characteristic of Ezekiel's poetry is his analytical attitude. He believed in the genuineness of experience but at the same time he maintained a detachment from the experience. His poetic style reflects this quality. He is always detached, analytical
and intellectual. This is also true about his life. Ezekiel observes everything with the
detachment and comments upon it with a neutrality and ruthless objectiveness.
Ezekiel is a truly modern poet in the sense that he is aware about the western poetic
tradition and contemporary poetic scene and at the same time he is free from slavish
imitation. He knows what it means to be influenced by someone and what it means to
be a slavish imitator. In an interview with Frank Birbalsingh Ezekiel commented;
“Rilke and Eliot both influenced me, although, I soon understood the difference
between being influenced in the right and in the wrong sense. I did not want to write
like Rilke” (136).

He shows a calm confidence and rejects any labels that can be attached to him.
In a further discussion with Birbalsingh Ezekiel clarified: “I would prefer to claim
that nine times out of ten my being human is more important than anything else in the
whole world” (137-8). However, he knows that his roots are in India. As a poet, he
knows that he inherits a tradition that is Indian and more than three millennia old. He
says that the Sanskrit poets are his poetic ancestors. Dr. Jagdish Dave opines that
Ezekiel is a part of Indian tradition which may be rightly described as the Tagore
school, a school that does not consider indigenous literature inferior and does not
eulogize western literature and theories just because they are western. Like Tagore
they wanted a healthy relationship with the west.

Ezekiel's views on nature of poetry as evidenced in his article How a Poem is
Written highlight two remarkable features. He believes poetry to be intensely self-
revelatory and he believes in the power of inspiration. The two qualities bring him
closer to the western romantic poets who believed in the inspirational quality of
poetry and who believed in self-expression. However, Ezekiel is different from the
western romantic poets in the sense that while he believes that poetry is inspired he
does not believe it to be the Drunken Boat as described by Northrop Frye in relation to Shelley’s poetry. His poetry is self-revelatory but with a critical scrutiny of a detached mind. Jagdish Dave says that Ezekiel’s detachment is *Upnishadic* non-attachment. He takes the analogy of the two birds as described in *Swetaswater Upanishada*. The two birds are perched on the branch of the same tree: one of them is eating the fruits of the tree flying from one branch to another. The bird enjoys the fruits be it sweet, sour or bitter. The other bird sits calmly and immovably on the branch observing the flying and singing bird. The calm and collected bird watches the restless flights of the other bird. Dave observes:

One is the empirical self-distinct in each being. The other is eternal witness consciousness, ‘the Eye of the Eyes’, ever the same in all beings, observing without active involvement in the temporal flux of mind and matter which are alike objective and other to it. (163)

Shirish Chindhade also noticed the two voices in Ezekiel’s poetry, one of the observer and the other that of the performer. He observes that, “… as an observer and commentator the poet’s identity remains unaffected. That is why the tongue-in-cheek way of commentary is possible. This ironic stance is what singles out Ezekiel as a poet.” (34)

John Thieme in his *Introduction* to the collected poems of Nissim Ezekiel records:

[H]is poetic persona is both that of an observer who regards his social world and his own behaviour with a degree of amused detachment, and that of a complete insider. As has frequently been noted, the dominant tone of his poetry is ironic scepticism. It is this scepticism – and this point has been made less frequently – that makes it possible to see his poetic practice as a
metonym for the discourse of the new secular nation to which he returned in
the early 1950s. (xxi)

However, it is important to remember that this use of poetic persona is not just a
poetic device used by Ezekiel. It emanates from a deeply spiritual attitude to life
which makes him an observer and commentator as witness consciousness on the
frenzied and feverish struggles of the indulgent self.

The witness consciousness is present in Ezekiel's poetry and when it asserts,
the poet refers to himself as third person singular: “I know a man whose definition in
a word is chaos, but listened to his cry because he strove to be a finished man. I found
him haunted by a passion for the truth about himself, he had been long in abandoning
the urge to be loved and understood” (CP 75). It is this quality that gives his poetry a
unique quality of peace and tranquillity. Though he alludes to self-revelatory and
inspirational quality of his poetry, he never shows the agitated enthusiasm of romantic
poets of the western tradition. Ezekiel's poetry is, in this sense, typically Indian. The
inward gazing character of Indian civilization with its insistence on restraint and self-
effacement for spiritual development is present in Ezekiel's poetry. He has been able
to silence his ego and achieve a sense of restraint and composure. His poetry evinces a
quality of clear sighted reasoning and intellectual inquiry which is a result of his
detachment.

The poems where Ezekiel wears a poet persona and uses third person singular
have led many to believe that the two are separate. Geetha Ganapathy-Dore warns the
readers not to confuse the persona with the poet. She suggests:

But we would do well not to confuse the poet with his satirical self which is
an assumed theatrical role to expose the follies and vices of society and bring
contempt and derision upon flouted aesthetic and moral values. Nissin
Ezekiel is at time the indignant whistle blower, at times the cynical observer and at times the mouthpiece of simple common sense. (482)

However, Ezekiel is always a real authentic self even when he uses poet persona in the poem. The persona Geetha refers to is the witness consciousness. He is the same Ezekiel observing the frenzied activities of the indulgent self like the witness consciousness suggested in the *Upanishada*. Shaila Mahan considers the use of third person singular as a stylistic device used by Ezekiel to depersonalise the quest. She quotes from Case Study to suggest how Ezekiel mingles personalised quest with depersonalised quest by switching from first person singular to third person singular. Ezekiel writes:

> His marriage was the worst mistake of all.
> Although he loved his children when they came,
> He spoilt them too with just that extra doll,
> Or discipline which drove them to the wall.
> His wife and changing servants did the same. (*CP* 125)

In the words of Mahan; “Here the poet uses the depersonalized third person singular as his mask; while he uses the first person singular as his projected self. With this stylistic strategy, he is able to point out precisely his state of mind in clear poetic terms.” (97) However, while it is true that Ezekiel deliberately used third person singular in some of the poems which gave his poems a touch of objectivity, he also used it because it gave him a stance through which he could just be a witness without being involved in it.

However, it is the fruit eating bird which finds more presentation in Ezekiel's poetry. He has minutely and faithfully captured the joys, sorrows and aspirations of the fruit eating bird. Ezekiel's poetry is in this sense a catalogue of his own rendezvous with the pleasures of the world. The indulgent self must be faced with all
its powers. The sensuous self has to be seen in its nakedness. The other impulse is to transcend this sensuous self and attain selfless love. The desire to outgrow the selfish indulgent self by facing the failures in the face is the journey that one finds in the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel. Jagdish Dave compares Ezekiel's spiritual struggle and journey with that of St. Augustine and Mahatma Gandhi. Like both of them, Ezekiel constantly wants to improve. The desire for spiritual improvement is very strong in Ezekiel. And, like both of them, Ezekiel has the courage to accept the failures. The confessional tone in Ezekiel's poetry is reminiscent of confessional poetry of 1950s and 60s. However, in Ezekiel the confessional tone does not give a sense of gloom and desolation that one finds in the poetry of the confessional poets of the 1950s and 60s. Ezekiel's confessions are confessions of his own failures. In Egoist's Prayer Ezekiel writes:

The vices I've always had
I still have.

The virtues I've never had
I still do not have.

From this human way of life
Who can rescue man
If not this maker?

Do thy duty, Lord. (CP 212)

The marked qualities of Ezekiel's poetry are his courage, candour, love of truth and aspiration to improve. His life is a journey for improvement. It is, as Mahan puts it, 'a journey where poetry is the source through which he could discover himself. The developing body of his poems expresses his personal quest for a satisfactory way of living in the modern world' (193). Thus, insistence for truth and faith in poetry can be seen in Nissim Ezekiel's poetry right from the beginning.
Ezekiel never allows his ego to interfere with his poetry and his quest. He knows his limitations and that candid acceptance of his limitations makes him a poet of the common humanity. In *Transparently*, Ezekiel candidly declares:

All I want now
Is the recognition
Of dilemma
And the quickest means
Of resolving it
Within my limits. (CP: 150)

The resources that Ezekiel had with him to resolve his dilemma were those of a poet. It is through his poetry that Ezekiel tries to recognise the self. And the odds against him are very powerful. The modern urban life with its dehumanising power robs one of the life force and turns in to machine. In *Double Horror*, Ezekiel talks about the dehumanising effects of the city are enough to corrupt the self. It’s a double horror because the poet says at the end of the poem that corrupted by the city he infects the city with his corruption:

Corrupted by the world I must infect the world
With my corruption. This double horror holds me
Like a nightmare from which 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.
Between the world and me there is a frightful
Equipoise, as infected I corrupt the world. (CP08)
It is this conflict between the inner self and the outer self that Ezekiel writes about in his poetry. The inner self scrutinising the outer self is pained and the anguished cry of being hurt is a result of the confessional tone of his poetry. Ezekiel commented in an interview to Gentleman: “To start with, my own inspiration is and always was ‘my inner life’. And writing is, for me, a way of coping with the tension between my inner life and the outer life. . . . My poems are often introspective and therefore, express self-criticism and self-doubt” (Nissim Ezekiel's interview to Gentleman (July 1984); quoted by B. K. Das, “Nissim Ezekiel and the Making of the Indian-English Idiom” The Indian Journal of English Studies, Vol. XXVI (1987) p. 114.)

Ezekiel's quest begins from the very first poem *A Time to Change* where he says:

> The juice of life is in us still
> But when the mind determines everything
> The leap is never made, the music
> Never quite completed, redemption
> Never fully won (*CP* 03)

The hesitation of the mind which results in ‘incomplete absorption in the common scene’ (*CP* 3) results in frustration. The ‘faults concealed’ must be revealed in order to attain an equilibrium in life. The poet’s search for identity and a meaning and value in life leads him to realise the simple needs of a man. He lists the needs as ‘a bit of land, a woman and a child or two’ (*CP* 3) and the ability to practise a singing voice and a talking voice is ‘all the creed a man of God requires’(*CP* 3). A singing voice and a talking voice is again about the dual selves: one is the self-enjoying the pleasures of the world and living a full life and the talking voice is the witnessing self-watching the frenzied movements and restlessness of the singing voice and subjecting it to scrutiny. This self-scrutiny is what gives Ezekiel a self-knowledge that saves him
from pride and gives him humility to identify with the common humanity. This also makes him a relentless critic of himself. He is aware about his faults and knows:

He has to silence no one but himself
And walk occasionally on the alien land
To know the various lives and dreams of men
And show his deep affection for the world
With words emerging from a contrite heart (CP 4)

These lines reflect Ezekiel's compassion for the common humanity. This compassionate attitude is always reflected in the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel. It saves him from becoming bitter and biting. So even when he laughs at the oddities of behaviour in his Very Indian Poems in Indian English, his humour does not become satiric. This is the reason why we do not agree with those who accuse him of elitist attitude. Ezekiel is humble and because of his humility he shares the failures and weaknesses of the weak. His love and compassion for fellow humans is reflected in the following lines:

Within my peace
and poetry
the world of suffering
is not explained away,
though some of it
has its own validity
I want my hands
to learn how to heal
myself and others,
before I hear
my last song (CP 274)
The heart is contrite for the faults about which the poet is very much aware. He knows the limitations inherent in human beings and is aware that perfection is an ideal impossible to achieve but he should continue to strive nonetheless:

- The pure invention or the perfect poem,
- Precise communication of a thought,
- Love reciprocated to a quiver
- Flawless doctrines, certainty of God,
- These are merely dreams (CP5)

The poet is aware that he has to win redemption ‘in the private country of [his] mind’ (CP 5) ‘where the worser’ (CP 5) part presides. His poems of character portrayal such as The Truth about Dhanya, The Railway Clerk, Good Bye Party for Miss Pushpa T. S., How the English Lesson Ended, Ganga, etc., he appears smiling in a genial good natured way and never appears to be malicious. The only poems were his tone becomes satiric are those where he comes across sham and hypocrisy. He cannot stand hypocrisy. It is always subjected to satire as one finds in Guru where he ruthlessly attacks the Guru who is a conman.

Ezekiel subjects himself to minute scrutiny. He observes himself and is candidly confessional about his faults. The witness consciousness is forever observing the indulgent self. In What Frightens Me, Ezekiel writes about his self-scrutiny. He is aware about his faults and hence he says:

- Myself examined frightens me,
- It is no accident I am what I am
- I saw the image being formed,
- I saw it carnal in the arms of love (CP 106)

The witness consciousness is watching the fruit eating bird and it is aware of the weaknesses and limitations of the self. Hence, Ezekiel says it is frightening. He has
seen himself in the image of a sensual being. But he is not ready to stop observing himself. The realization of the faults is reassuring for him because it is due to his witness consciousness that he can be aware of his faults. He writes:

I have long watched myself
Remotely doing what I had to do,
At times ashamed but always
Rationalising all I do.
I have heard the endless silent dialogue
Between the self-protective self
And the self naked.
I have seen the mask
And the secret behind the mask. (CP 106)

The idea of self being watched from a distance is truly *Upanishadic*. The fruit eating bird and the witness bird are both present in Ezekiel. This is what makes him humane and compassionate to other fellow humans.

Ezekiel's spirituality is humane. He is a follower of what one may call humanist philosophy. Even God in Ezekiel is human God. His concept of God is very much Indian which is heavily coloured by Hindu view of God. Jagdish Dave calls his God Kierkegaardian and spotlights:

He is not the God of philosophy, the distant, third person singular. He is the God of faith of Kierkegaard’s notion with whom I-thou relationship is possible. Even more than that in Ezekiel the ‘thou’ of God is a matter of direct experience at times. . . . Ezekiel's God is the God of a mystic. (165)

As in devotional poetry in the tradition of saint poets, in Ezekiel God is very intimate and friendly. Gieve Patel writes, “Ezekiel addresses his God in a varying range of tones, from translucent praise, to supplication, to angry, baffled accusation”. (CP
xxiii) One can talk to Him in a friendly way as Ezekiel does in *The Egoist’s Prayers*.

In one of the prayers Ezekiel writes:

No, Lord,
not the fruit of action
is my motive.
But do you really mind
Half a bite of it?
It tastes so sweet
and I am so hungry. (*CP* 212)

Or again in *Prayer no. II*:

The vices I’ve always had
I still have
The virtues I’ve never had
I still do not have.

From this Human Way of Life
Who can recue Man
If not his maker?

Do thy duty, Lord. (*CP*: 212)

This is the intimate relationship with God that one finds in the bhakti tradition of saint poets. Ezekiel's God is kind, generous and compassionate and all encompassing. In *Latter-Day Psalms II* Ezekiel writes, “Thy blessing is upon / all the people of the earth”. (*CP* 154) Like a true mystic and in the tradition of Indian philosophical thought Ezekiel believes that spirituality does not negate the world. Spirituality does not make one averse to the beauty of the world. In *Transmutation* Ezekiel says:

. . . . apprehend
The carnival of things created: water, wind
And season’s breath. Demand
The dissolution of the word, the aspiration
And all the equipage of doubt and dissipation.

Do not, in your vanity, the tenuous thread
Of difference flaunt, but be
Asserted in the common dance. . . .

Sense-explosions, agitations
Of the mind and marrow, merge
Into a wider, warmer meaning.
Holiness reveals itself in everything. (CP 56)

This wholehearted acceptance of the world and faith in the here and now makes Ezekiel a pilgrim of his inner journey. The eternity is here and now in the variegated world which is to be enjoyed with a spirited plunge into it. This is the faith of someone who sees a divine oneness in everything. Like an Upanishadic rishi, Ezekiel sings of the oneness of all beings and total effacement of otherness. The self and the soul, the material and the spiritual, the mundane and the divine merge and become one. The world is a manifestation of the divine and not a hurdle to achieve oneness with the divine. Vasant Shahane finds a tension between the opposites in Ezekiel's poetry:

He is primarily a poet seeking, sometimes in vain, other times successfully, a balance between an almost existential involvement with life and an intellectual quest for commitment. His poetry emerges from a tension between opposites, an emotional plunge into life and a desire for detachment from it; a sensuous perception of the physical world and a spiritual abstraction out of that world; a craving for prayer and a temptation for irony; a passion for this world and a hankering after the world beyond.(254)
It is in this sense that Ezekiel's encounters with the women and sexuality are not burdened with a sense of sin. Ezekiel accepts them as real and normal. He does not consider them temptations. All his poems about sexuality and sexual encounters are frank and unapologetic. There is no sense of exploitation or no qualms of immorality attached to them. They exude a deep faith. Like Tagore, Ezekiel accepts sensual pleasure with a warm and loving embrace. The world is a precious gift to be enjoyed. In Ezekiel, one finds the use of the word prayer with several connotations. Two distinct undertones of Ezekiel's prayers are inner quietude and ability to enjoy the world around to the fullest. In *Prayer I*, Ezekiel writes:

> If I could pray, the gist of my
> Demanding would be simply thus:
> Quietude. The ordered mind,
> Erasure of the inner lie,
> And only love in every kiss (CP 54)

In *Prayer II*, Ezekiel writes:

> When eyes are open let me see
> Let words be intimate with brain,
> And let the road, the house or tree
> Not sprawl across my life in vain. (CP 55)

This is Ezekiel's earnest desire. He wants to enjoy the beauty and pleasures of the world. In the same poem Ezekiel writes: “Let me dream the dream of Man” and prays that “Let me not be isolated / Uninvolved in Man’s defeat” (CP 55). Jagdish Dave considers Nissim Ezekiel a continuity of the tradition of mystic poets represented by Tagore. He observes:

> Tagore and Ezekiel are alike mystics, and mystics of almost the same kind.
> Both refuse to renounce the world. They accept it in a warm embrace of love.
Both are determined to stay in humility with toiling humanity as one of them.

Both alike realize a merger of their identities in the totality of existence which, to them, is the manifestation of Divinity. (167)

However, the difference between the two is remarkable because both belonged to different times. Tagore is sheer exultation for the beauty of this world whereas Ezekiel is very subdued. Ezekiel with his modern urban sensibility is more analytical, intellectual and muted in his expression.

Ezekiel is an Indian poet and his Indianness is reflected in his spiritual musings and journey. He represents the comprehensive Indian philosophical tradition which looks at existence on three levels or three spheres. The one is *kshara* or the transient or the perishable or that which is finite and has an end. The other is *akshara* or that which is permanent or imperishable and has no end. The eternal witness consciousness, which observes everything with a non-attachment, is in it without being involved. The witness consciousness is like a lotus in water. It is in the water but yet water cannot touch it. The third is the supreme being or the *Purushottama*, the God who is infinite and timeless that transcends the temporal and who manifests in all things animate and inanimate.

Ezekiel's poetry is a testimony to the influence of Hindu view of life in a poet who is Jew. He was born and brought up in Jew family but the tolerant Hindu culture in which he lived exercised a tremendous influence on him. Ezekiel wrote to Vasant A Shahane “I also veered towards the Hindu view of life, which I consider mystically, religiously and metaphysically right, though I don't accept its ethics and social codes,…” (260) Ezekiel remarked in an interview with Frank Balbirsingh that he read the *Gita* and the *Upanishadas* at school. Ezekiel remembers that the father at the Roman Catholic school used to tell them that there was nothing in Hinduism. This led him to read the Hindu scriptures. The tolerant and catholic Hindu environment in
which Ezekiel lived and grew up has impacted Ezekiel in a significant way. In his poem *Speech and Silence* Ezekiel writes:

Man is alone and cannot tell  
The simplest thing to any friend.  
All speech is to himself, others  
Overhear and miss the meaning.  
And yet to speak is good, a man  
Is purified through speech alone,  
Asserting his identity (*CP* 53)

This poem reiterates the Hindu view of the value of speech or word which is or *Shabdbrahm* or the manifest form of ultimate Supreme Being. The iteration of ‘*aham*’ that is ‘I’ by the *Paramatma* that is Shiva is responded by the *Jiva* that is self as ‘*soham*’ that is ‘that is me’. This dvaita of Jiva and Shiva can be eliminated by *Sadhana* of the *Naad* which is manifested by the Word. Ezekiel is a poet and hence his medium is language that is words. He is well aware about the power of words. In the same poem Ezekiel writes:

If speech is truly speech, silence  
A whisper of eternity.  
Integral with the inner self  
Becomes the public spoken word,  
Emerging from a silence which  
Is not inarticulation  
But rather speech that needs no words  
Being obedience to the Word. (*CP* 54)

*Vedanta* deals with *Parama Brahman* or the ultimate reality. *Parama Brahman* which is without form and without name can be realized only through *ShabdaBrahman*. Ezekiel realizes the value of *Shabda* and believes that it is through speech that one
can achieve one’s identity. The word has the power to be one with the self through which one can achieve the true obedience to the Word which is the supreme being or the ultimate Being Consciousness. The primordial sound from which all Vak is believed to have flown is represented by the sacred syllable Aum. According to the *Mandukya Upanishad*, Aum consisting of three sounds a, u, and m represents three states of consciousness namely waking, sleeping and dreaming. Beyond these three is the fourth which is the eternal wakefulness or the ultimate Being Consciousness. The fourth state of consciousness can be achieved through the Sadhana of the three that is Aum. This is what Ezekiel refers to when he writes: ‘Being obedience to the Word’ (*CP* 54).

The very idea of speech as a path of self-realisation and the idea of submission to the Word to achieve oneness of purpose by reigning ‘the gallivanting mind and heart’ (*CP* 53) through silence which is ‘not inarticulation but speech that needs no words’ (*CP* 53) is reminiscent of *Upanishad* knowledge. The reference to ‘the flying fish and frog’ (*CP* 53) in the second line of the poem reverberates with the echoes of *Mandukya Upanishad* which talks about soul as a Manduk or frog which takes three leaps to reach the fourth state of being which is awareness of the eternal wakefulness or eternal Being Consciousness. The three leaps of the frog are the three states of consciousness namely waking, sleeping and dreaming represented by Aum. The idea that obedience to the Word can lead one to the spiritual experience of oneness with the ultimate Being Consciousness irrefutably makes this poem a tribute to and acceptance of the Upanishadic learning.

Thus, one finds in Ezekiel an Indian sensibility revealing itself in various forms. This sensibility is essentially Indian and neither Jewish nor atheist in the western sense of the term. If it is heavily coloured by Hindu view of life, it is
inevitable because the eternal flow of a national sensibility is inevitably shaped and influenced by the dominant culture. It is in this sense only that any writer or poet writing in any regional language of whatever ethnic origin or religious background is Indian. When one uses a term Indian for a writer or a poet, it is this Indianness that is referred to. Ezekiel is in this sense an Indian poet who belongs to Indian literary tradition and is an important link in the ever-flowing national literary tradition.

REFERENCES


