CHAPTER VI

Theme of Alienation
THEME OF ALIENATION

Ezekiel, along with Kamala Das, Ramanujan, R. Parthasarathy, P. Lal, and S.R. Mokashi is considered a neo-symbolist. While some of these writers were bi-lingual and tri-lingual, Ezekiel writes only in English. His poetry is simple, introspective, and analytical. He is highly disciplined and unpretentious. His skilful use of prosody, his restraint, conversational style, his mastery of irony, his purity of diction and perfect control over his emotions place him on the top of the modern Indo-Anglian poets. Ezekiel has contributed a creative, straight-forward, point to point, and more direct approach to Indo-Anglian poetry, which ensues from the conversational tone of his poems. Ezekiel’s poetry is both the instrument and the outcome of his attempt as a man to come to terms with himself. Referring to these characteristic features of Ezekiel’s poems, R. Parthasarathy says: “The imprint of a keen analytical mind trying to explore and communicate on a personal level feelings of loss and deprivation”.1 One can find in them a sense of alienation, and Ezekiel himself admits about the personal therapeutic purpose of his poems. Indeed, his later poems seem to be an attempt to overcome this sense of alienation he experiences.

Having been born in a Jewish family, he soon realized that he belonged to a micro-minority group in India, a minority that has its roots elsewhere. Besides, a poet like Ezekiel must be conscious of the threat the
Jewish community faced in the forties due to the Nazi culture in Germany. It is but natural that he should seek an identity in a city where he grew up. Thus, we see in Ezekiel’s career as a poet there is a movement, a growth, in other words, something is gained but something is also lost. In his first two volumes, Ezekiel’s poems deal with persons, places, memories, situations, ecstasies of the flesh, and the concept of the mind and heart.

In his first two volumes *A Time to Change* and *Sixty Poems*, Ezekiel is very simple in his technique. No references to classical and mythological figures is made. He handles the free verse from which evolves a rhythm that suits the emotional mood of the poems. He is able to touch his readers to the quick by his sincerity in describing things, but he examines the situations with an ironic detachment.

In “Poetry” one of the poems in *A Time to Change* Ezekiel makes it clear that poetry does not remain separate from life. It is:

Why
The how, the what, the flow
From which a poem comes. (“Poetry”, 12-14)

Poetry and the mind of man seem to have been of primary concern to Ezekiel during this early period. The haze of self-deception in our eyes, ‘desire labyrinthine’ - desire with object near and far has been an obsession with the poet. He states in these early poems, themes of failure, the difficulties of love, and necessary sex. As Bruce King feels,
“Ezekiel is like Auden’s Klanderer who has crossed the seas to a strangeland, seen and tasted temptation and now is faced by the problem of returning home when his mind has been corrupted by the things imagined”.2

In *A poem of Dedication*, one of his best poems in the second volume *Sixty Poems*, Ezekiel talks of the tradition of Hinduism and its mystic nature:

The image is created try to change
Not to seek release but resolution
Not to hanker for a wide, god-like range
Of thought, not the matodor’s dexterity
I do not want the Yogi’s concentration
I do not want the perfect charity
Of saints nor the tyrant’s endless power
I want a human balance, humanly
Acquired, fruitful in the common hour

(“A Poem of Dedication”, 25-33)

The poet fails to acquire this mental balance in either sea or in these silent long evenings when he tries to concentrate on the inward self. Finding no peace in prayer, sea, family life, and in meditation, the poet questions the predicament of the modern man in the third volume titled *The Third*.

No longer young but foolish still,
He wakes to hear his words unspoken
A sadness on his toughened will
And all except his faith unbroken. (“Portrait”, 1-4)
In the third and fourth volumes, the mature but disillusioned, Ezekiel is more direct with images of irony and frustration, Ezekiel’s tone is cynical. The irony and frustration of the poet is expressed very well in this collection of poems. Talking of the city in “A Morning Walk” he says:

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. (pp.15-12)

The city man (Ezekiel) standing at the cross roads (of life) and looking at this dirty city forgets for a minute his dreams of ‘being lost/upon a hill too high for him’. “Watching the dim lifeless city around him”, he wonders “if he is among the men of straw”. He becomes aware of the gross reality that his dream, cannot come true in such a place where, The city wakes, fame is cheap / And he belongs, an active fool. (pp. 41-42)

Nevertheless he returns to kindred clamour close at hand since his desire to escape it can only remain a dream. The fifth volume of poems, appropriately titled, *The Exact Name* invokes:

Intelligence give me
The Exact name of things:
Let my word be
The thing itself,
Newly created by my soul. (“The Exact Name”, 1-5)
In the fifth volume, defeated, checkmated, and forced to face the futility of life, Ezekiel wanders for sometime in a limbo and turns to prayer and poetry in search of consolation. Thus, the development especially from the third volume, *The Third* to *The Exact Name* is from a search for identification to resignation. This search for identification which may also be termed as “identity crisis” is what led to the feeling of self-exile and alienation reflected in his poetry. It is further pointed out that in Ezekiel as in Ramanujan and also Kamala Das, one can perceive three distinct modes of affirmation of one’s milieu of myth, symbol, and finally the quest for self which is a consequence of his sense of alienation. The corresponding weaknesses are obvious; affirmation can lead to complacency in regard to craft, myth can camouflage lack of emotion, and quest for self can slide into preoccupation with fantasies and in Ezekiel’s case erotic fantasies without affirmation of one’s milieu. Poetry thus becomes a ‘Cerebral game’ in which ironic contemplation of milieu masks the rejection of it. This is what happens in Ezekiel’s “Very Indian poems in Indian English”.

Since Ezekiel feels alienated from the milieu, he tries to mask it in irony. While these poems are noted rightly for their wit and humour arising from the syntactical oddities of ‘Indian English’ their ultimate significance lies probably in Ezekiel’s sense of not being able to merge with the milieu. Therefore he tries to poke fun at the system which does not accept him into its fold.
Similarly, myth is indispensable for rediscovery of roots and without roots no poetry can be made aesthetically pleasing – it is bound to become sterile. This is one reason why Ezekiel gropes for roots and it is only after his trip to London he realizes where his true home lies. This automatically leads us on to an affirmation of the environment which is a personal quest for significant personal emotion. A close study of Ezekiel's poetry shows that all three modes are incorporated in his work. As is evident in the poems, his moods vary from despair to resignation with an assumption of easy superiority breaking in occasionally.

In the process Ezekiel attempts not at mere decorative incorporation but at a subtle revelation of the implicit attitudes and the corresponding sensibility which is no less comic than that of the Indian poet himself trying to write in a language which is not his by birth. The comic speech oddities in a poem like "Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S." seem to reflect the poet's own whoring after English Words. This is an equally comic attempt since it hardly transcends in most cases the level of the hybrid. The Indo-English poems which distort formal English evoke a sensibility which becomes emblematic of the Indo-English poet's own predicament of 'going foreign'. The poet's speech that Miss Pushpa is 'departing for foreign/In two three days' holds good for both the speaker and the poet who, himself, in his choice of the English language to express his creativity, has indeed 'gone foreign'. The implicit defiant note in the
poem relies itself both on the levels of grammar and syntax on one side and the muted rejection of native roots on the other by the poet himself.

Ezekiel is one of the few Indian writers in English, who has sought to give full expression to the predicaments and failures of the middle class intellectual who is aware of the burdens of the past and yet longs to play some role in bringing about a change in the course of history in his own immediate political and social contexts. His poetry is inevitably the poetry of alienation, and Ezekiel is compelled to use English as his mother tongue – the only language he can use for creative expression. His poetry is thus essentially a product of the individual and social contradictions consequent upon decolonization. Its uniqueness lies in the manner it demonstrates the inseparable and indispensable nature of English language in the colonial heritage and as to how it can be successfully and effectively used to articulate the new experience. Ezekiel does so by resorting to self-mockery and self-irony and the articulation is handled ironically and ambiguously:

Do I belong, I wonder
to the common plain? A bitter thought
I know that I would rather
suffer somewhere else
than be at home
among the accepted styles

("A Small Summit", Collected Poems; 13-18)
Not knowing how to combat with this feeling, the poet wonders:

Should we take to meditation
transcendental, any others?
Should we take to Zen?
We cannot find our roots here
don't know where to go, Sir,
don't know what to do, Sir,
need a Guru, need a God.
All of us are sick, Sir. ("Family", *Collected Poems*, 7-14)

Being sick of the place it seems logical that the poet should flee from India – the Hindu scene.

Twenty-two: time to go abroad
First, the decision, then a friend,
To pay the fare.

("Background Casually", *Collected Poems*, 21-23)

Characteristically colonial, Ezekiel escapes to dear old London, the capital city of the colonial masters.

London, to his chagrin, is a great disappointment. He is an ‘alien’ and an ‘outsider’ there too. His attempt to feel at home is a miserable failure. He unsuccessfully tries to knit together in a miserable London basement poetry, philosophy, and poverty. Materially London oppresses him and psychologically the feeling that he is more an outsider there than in India is driven home to him.

I have not come
to Edinburgh
to remember
Bombay mangoes,
but I remember them.
Even as I look
at the monument
to Sir Walter Scott,
or stroll along
in the Hermitage of Briad
Perhaps it is not the mangoes
that my eyes and tongue long-for
but Bombay as the fruit
on which I’ve lived,
Winning and losing
my little life.

("Mangoes", Collected Poems, 1-16)

‘Dosing my little life’ seems a good pointer, because in spite of
being spurned (as he thinks) by the native Indians – he is unaware that his
ture home is India – but he is sure it is not England. Therefore,

I ask the prophet in me
to say where I must go next.
You will never go there, he replies,
because you don’t really want to.
You will only go
to another city.

("Prophet", Collected Poems, 1-6)

So, Ezekiel goes to London from Edinburgh – yet peace alludes
him. So the prophet offers to help.
Let me open your old wounds, he said,
Your suffering
may help you find the place
where you need to be.

("Prophet", Collected Poems, 11-14)

Ezekiel is afraid of the torture of alienation, of ‘bleeding to death,/ as I once nearly did’. But he must find ‘that invisible and intimate place’ to which he truly belongs. Thus comes to an end ‘another/trip abroad’. He is as persistent and poetic as the grass that grows between “Bombay’s pavement tiles’. It is essential to note the last lines which show that although physically in London, his mind is repeatedly brought back to India. Sub-consciously, and consciously, India is accepted as home. However, Ezekiel does not understand and is all confused:

I met a man once
who had wasted half his life
partly in exile from himself
partly in a prison of his own making.

("Hymns in Darkness", XIII, Collected Poems, 1-4)

The man is Ezekiel himself. He is energetic, active, to many – ‘all attentive’, often indifferent to his own needs, a tireless social human being frequently destined to know defeat, as so many of his poems testify. However, he seems to work his way upwards and out of it as a matter of credo. The little light in which the poet stands is made to sustain long passages of dimness, and can sometimes grow into a shining torch; but
there are moments when the universal darkness closes in upon the poet
totally looking insurmountably behind all efforts to comprehend its
hostility to man and the creation. This is Ezekiel’s feeling when he was
disillusioned with his experience in London. He realizes he is like the
worm which is ‘So monstrously incapable of being/Just itself, enduring
rain, moving on, /secure in dust’s ingrain vitality’ (“The Worm”,
*Collected Poems*, 8-10).

The future to Ezekiel always seems

The image
With its freight of dreams is always near,
Will Bethlehem or Moscow end my fear?
It all comes back to individual man
And what he chooses; always, somehow,
A failure, and knowing all he can
Accept the mob or worships snake and cow.

(“History”, *Collected Poems*, 8-15)

At this stage Ezekiel seems to have faced failure at every stage and
wishes to go back to India, the country of ‘snake and cow’ in the outsider’s
view. Alienation cannot be resolved by fleeing from one’s country. He
realizes that

One must be out of doors also
Within, break the barricades
Of pettiness and pride, overcome
The schizophrenic agonies
And dive into the present tense,
Making for the friendly land

... ... ...

with corners

In the mind for quiet sunbathing,

("Something to pursue", Collected Poems, Part I, 1-19)

'A hundred nightmares press upon his soul' and they seem to ask him "Are you self possessed?/Self-propelled upon a single track?" The experience of alienation brings about a certain solitude and calm to the poet's temperament. He realizes the truth that before one expects solitude and solace from the outside milieu one will have to 'drink at first the waters of your own soul' ("Something to pursue", Part II, 25-26) and 'remember that the eagle/when he soars is always alone' (pp.40-42). It is these kinds of experiences that provide 'a pattern for our lives/Illustrate the paradoxes of the real' to which one is exposed.

It is surprising that throughout his poems this interaction with the world and the corresponding knowledge that man is in a sense in exile forever from the outside world -- is evident. Alienation here assumes the character of an almost cosmic dimension, marking the very texture of existence. In yet another poem, 'Commitment' voices forth his feelings:

Truly I am betrayed, consorting with

The world contracts my love, vast organized

Futilities suck the marrow from my bones

And put a fever there for cash and fame.

("Commitment", Collected Poems, 1-4)
Hence, his longing, 'Truly, I wish to be a man. Alone, or in the crowd this is my only guide ("Commitment", Collected Poems, 12-13) which is contradicted later – when he admits that he feels rejuvenated by interaction with the world: 'Once I was a child/ and in the mornings woke to wind and sun. With upturned face receiving kisses from/ The constant newness of the world' ("The Child", Collected Poems, 1-4).

Ezekiel slowly comes to understand that it is not the surroundings but himself that he should count upon and cultivate to face the world alone. Quite understandably, the poet therefore performs the journey back to his original alternation because 'Home is where we have to earn our grace' ("Enterprise", Collected Poems, 30). The poet's initial alienation is overcome by a conscious acceptance of the overwhelming Hindu and Muslim milieu.

This is the place where I was born. I know it
Well. It is home,
("After Reading a Prediction", Collected Poems, 13-15)

The poet fatalistically accepts the 'home' where he was born. He has recognized it and come to accept it at last. Although it is a kind of hell (because initially he felt alienated and as an escape left for London) he prefers it and regards it more tolerable than the feeling of alienation in London. Life in India was more tolerable than the torture of dying or being
dead. We must note that he neither celebrates nor welcomes the ‘home­
coming’. He accepts it in comparison to life abroad.

The Indian landscape sears my eyes
I have become a part of it
To be observed by foreigners.
They say that I am singular
Their letters overstate the case.
I have made my commitments now.
This is one: to stay where I am,
As others choose to give themselves
In some remote and backward place.
My backward place is where I am.

(“Backward Casually”, Collected Poems, 16-25)

‘A backward place’ – this is how foreigners regard India and the poet is aware of this. It should be noted that he prefers this ‘backward place’ which ‘sears’ his eyes to a life of exile abroad. The word ‘foreigners’, refers not only to foreigners but also to ‘Hindus, Muslims and Roman Catholics’ who had regarded him as a ‘mugging’ alien ‘Jew’. This is still the stage where Ezekiel does not yet feel one with India. Since the West is found to be equally bad, he feels cornered to prefer India as a second alternative. The contempt for India and Indians and the related irony is evident. Also evident is his condescending attitude towards the ‘backward place’ which he prefers to the sophisticated West.

Man cannot exist alone in a vacuum, that is, without love, a sense of belonging, and identity. Ezekiel is gradually forced to accept his place and
relevance in the Indian milieu. He overcomes his sense of alienation through a fatalistic and conscious acceptance of the Hindu environment which is evident in poems like “In India” and “Night of the Scorpion”. This is the first strategy adopted by Ezekiel to cope with the feeling of alienation.

If “exile” is a dynamic state for most individuals changing according to time, place, and circumstances, its literary manifestations are likely to vary widely. For the literary scholar an issue of great interest is how this change affects the writer’s imagination and language. The man-alone-in-a-hostile world attitude, with its sense of opposition, cynicism, and the ironies of life, has with it an openness, especially noticeable in the middle portions of the poems. As a result, the narrative becomes an experience in itself, instead of just an example in an argument.

‘Subjective protest poetry’ as Bruce King calls it, is an open kind of poetry. It is also called associational poetry, with its surprising attitudes, prominence of such topics as guilt, sexuality, ambition, memories of past rebellions, conflicts, shames, childhood, and love affairs, and the assertion of an articulate but fractured self. It was part of the confessional mode that started in America during the early fifties and which was practised internationally during the sixties. This kind of a confessional element in modern Indian poetry is evident in Ezekiel and also in Kamala Das. He often makes use of allusions to his life and a desire for personal change.
He is also concerned with consistency and a strong will for self-improvement. It is Ezekiel, who, in *The Unfinished Man*, first shows how a unified vision could be put together in which diverse lyrics are linked by theme, implied narrative, imagery, and recurring but developing concerns. This is an instance of an Indo-English poet seeking reconciliation with a tradition from which he feels alienated and of which he is rationally skeptical.

However, Nissim Ezekiel's chief importance is not as a promoter of poetry, rather, it is in his will to be a poet and use the medium of poetry to express his personal quest for a satisfactory way of living in the modern world and to cope with the sense of alienation and express it as a resolution of his conflict. Ezekiel also gets credit for having made Indo-English verse central to his life – whereas previously it was just a hobby, something done in spare moments. Such modern characteristics as irony, heightened self-consciousness, strong intellectual purpose (in contrast to philosophising in verse), a multiplicity of tones, the artistic distancing of emotion through a persona were among his contributions to Indian poetry. The voice expressed in the various themes whether it is *The Unfinished Man*, *The Exact Name*, or *The Latter Day Psalms* has a distinct personality of its own. Life is seen as a quest for wholeness, for intellectual and spiritual satisfaction, for maturity – a quest essentially concerned with how to live happily, calmly, ethically as an integrated being. Thus, the need to
overcome the sense of alienation and to create an integration among various aspects of his character are Ezekiel’s early and continuing themes.

K. Raghavendra Rao regards the theme of alienation as a kind of game played by Ezekiel. The game in which the poet finds himself drawn to is 'integral to modern, urban Indian life'. The urbanized Indian does feel alienated when thrown into the rural milieu. In cities the differences that exist in relation to caste and class are ironed out while in villages they are the hallmarks of public behaviour and treatment of an individual. Ezekiel, being an urbanized Indian, born and brought up in a cosmopolitan city like Bombay shares, to some extent, with other Indian writers, this kind of alienation, which the others may not have to face is an ethnic, communal alienation. This is the alienation that comes from the vast difference that exists between the rural Hindu masses and the articulate urbanized middle class minority in terms of cultural patterns, life-style, belief-system, and material existence.

In fact, this kind of alienation is a more accepted condition because there is no expectation and consequent disappointment. Thus, it is not sharply or agonizingly seen as alienation. Paradoxically K.R. Rao calls it a 'non-alienated alienation, characterized by a rooted rootlessness'. Ezekiel stands a perfect example to this kind of alienation. Being a Jew and having been raised as a secular rationalist by his 'scientist father' and 'teacher mother' he remains an outsider to Hindu-Muslim culture. It is his very
outsiderness, his marginality which makes him a representative voice of the urbanized, western-educated Indian. He is an Indian but different from the normal stream of the natives. His peculiarity is rooted in the fact that he is rootless.

Ezekiel’s poetry puts forward the point that it is possible to write about oneself without being self-consciously Indian. It also shows that Indian poetry can express the experiences of the educated and urbanized people. It need not always be obsessed with mythology and nationalist slogans. Ezekiel can be hailed as the pioneer of post-colonial poetry which reflects the lives and identities of people – that a number of educated Indians knew or sought. Yet, no matter how distinctively a poet may observe his environment, there is a space between himself and how he perceives others. In Ezekiel’s earlier poems India is out there, an environment of which he is aware as a setting and a source of symbols. Ezekiel always appears to be on the outside, watching, observing, commenting, impersonating rather than someone directly engaged in the experience. Bruce King says that this is a matter of technique and partly it reflects his tendency to intellectualize order and judge experience – whether social, moral, or sexual. But it might be explained in terms of Ezekiel’s formative years as a rationalist Jew in a Hindu-Muslim society. Thus, to Ezekiel, a typical Bombaywalla, alienation is also an
intellectualised experience, relating to an objective perception of the life of
the masses in the rural hinterland and the life in the city.

Ezekiel tries to overcome the sense of alienation by trying to adapt
himself to the Indian environment – just the way Indians have tried to
overcome their alienation from the Britishers, by adopting their life style
and customs. To many middle-class Indian intellectuals, alienation is
probably an objective perception rather than a first hand subjective
experience – and may be Ezekiel is trying to be so when he says in the
poem *In India*:

The wives of India sit apart
They do not drink,
They do not talk,
of course, they do not kiss.
The men are quite at home
among the foreign styles …
‘What fun the flirting is’,

("In India", *Collected Poems*, Part III, 6-12)

Ezekiel says as though it is not in the nature of the Indians to flirt.
The irony is, it is highlighted as something discovered in the foreigners –
and which is liked by the natives and borrowed from the British. The
educated Indian women do not lag behind. The working woman considers
herself emancipated if she is escorted by a Britisher.
This, she said to herself
As she sat at table
With the English Boss,

("In India", Collected Poems, Part IV, 1-3)

Ezekiel, here, is trying to make two points. Firstly, the culture the Indians try to ape is alien to them. At the initial level he is ironical about it. Secondly, the efforts the Indians make to come out of a sense of alienation by adopting alien customs. This they feel is one way of getting accepted into the foreign fold. The sense of alienation is something rooted in the sub-conscious of the urban alienated minority and therefore when they talk of alienation they are playing an intellectual game rather than facing a genuine life situation. The depiction of Indians’ enjoyment of the foreign styles, their contempt for the unresponsive ‘wooden’ wives, and the mention of the Indian girl who is a secretary to the English Boss – are Ezekiel’s attempt at mocking the Indians from whom he feels alienated. In comparison with the English boss he feels a closer identity with the Indians. The poet cannot leave Bombay – India (his trip abroad being a disaster), he is compelled to find a lesser degree of solace in India. He accepts it as fatality, but a fatality which can be tolerated and transcended subjectively through relationships with others – a wife, a friend, lover or even the railway clerk, or the Muslim girl who comes to take English lessons:
In the squalid, crude
city of my birth and rebirth
You were a new way
of laughing at the truth
I want you back
with the rough happiness you lightly wear,

("Poems of Separation", Collected Poems, 32-37)

The urban alienation, however, does not relate to either rural reality
or rural sympathy. The poem “Rural Suite” shows how Ezekiel is out of
joint with the rural milieu. The village youth who guides him around is
described as one who

merged into the landscape
as we could never be,
his bare skin, except
for the usual cloth
...
...
...
It was like walking
With an animal
Only his smile
made him human

("Rural Suite", Collected Poems, 8-16)

It is surprising to note that in spite of his compassion for the
innocence and naïveté of the villagers – there is more of contempt for their
ignorance – and their ‘gullibility’ in being duped by the ‘Bhikshuks’
(religious mendicants):
Because of the superstition
Rampant in these villages
They’re royally treated …

... ... ...

and carry away huge quantities of rice
Chillies, fruits 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.

(“Rural Suite”, Collected Poems, 27-38)

Despite his brave efforts to relate his poetry to non-urban life, Ezekiel remains an outsider – alienated. It is evident that his heart is not with the villagers of the rural milieu as is the case with Wordsworth – although in a theoretical way he feels he should sympathise with their lot. The capacity to genuinely feel for them or relate to them is lost in Ezekiel and this could be one of the consequences of the initial alienation from the Hindu masses and his urbanized up-bringing. It is very ironical that Ezekiel who is less alienated from this rural milieu since he has no relationship personally to it should touch on theme of this alienation whereas those poets like Ramanujan, Parthasarathy, etc., whose lives and destinies make sense only in terms of this alienation, have turned away from its reality and horror with something of intellectual and spiritual cowardice.
Ezekiel, who is considered to be more serious and substantial a poet than Ramanujan or Parthasarathy, resolves the conflict of alienation by resorting to their poetic strategy of reverse romanticism, extreme, subjectivism, retreat into the narrowest core of one's self and functioning in terms of self-irony, self-pity and self-righteousness. A study of his love poems shows that they grossly lack in genuine affection. They are 'dry' and 'self-trapped'.

We were not made for love alone, my love
Although our flesh and bones would have it so.
A thousand small intricacies of brain
Hold my blood-streams captive, which will not flow
Freely to serve the ends of love,

("And God Revealed", Collected Poems, 15-19)

His treatment and approach to women almost borders on male chauvinism and it is surprising that there is no respect for 'woman' as such. She is merely a plaything and a passive mirror to his male ego.

Lady, don't nag.
If you want that expensive lipstick
Buy it, for God's sake -- not mine --
I mean, really, why should I approve of it?
And that goes for dresses, hats, shoes,

("To a Certain Lady IV, 1-5)

... ... ...

So long as they're not on the instalment plan
I'm not trying to be funny, dear.
O.K. I don't love you. ("To a Certain Lady IV, 7-9)
Yet he is not altogether heartless. Having said something hurting—he tries to diffuse the seriousness of the situation.

Of course I didn’t mean it,
Sometimes I like to be alone, that’s all.
But I am interested.
I shout at you
Because I love you, didn’t you know?

("To a Certain Lady", *Collected Poems IV*, 12-16)

He expects these words to blot out the venom of his hurtful comment. He renews efforts to reach out, connect. The following lines seem a perfect illustration of reverse romanticism and extreme subjectivism.

Destroying or creating, moving on or standing still,
Always we must be lovers,
Man and wife at work upon the hard
Mass of material which is the world.
Related all the time to another and life,
nor merely keeping house and paying bills
And being worried when the kids are ill.
...
...
...
And let us die, love, as though we chose to, for a reason.

("To a Certain Lady", *Collected Poems*, Part V, 8-14)

This appears to be a fateful acceptance of togetherness lacking romance, and passion. Occasionally, there is a tinge of sincerity and he gives into the force of true love:
Is this the way to happiness?
Prolonging kisses till the world
Of thought and deed is dim?
Your loveliness makes all things hard
To bear that are not beautiful,
...
...
This laughing love of ours alone
Is wise and will remain,

("Question", *Collected Poems*, 1-9)

It is strange, however, that even in moments of love, Ezekiel is constantly shadowed by a feeling of alienation and separateness.

Somewhere among my dreams
The essential you is lost
Playing hide and seek between our kisses.
A quite essential difference lies
Between the soils that hold our roots.
Our separate landscapes spring to flowers
Clothed in a kinless rain.
The silent moments of our love
Post questions to
The religions far beyond our eyes;
Strangeness of a strange novel!
Beauty of a distant world!

("Dualism", *Collected Poems*, 1-12)

This probably can be traced to disillusionment in love for he says in

"Report":

158
Possession is not, as once
I thought it was, an act
Of love, it is only
A substitute in dream and fact
For the ignorant and lonely.
Within the arc, as now
I realize, of my
Experience, there is clearly
emphasis on the inner lie
For which one pays so dearly
And those who love are not,
As people think, happy
Because they love, but nearly
Sad because the sea
of Passion is nothing precisely.


The "Language of Lovers" is another poem where there is irony and
contempt too for the lover.

Poetry, some foolish critic said,
Is the natural language of lovers —
Looking at her destroyed even my prose.

("The Language of Lovers", Collected Poems, 1-3)

Sex becomes a self-renewing ritual rather than a bliss of mutual
feelings.

Great woman beast of sex you are.
I see you now as myth and dream
completed, more than what you seem

("Love Poem", Collected Poems, 5-8)
Ezekiel sounds as though he is incapable of romantic love and therefore says: I feel/I am/not in pursuit/ of anything/ except/ animal faith/ with the mysteries/ of love/ dissolved in it.

("Tone Poem", Collected Poems, 25-33)

An obvious sympathetic attachment to a woman is expressed in morbid form as in these lines

The boulders will be hard
and the water cold, the stars
distant, and no doctrine proved.
Better hold to the sea wall --
I don't want to hear you scream.

("A Warning", Collected Poems, 9-13)

Ezekiel's poetry apparently reeks of egoism — a strong sense of self. However, a closer study and understanding show that it is only a façade. The air of self-confidence and self-sufficiency are modes which Ezekiel adopts to overcome his sense of alienation, insecurities, and uncertainties. It is a strategy he adopts to cover up his fear of rejection. Ezekiel harassed by uncertainties and 'overpowered by incomprehensible immensities' is a man penned into terrifying loneliness, he writes in "Confession".

And what is in this loneliness?
Perfection. A fantasy
Of lucid being, relation
To a rational crowd, traffic
Of the heart on images,
Miracles of love that run to rule
And at the end, desolation,

("Confession", Collected Poems, 9-15)

Nothing seems to have changed in his poems written between 1965-74. In
"Happening" he writes:

I close the door and sit alone
in Kinship with the world
I am near everybody
being near myself alone.

("Happening", Collected Poems, 40-43)

Time does not bring about any change. In Hymns in Darkness he continues
to lament

'I met a man once
who had wasted half his life,
partly in exile from himself,
partly in a prison of his own making.

("Hymns in Darkness", Collected Poems, Part XIII, 1-4)

In the existential arena of the world man is essentially a loner, often pitted
against unknown adversaries. He has to face new challenges, drawing
upon his own inner reserves of strength. In the perception of alienation
Ezekiel withdraws into himself – trying to muster up enough energy and
resilience to choose his course of action – to cope with the feeling of
alienation. ‘Sometimes I cry for help/but mostly keep my own counsel!’ ....
I cannot leave the island/ I was born here and belong. ("Island", *Collected Poems, 19-20*). He makes an attempt to gain strength.

Why should I be reconciled
...
...
If nothing else, I'll keep my nerve,
refuse the company of priests,
professors, commentators, moralists,
be my own guest in my own
one-man lunatic asylum,

("A Small Summit", *Collected Poems, 34 – 40*)

These lines express Ezekiel’s acute sense of isolation which is not merely physical but psychological too.

The ‘one-man lunatic asylum’ shows his deep sense of isolation from people who are insensitive to others’ finer sentiments, needs, and responses. He longs to look upon the world as one big home but he cannot be certain because of the diverse temperaments of people. In the over-crowded cities or slums, a single room is the only thing he can call his own – the true home of his affections. He is disillusioned and the abstract ideal of universal brotherhood fails to impress him. He feels that such love can exist only hypothetically. How can one love mankind and consider it his own, without getting the love of his own family and neighbours? Secondly, his attempt at finding love and a sense of belonging abroad, where his identity is not known had been a thorough failure. His lamentation is truly touching:
Fugitive am I far from home
A vagabond and every part of me is withered.
The season comes and brings forth their fruit
But I am bare beside the abounding sea
Rivers feed my roots yet I do not prosper
... ... ...
Give me vision and I shall be clean
... ... ...
And let my leaf be green with love
And let me live.

(“Lamentation”, Collected Poems, 4 – 18)

There is an incessant desire in Ezekiel to love and to be loved, to belong, yet the poet does not seem to succeed in this endeavour:

I have stood in the empty room
And gazed at crowds in the street,
Longing to be absorbed –
No moral law can fill the void
Deaf and blind to all is appetite
and ‘deprivation is desolation’

(“Declaration”, Collected Poems, 15 – 20)

However, Ezekiel does not stop trying and continues to attempt at fighting the feeling of alienation. In line with his limitations and capacities, he tries to set modest goals without expecting too much or finding refuge in escapist aesthetics. As he expresses in “A Comment”, to be reborn is to take the next step that has to be taken whether it is joy or sadness. One must do it without fuss and with the courage to accept the consequences of
his actions. By the late 1950s Ezekiel's verse reveals his tryst with the experience of marriage. His moral intelligence seems confused, while he is critical of his self-deceptions and lack of control over emotions. Yet he hopes that love in marriage would bring the unity of self that he wants. Pity, marriage too proves a disillusion. In "Division" he looks at his marriage:

> With cold, determined intellect  
> I watched the heart at play,  
> And heard it sing of blessedness  
> Upon a nuptial day  
> I warned it of a changing time  
> It would not sing that way.  

("Division", Collected Poems, 1-6)

The problems and disappointments of marriage, more so at not being able to strike a cohesive sense of belonging, becomes a major theme and the temptations of new loves move his poetry towards the confessional. At times as expressed in his "Mid-monsoon Madness" there is a strong desire to 'smash it up and start again'. However, he is wise enough to know that running away would probably change nothing, 'the future stuff of dreams/repeating what has always been' ("Mid Monsoon Madness", Collected Poems, 7-8). He looks around and sees the city and its 'million purgatorial lanes'. He asks himself whether he is among 'the men of straw' who delude themselves that they are free when they are not and his will too is as inconstant as the 'morning dew'. Quite in contrast to his
sense of discontentment he dreams of the redeeming possibilities of love taken up by “Commitment” where he talks of men:

Who wanted only quiet lives
And failed to count the growing cost
Of cushy jobs or unloved wives.

(“Commitment”, Collected Poems, 14 – 16)

Ezekiel finds means of transcending alienation at the level of personal relations and their implicit emotions. As he mentions in “Motives” these are sexual, aesthetic, and friendly – in that order. It is friendship that he longs for in a partner so that it absorbs the other two motives.

Ezekiel is struck by the bitter truth – of the paradisal complacency of lovers who think they will never be separated, and who in truth, fall from grace with each other. He asks for understanding, a sense of oneness and merging of personalities in harmonious love but what he gets is monotony and separateness as the marriage wears on. The poet feels more and more alienated from his partner. He concludes that marriage is hell and a ‘man is damned in that domestic game’, because, ‘To love her was impossible’ yet ‘to hope and look for ultimate harmony and oneness is not abandoned’. In the first stanza of ‘The Railway Clerk’ Ezekiel tries to show what degradation marriage sinks to. The relationship that exists between a husband and wife has only money as the connecting link. The
wife constantly pesters the husband for money and the poet quite disgusted, 
sighs - 'I wish I was bird', ("The Railway Clerk", Collected Poems, 13).

But Ezekiel does not abandon the effort to search and hope for 
ultimate oneness with a partner. But his dreams remain unfulfilled and 
sometimes he is forced to conclude:

I cannot even say I care or do not care, 
Perhaps it is a kind of despair
("On Bellasis Road", Collected Poems, 31-32)

It is this very despair that drives him against himself towards God:

Come, religion, comfort me 
You lifeless moralists prescribe your laws, 
And make me see 
My secret flaws.
("Song of Desolation", 9-12, Collected Poems, 103)

Redemption and rebirth of the spirit, concern with spiritual wholeness are 
what Ezekiel hankers after in order to cope with his sense of alienation, his 
feeling of exile and he does it with a peculiar kind of religious retreat.

From the long dark tunnel 
Of that afternoon, crouching, humped, 
Waiting for the promised land, 
I peeped out like a startled animal 
and saw a friend flapping his angelic wings 
I welcomed him. ("Two Images" 1-6, Collected poems, 143)

The friend is of course 'God'. God who initially turned up in early poetry 
as a personally constructed necessity becomes in his later poems, Latter-
Day Psalms, an all-engulfing and all-pervading presence. When the poet has to cross the hurdles set by code ethics or grapple with a fossilized tradition the question of the individual pitted against an establishment assumes a very sharp and strident note. Ezekiel’s poetry discloses a constant conflict between an individual’s yearning for spiritual growth and the constraints that crop up because of the institutionalized religion, his quest for deeper fulfillments, and the rigid framework of accepted and organized opinion. Therefore, we recognize the presence of such ‘schism’ and ‘tension’ in his poetry as he confesses in his own statement:

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 (9).

In his first volume of poetry, A Time to Change, (London: Fortune Press, 1952) the title poem is a moral allegory using the journey and quest motif. Bruce King\(^\text{10}\) discusses this aspect of Ezekiel’s poetry at length in his book Modern Indian Poetry in English. He says that there are echoes of Old Testament reminiscent of the Book of Psalms or the prophets in A Time to Change, Ezekiel in London could be personifying the Jews in Babylon corrupted by unlawful desires, strange gods, and deities defined by foreign practices.

We who leave the house in April, Lord,
How shall we return?
Debtors …
Corrupted by the things imagined
Through the winter nights, along,

… …

… When the mind determines everything
The leap is never made, ….

… …

And anywhere, in London or Rome,
The amputated gestures, eyes turned away,
Incomplete absorption in the common scene,

… …

Marking time on unknown ground
with faults concealed.

("A Time to Change" (To my Mother) 1-20, Collected Poems, 3)

Thus, life is incomplete and impossible without interaction with others.
One cannot exist in 'exile'. Man has to patiently build a life with a woman
and consequent responsibilities of children. He has to accommodate
himself to their changing needs and moods and this is the 'creed man of
god requires'. Ancestors, parents, and friends have their own contribution
to make to the building of his life. He has to face hostility and walk
occasionally on alien land to know the various lives and dreams of men
and show his deep affection for the world. 'Precise communication of a
thought,/ Love reciprocated to quiver,/ Flawless doctrines, certainty of
God,' – these are not merely dreams but the most important necessities of a
wholesome life. This brings us to the religious dimension of alienation –
an important aspect of existential alienation. Every man 'subsidised by
dreams alone' makes endless efforts like a stubborn workman to feel one
with the world. In the process he 'breaks the stone/loosens/soil, allows, the
seed to die in it, waits/patiently for grapes or figs and even/ Finds on a
lucky day, a metaphor/Leaping from the sod' (Collected Poems, 73-77,
p.5). This is every man's endeavour. To achieve this when everything in
life seems to fail and works against him he turns to God and this is what
Ezekiel does. The tremendous need to overcome the sense of alienation
and create integration among the various aspects of his character drew
Ezekiel to God.

Ezekiel is most conventional in his conception of God. He speaks to
God casually and informally like a friend and often his expression is
inflicted with banter and irony. In the Poster Poems entitled "The Egoist's
Prayers" he does not conceive of God in terms of His Olympian aloofness,
or as an awesome supernatural reality. There is in Ezekiel, as Bruce King
comments, a Blakean strain of humanizing God. One may think that it is
an attempt at over-coming his sense of alienation. Constancy which is
difficult to find in life is sought by Ezekiel and he tries to find it in God as
a friend because 'unloved, I cannot stay alive' ("Subconscious", 13,
Collected Poems, p.271). Moreover he feels 'driven to the wall/by age and
circumstance: / It is 'holiness' that matters. Tired of living in the old
dimension he says: I have begun to imagine/ a different way/in which
things become holy/ as they remain the same. ("A Different Way", 14-16

169
In his dialogue with God, the poet ruminates about life and brings up in striking and unusual images, feelings that others repress or are reluctant to display. He tries to draw strength from God trying to explore and communicate on a personal level feelings of loss and deprivation.

Redeemed with prayer
The aspiration
Found again
I start again
With secret faults concealed no more.

(“A Time to Change”, 94-98, Collected Poems, p.5)

Thus God remains a persistent presence, coming up every few pages later, just as the readers and the poet had all but forgotten Him. Who is Ezekiel’s God? Is he a Jewish God? Not invariably though Judaic presence is strong in the tone of lament in many of the poems and also in the Latter-Day Psalms. Ezekiel’s God has a much more common, unpedigreed denomination to Him in His presence as a kill-all, cure-all pop God, a metropolitan Bombay God, an Urban contemporary without hang-ups about origin. Ezekiel addresses him with familiarity as though he talks to a close pal.

Kick me around
a bit more, O Lord,
I see at last
There’s no other way
for me to learn
Your simplest truths.

(“The Egoist’s Prayers”, 1-6, Collected Poems, p.212)

The pal, God, is someone in whom he bestows tremendous faith:

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 His Maker?
Do thy duty, Lord.

(“The Egoist’s Prayers”, 7-14, Collected Poems, p.212)

The last sentence takes the formality away from the relationship.

In overcoming this sense of alienation Ezekiel has come very close to God. Hence, he takes the liberty to ask of God:

Strike a bargain with me, Lord.
I’m not a man of ample means.
Confiscate my passport, Lord,
I don’t want to go abroad,
Let me find my song
Where I belong.


Thus Ezekiel seeks comfort in God
I laid down and slept:
I awakened, for the Lord sustained me. Let every man,
It is very significant that Ezekiel’s religion is eclectic absorbing different strands of Hindu texts. Thus Ezekiel turns to the *Upanishads* and the *Gita* too, and firmly believes there is no difference between a Hindu or a Jewish God. Thus he becomes not a Jew or a Hindu but a ‘model’ Indian. He has successfully merged his identity with the other religions of India.

Adverting to the Gita’s famous doctrine about disinterested action, ‘Karma’ without expectations in return, the devotee craves for God’s indulgence. The ordinary man cannot suppress entirely his appetite for the fruit of action. ‘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’m so hungry. (*The Egoist’s Prayers*, 15-21).

“Tribute to Upanishads” stands as a testimony for his understanding of the essence of the Hindu philosophy

To feel that one is somebody
is to drive oneself
on a kind of hearse –

... ...

I don’t want to be
the skin of the fruit
or the flesh
or even the seed,
which only grows into another
wholesome fruit –
The secret locked within the seed
because my need, and so
I shrink to the nothingness
within the seed.
At first it is cold
I shiver there,
later comes a touch of truth,
a ferment in the darkness,
finally a teasing light.
For the present, this is enough.
That I am free
to be the self in me,
which is not somebody –
not, at any rate
the mortal me,
but the Eye of the eye
that is trying to see.

("Tribute to the Upanishads", 1 – 27)

Thus, Ezekiel turns to existentialism where he is happy to be – the Self, the
‘mortal me’. Some critics regard these poems as ‘gnomic, aphoristic and
paradoxical statements’.12 They are even regarded as religious statements
of a predominantly non-religious self. They may be Ezekiel’s attempts at
finding an answer to his alienation – attempts to steady himself with a
religious faith, to overcome the feeling of ‘exile,’ and face the world with compasson for humanity in his heart intact. They are the attempts of an individual who does not wish to sink into despondency and bitterness in life. Thus Ezekiel who earlier regarded himself as the ‘uneasy orphan of their racial/memories’ merely polishing his alien techniques of observation achieves absolute faith – which helps him tide over the holocaust of alienation and blesses him with ‘the will to pass/through the eyes of a needle/to self forgetfulness’ (“Minority Poem”, 19-21, Collected Poems, p.236).

Thus, Ezekiel’s poetry is poetry finding a resolution to an inner conflict through moral intelligence attempting to find balance between various needs and desires. The poems are concerned with how to live sanely, fully, and morally in the secular world. The poems are intelligent, dedicated, and serious. There is a self-critical awareness wherein Ezekiel tries to find a proper mode of expression to his inner tensions and conflicts of alienation. His poetry is more a poetry of mind thinking about feelings rather than an expression of emotional outbursts. The Third published in 1959 is a perfect example. Ezekiel speaks like an observer discussing personal emotions intellectually and conducting in abstractions. Yet the generalities are made poetic through such quiet, subdued metaphors as ‘heart at play’ and ‘cold determined intellect’, which, both summarize and suggest his inner longings for love and belonging.
A glance at the last canvas of Ezekiel's poetry shows that *The Unfinished Man* (1959) is an explicit recognition of another time to change. The poems speak of a time of incompleteness and record a period of personal purgatory concluding with the possibility of redemption. A longing for wholeness and equipoise is evident. Creativity is a form of resolution of conflict in the mind of the poet:

God grant me certainty
In Kinship with the sky
Air, earth, fire, sea –
And the fresh inward eye.
Whatever the enigma
The passion of the blood,
Grant me the metaphor
To make it human good.


The themes of these poems are mostly discontentment of a supposedly settled life, the poet’s endeavour to find wholeness, and the poems finally conclude with ‘Home is where we have to gather grace’. *The Unfinished Man* is remarkable in its self-scrutinizing psychology and polished craft. Ezekiel’s themes move from generalizations towards the personal, from complaint to decision. The poems are rounded-off with a conclusion providing a satisfying formal closure.

The poems in *Indian English Poems* (1967-72) are part of his commitment to ‘stay where I am’ and besides giving vent to his contempt
and irony, they are a step towards using local speech to bring in a sense of belonging and authenticity. Most educated Indians have aimed at speaking approved British English and there is no attempt by poets to use the typical, native ‘local varieties’ in the way the Nigerian and West Indian writers mix dialect in their writings. It is believed that Kamala Das is the only Indian poet, perhaps, to use subconsciously Indianized forms of English. English is a foreign tongue and the poet being a Jew does not have any mode of expressing himself or giving vent to his creativity in any other language. By using Indianized English, Ezekiel seems to find his medium of expression – something his own, wherein he is not compared to writers of any set British standards. When there is no comparison there is no rejection or consequent alienation. Moreover, it could be the dialect that helps him feel at home, besides a means of purging himself of his contempt and irony.

The poems can also be regarded as part of an awareness that confused thought and speech, slogans and talk of traditions, the unchanging poverty of the masses, and their exploitation. There is an immense sense of identity and compassion on part of Ezekiel for India and Indians – “The Patriot”, “The Professor”, “The Railway Clerk”, “Truth about the Floods”, “Rural Suite”, “Undertrial Prisoners”, and “Poverty Poems” reflect his social and political concerns, for ‘his people’, the Indians. The initial sense of alienation that Ezekiel felt as a ‘mugging Jew’ amidst the wolves blurs
in our vision. The poems reflect a number of distinct lives he had led and the consequent attempts to come to terms and merge with his circumstances. What remains constant in him is the desire for continual renewal to remain young at heart. Ezekiel is particularly concerned not with achieving wholeness the way others do as they become older at the cost of abandoning many previous interests and forsaking new paths.

In the “Poster Poems” Ezekiel remembers his dying father. They express his sense of identity with India, the consequent reactions being commitment, concern, involvement. There is an emphasis on sense experience at the cost of moral consistency as seen in the poem “The Neutral”, thus rousing a need for the religious or spiritual to soothe the mind. Previously tranquility was expected from the wholeness of conscience alone. Now there is a need for some kind of technique, method, or belief to call the self off its disquiet. One cannot miss in Ezekiel a persistent note of discontentment. Since Ezekiel cannot shut himself off in ‘exile’ from the surrounding world he does not appear to be isolated from the happenings around him. He is involved in them. His poetry crosses life at several points and at different levels and its artistic worth does not suffer in the process. A victim of impulses and indecision, the poet’s worst oppressor is his own self:

Compared to my mind
rocks are reasonable

... ...
How many times have I felt free?
How many times spontaneous?
Its fantastic
what a slave
a man can be
who has nobody
to oppress him
except himself.

(“Transparently”, 9-23, Collected Poems, p.149)

This ‘oppressing self’ is the source of his poetry. In the process he struggles for solutions to life’s varied problems. He yearns to identify the dilemma and settle for its resolution:

All I want now
is the recognition
of dilemma
And the quickest means
of resolving it
within limits.

(“Transparently”, 42-47, Collected Poems, p.149)

He longs for strength and stamina in order to remain undeterred by the feeling of alienation. In his quest for inner stability and strength the seeker does gain by impatient efforts at knowledge or irritable reaching after results. Gradually Ezekiel comes to understand that he has to learn and cultivate ‘the gentle art of leaving things alone’ – Not ‘mock the grace of living with small analysis’. Similarly he should allow the problems of life
to take their own course rather than try to stand up against them. Thus he beholds life as a tranquil process of creativity and growth:

- A silence in the depth
- A stir of growth
- An upward thrust
- A transformation
- Botanic turmoil
- In the heart of earth.


Similarly, when he fails to tackle and cope with the feeling of alienation, he allows it to take its own course. Thus, Ezekiel lays bare his heart when he strips his mind of all masks, falsities, and pretensions. It is only then the peace of mind comes like ‘a touch of truth/a ferment in the darkness/finally a teasing light’. (“Tribute to Upanishads”, 17-19, *Collected Poems*, P.206).

It is always better to try than to abstain, from trying and ‘no labour is altogether in vain’ (*Collected Poems*, “Latter-Day Psalms” IX, 6-7, p.260).

A seed has to break its identity in order to sprout and bloom into a sapling. It has to give itself up to dissolution — it has to rot and die in order to emerge into new life. The self too has to undergo the torture, the misery, and the shocks of life in order to emerge into a better life. Shorn of the trappings of egoism, the self is now sufficiently mature to face the truth, and reality — even if it is the reality of alienation. He realizes that:

- Whatever you pursue
- Let it not be happiness
May you find it often
resounding in your normal pursuits.
(“Hymns in Darkness” VI, 4-7, Collected Poems I, 219)

The normal pursuits of the poet are self, family, society, and God:

He has seen the signs
but not been faithful to them
Where is the fixed star of my seeking?
It multiplies like a candle in the eyes of a drunkard.

(“Hymns in Darkness”, III, 1-5, Collected Poems, p.218)

Thus, the central dilemma at the heart of Ezekiel’s work is his search for a larger identity. He longs for merging with and then transcending gradually, one after another, the confines of self, family, and society. As Satyanarain Singh points out13 his progress is not charted outward from circle to circle but is a journey inward into the centre of the being from where he could rise above and embrace all other concerns. Ezekiel feels that this is one way of growing out of the shackles of alienation. What have I done for others, rather than what have others done for me should be one’s criterion in life, one’s major concern. Thus one who gets nearer to his true self, one who understands and identifies his desires and wants gets closer to his fellowmen. Ezekiel finally grows beyond the pressures and tensions of his time and place, and from the joys and woes of existence around him. ‘The sea is calm, a flight of birds/Fills the sky with a million words’ (“Subject of Change” 13-14, Collected Poems, p.177).
I am like a pelican of the wilderness, like an owl of the desert, like a sparrow alone upon the house top – but not in misery.

(“Latter day Psalms”, Part VIII, 1-5, Collected Poems, p.259)

A point of acute balance seems to have been arrived at in his essay,14 “Naipaul’s India and Mine”, written in 1965. The essay is suffused with the same spirit found in his poem. The occasion for it was the publication of V.S. Naipaul’s An Area of Darkness (Andre Deutsch, 1964), which is sub-titled An experience of India. Naipaul’s grandfather had migrated to Trinidad, the family became West Indian but retained many Indian customs and ways of thinking. Naipaul seeks to illuminate the ‘featureless area of darkness’, which was India, to him during a visit to this country. The trip was a disaster for Naipaul who found India to be death, negation, distortion, degradation. In hysterical tones Naipaul condemns India and Ezekiel refutes Naipaul in his essay. Ezekiel notes that Naipaul, like himself, writes exclusively from the point of view of his own dilemma, his temperamental alienation from his mixed background, his choice, and his escape. However, Ezekiel feels that this attitude is not universal, further the escape should not be away from the community but into it. To forget this is to be wholly subjective and self-righteous. Ezekiel points out that this subjective self-righteousness, while initially appearing to be authentic, becomes a little inaccurate, distorted, and falsely coloured.
The most important observation which Ezekiel makes and which is most relevant to this chapter runs thus:

In India which I have presumed to call mine, I acknowledge without hesitation the existence of all the darkness Mr. Naipaul has discovered. I am not a Hindu and my background makes me a natural outsider: circumstances and decisions relate me to India. In other countries I am a foreigner. In India I am an Indian. When I was eighteen, a friend asked me what my ambition was. I said with the naïve modesty of youth, “To do something for India” ....

India is simply my environment. A man can do something for and in his environment by being fully what he is, but not withdrawing from it. I have not withdrawn from India --

I believe in anger, compassion and contempt. (Naipaul’s line goes: ‘Anger, compassion and contempt were aspects of the same emotion: they were without value because they could not endure’). They are not without value. I believe in acceptance that incorporates all three, makes use of them. I am incurably critical and skeptical. That is what I am in relation to India also. And to myself. I find it does not prevent the growth of love. In this sense only, I love India. I expect nothing in return because critical, skeptical love does not beget love. It performs another, more objective function.
Ezekiel has finally found a solution to his conflict – ‘unsuitable for song as well as verse’ his country, India, ‘flowers into slums and skyscrapers, reflecting/precisely the growth of my mind./ I am here to find my way in it. (“Island”, 1-5, Collected Poems, p.182)

There is no compulsion and Ezekiel at last feels he cannot leave India because ‘I was born here and belong’ – a feeling, a sentiment which had been deluding him everywhere else in the world. Dom Moraes’ lines from “A Beginning” (1957) seem to echo very aptly, Ezekiel’s own sense of exile and his coming to terms with it:

I have grown up, I think, to live alone,
To keep my old illusions, sometimes dream
Glumly that I am unloved and forlorn
Run away from strangers, often seem
Unreal to myself …

I have grown up hand on the primal bone,
Making the poem, taking the word from the stream
Fighting the sand for speech, fighting the stone.16

Commitment to place and time bring about a release from a sense of loneliness and alienation for the poet. The poet’s continued identification with India has proves to be the right choice for him to sustain him as a writer and human being, also setting him free from the torture of alienation. Ezekiel acknowledges his own backwardness as a man and the backwardness of the country which is his home. The tortured, torturing environment, has irascibly become ‘Home’. Finding an answer to his sense
of alienation, Ezekiel does not but say, ‘I love India’, an answer to the words he said earlier

    I went to Roman Catholic Church.
    A mugging Jew among the wolves. ("Background Casually", 6-7)
References


3. Ibid., p.10.


7. Ibid., p.103.

8. Ibid., p.104.


185


15. Nissim Ezekiel, “Naipaul’s India and Mine” New Writing in India, London; Penguin, 1974, p.25