CHAPTER IV

MODERNITY AND INDIAN COLOUR
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Whatever the enigma,
The passion of the blood
Grant me the metaphor
To make it human good.

(Latter-Day Psalms, p.61)

Having published seven volumes of verse to date, Nissim Ezekiel has come to be regarded as an established Indo-English poet of post-Independence era. Since 1952 when his first poetical work, A Time to Change, came out in London, he has been regularly composing poetry in book-form or for magazines, and hence he may truly be called the barometer of modern India's literary atmosphere. By his other numerous assignments—editing, teaching, advertising, anthologising, and encouraging younger generation of poets—he has only strengthened his position of his in the literary world. Quite in recent years, his two OUP publications, Hymns in Darkness (1976) and Latter-Day Psalms (1982), have taken his critics by surprise and belied their adverse predictions about his artistic growth. This may be emphasised here that Chetan Karnani's commentary that Ezekiel's recent poetry shows "a marked decline"¹ is now outdated and ill-conceived, keeping in

mind the poet's whole-time application to the Muse. William Walsh is rather nearer the truth when he remarks that Ezekiel's poetry is "fastidious poetry, at once spontaneous and controlled." The austerity of his art, the economical accuracy of his language, the condensation of his style, the impressiveness of his imagery, the sharpness of his wit and irony, the contemporaneity of his subject-matter; all these immediately render him a 'modern' poet of great relevance and significance. Here in this Chapter an attempt is made to trace modernity in his poetry, especially in his Latter-Day-Psalms.

This poetical work of Ezekiel running into sixty-three pages and spanning a period of about twenty-five years in its coverage of a wide spectrum of experience and knowledge has in its texture a beautiful blood of the old and the new, of religion/philosophy and worldliness/sensuality, of traditional value systems and modernistic value systems, and of all those contradictions which constitute the present day human life of complexities and difficulties. According to T.S. Eliot, 'variety' and 'complexity' are the two accepted attributes of 'our civilization,' (which is another name of modernity)

and they are amply found in the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel. The following poetic passage may look to be very simple describing an incident in man-woman relationship, but it is highly evocative and suggestive in its tone:

Certainly the blouse
Could not be used again.
But with true British courtesy
He lent her a safety pin
Before she took the elevator down.

(p.52)

If 'the blouse,' 'true British courtesy,' 'a safety pin,' and 'the elevator' combine to introduce variety in this passage, its complexity is reinforced by its undertone suggestions and pricking words and phrases. Speaking of 'modern' and 'modernism'; R. Ellmann and C. Feidelson point out that "One characteristic of works we call modern is that they positively insist on a general frame of reference within and beyond themselves."^4

This statement aptly applies to the passage quoted above as well as to the following from "Nudes 1978":

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dares, sent forth ... desire Zen-eyed
to bring her in, saying.
Yes, this is me as I am
naked seen, seeking nakedness
... ... ... ... ...
womanly and vulnerable

(p.38)

Here the 'general frame of reference' goes within and
beyond the given extract, which underlines the truth
that one needs intuition to understand the real nature
of a woman. With reference to man-woman relationship,
the line 'naked seen, seeing nakedness' is highly
pertinent and revealing. The diction has grown delicate
and economical, and the technique evocative and imagi-
estic. The first two-three lines offer us valuable hints
at the intention of the poet, and at the artistic
efficacy of the imagery.

In his remarkable essay entitled "What is
Modern Poetry?" Donald Davie comments that "modern
poetry begins with symbolism,"\(^5\) which is the twin-
sister of imagism despite their birth in two different
lands—one in France and another in America. Pertinently,
it may be observed that the propagators of the latter
were also trained in French literary traditions,

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5. Ibid., p.200.
including the symbolistic tradition of Mallarmé, Valery and Laforgue. In the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel, the imagistic tradition established my Pound and Eliot is carried forward and reinforced. His *Later-Day-Psalms* abounds in striking images, such as the following:

The croes he carries to no crucifixion
is merely middle age ....
("Warning : Two Sonnets")

and again in the same poem:

Counterfeiters
caught by critic-cops at dead of night.

In the first extract, the uncrucified 'cross' is compared to the middle age, and in the second pretentious poets who cheat their customers with words is called 'counterfeiters' to be severely penalised by critics. Ezekiel competently evokes graphic pictures of human life with the help of apt similes and metaphors. Here are some instances of such similes:

Shall I be
driven before them
like a maddened
dog or horse?
("Furies")

and again:
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.

("Nudes")

And the transference of human psyche to the world of nature through charming similes is witnessed in the following:

Hills, valleyes, swelling river-banks, all those landscape images; praise of breasts and buttocks seen as fruit, thighs as tree-trunks; flower, moon, fire, bird of desire, fish of sex remotely tell a small fragmented part of the story.

("Nudes," 9).

Obviously, imagery combines with language to produce the desired effect of sensuousness in this passage. The illustrations of metaphor are to be had in the following extracts.

'.... and I love your body too, though you're hardly my cup of tea'

("Nudes 1978, 3)

Rare is the man whose fruit is in his season. Yet, his leaf
must wither, and that which appears to prosper, is often dying at the root.

("Latter-Day Psalms" 1, p.39)

Definitely the 'man' is visualised here in the shape of a tree laden with fruit and leaves and withering at the root. The Biblical prophets often derived their inspiration and pictures from the natural world, and the poet's attempt in this passage is to create an appropriate old-world atmosphere in the poem. This may be said with regard to the first nine Psalms which employ a characteristically outgrown and archaic language - e.g., 'man that walketh' (p.39), 'thou breakest the teeth of/the ungodly' (p.40), 'Salvation belongeth unto the Lord' (p.40), 'thy name and the glory' 'above the heavens' (p.40), 'For thou hast made him' (p.41), 'thou hast given us' (p.41), 'Is the Lord my Shepherd?'(p.41), 'of thee,' and 'overthee' (p.43) — though the tenth and last Psalm certainly stands apart, cast as it is in Modern English in the form of a commentary upon the preceding Psalms. Out of 150 Psalms given in the Bible, Ezekiel has chosen only nine, corresponding to numbers 1, 3, 8, 23, 60, 78, 95, 102 and 127, and as a real modern poet he thereafter advances his own views about them in the tenth. The idea of writing these psalms had
struck the poet when he was staying in a hotel in Rotterdam in order to attend an international poetry festival in June 1978. In an interview Ezekiel has thrown light on the origin of these Psalm, saying,

I think I realised suddenly that I had never accepted the Psalms, and this crystallised into an answer to the first one. Within ten minutes I'd written the first Latter-Day Psalm and formed the idea of writing ten. I completed nine Latter-Day Psalms in Rotterdam (June,78).

The tenth is a commentary on the other nine....

The Psalms are commonly called the Psalms of David, which were sung both in the public services of the Israelites and also in their private devotions. In essence, they are highly poetic and readable.

The modernity of Ezekiel's poetry is found in his skilful execution of wit and irony. All "modern" poets are prone to wit and irony. Here is a flash from Ezekiel:

She didn't know beggars in India smile only at white foreigners.

("Poverty Poem")

This contains an obvious truth as well as in ironical dig at the begging habits of Indian paupers. The poem

"Healers" is also sarcastic in its tone and temper, hitting at 'the unplanned city' that harbours 'a death-wish' in the midst of mercantile people. In another poem, "Jewish Wedding in Bombay," the poet laughs loudly in an ironic mood at the Jews who are out to mix up confusedly the sacred ceremony of marriage with beef-eating, pork-relishing, and with "betting and swearing and drinking":

Even the most orthodox, it was said, ate beef because it was cheaper, and some even risked their souls by relishing pork. The Sabbath was for betting and swearing and drinking.

There is nothing surprising in the poet's putting together of unexpected acts of sacrilege, for Ezekiel usually juxtaposes contracts and contradictions in his poetry. The cumulative effect of the above passage is to be felt in the closing line - the effect created by his ironic vision and witty remarks.

Thematically, modernity is appropriately equated with contemporaneity of the content. Ezekiel is quite modern from the viewpoint of his artistic treatment of current subject and immediate surroundings. If his "Poverty Poem" attempts to expose the stark reality of hunger and nakedness in the vast, sprawling
sub-continent, his "Jewish wedding in Bombay" and "Songs for Nandu Bhendu" (four in number) and "Latter Day Psalms" highlight the social, personal, and religious commitments and involvements of the poet in the busy metropolis. Even some of the poems of The Unfinished Man — like "Urban" and "A Morning Walk" and ENight of the Scorpion" — and "In India" of The Exact Name, which is more poetic-cum-philosophical than modern-cum-topical, actually dwell either on the banality of the city of Bombay and its rootless human life or on the immediately family and social environment. The poet's anti-dowry stance which is the call of the time, is evident in the following extract:

There was no dowry because they knew I was 'modern' and claimed to be modern too ...
("Jewish Wedding in Bombay")

There can be no better example of topicality than the following from "The Professor":

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

The title-piece "Latter-Day Psalms" is specially to be marked for its modernity vis-a-vis its religiosity.
Against the highly devotional attitude of the old-day worshippers, the poet's sceptical temperament comes out vividly in the following extract from the sixth Psalm:

How long are we to rely on those marvellous things in ancient Egypt? Tell me of the marvellous things in Nazi Germany. Even with manna in our mouths, we are not estranged from our lust.

By way of his commentary on the Psalms, Ezekiel informs us that all the old "fuse about faith" is highly "boring and pathetic" in the present-day context, and that it is better to watch and participate in human folly of committing sins than to talk of dead things of the past:

God is a presence here and his people are real I see their sins, I hear his anger.

The Almighty is humanized here, and the long-cherished motto that "Service to man is Service to God" is eventually realized. In an interview, Ezekiel observes thus: "If I write a religious poem the next poem is liketly be very secular, skeptical. I attach a great deal of importance to the worldliness of the world, its independence." The selfsame thought is repreated

in poetic form in the following lines:

Now I am through with
the Psalms; they are
part of my flesh.

The sanctimonious Psalms are, thus, described as powerless and inefficacious in curbing the turbulent desires of man, in controlling his lustfulness. The poet does not go wrong or irrational in subscribing to this viewpoint, and tells us that in so doing he is "accepting the condition of humanity."

To conclude, modernity is amply reflected in the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel, particularly in his *Latter-Day Psalms*. Although modernity is essentially "a stylistic revolution in literature" necessitating a fragmentation of "traditional literary forms" it does not lose sight of "the revolutionary changes in society" as Alan Bold has suggested in an illuminating article. Since Ezekiel has been a constant experimentalist with form and content, he is unquestionably a "modern" Indo-English poet who has, through his admirable work, brought about both stylistic revolution in this country and fresh social consciousness among the people.

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In his poems Nissim Ezekiel has done a tremendous job in focusing on various Indian settings. In many of his poems we come across a criticism of Indian situation. Ezekiel "treated poetry as a way of life, as a continuous flow and as something which is inextricably related to existence." He does the same thing in "Entertainment," "Night of the Scorpion," and "Servant." Perhaps the poet consciously possesses the belief that a poet should belong to his immediate environment.

Without any introduction he begins the monkey-show in "Entertainment," a peculiar Indian street-scene. In "Servant" he tells us about the suffering of the helpless wife who is used to harsh treatment from her husband. Again in this poem there is no preparation before telling the story of the miserable "young servant." Same is the case with "Night of the Scorpion." Clearly the poet beings the poem: "I remember the night my mother was stung by a scorpion ...." In this poem the poet draws our attention to the typical Indian scene where he is ironical about the superstitious belief of the people. But one thing is common in all these poems. There is the smell of Indian surrounding in each of

the poems. The street monkey-show of "Entertainment," the predicament of the woman-servant in "Servant," and the superstitious rituals of the fellowmen at the bed of a scorpion bitten mother — straightway take us to the Indian soil. All these poems appeal to us as they deal in typical day-to-day happenings which we come across regularly. The poverty of the monkey-master, the weals of the woman-servant and at last the comment of the mother give the smell of Indianness.

Ezekiel never tries to startle his readers with a kind of horrible prediction of the approaching year 2000. His poetry is self-criticising. He aims at interpreting the immediate atmosphere with a view to seeing really what happens. The reader must not overlook those scattered remarks of the poet. Those points constitute the essence of his poetry. Sometime they tell of Indian and sometime they tell of an Indian mind. But in no way those details are decorative.

In "Entertainment" we see the poor Indian society and perhaps possibly the reason for the meanness of the people: to watch entertainment and not to pay for it. Ezekiel is ironical about the "smallest coin" of the spectators. He also draws our attention to the fact that nobody was alert about the monkey-master who was "Naked to the waist." The entertainer is poor; the spectators are poor; yet "the show moves on."
"Night of the Scorpion" involves one entire community in a case of scorpion-biting. The mother is senseless. A big preparation goes on. Each one in his manner prepares to cure "the Evil One." The methods of superstitious practices are the main aim of the poet to point at. But the poet never forgets to describe the plight: "My mother twisted through and through/groaning on a mat. Inevitable is the helpless conditions of the unfortunate. Yet the people try on in several ways: either practical or superstitious. Being a typical Indian mother she wishes all kinds of problems off from her children: "Thank God the scorpion picked on me/and spared my children."

"Servant" is about the child-marriage of a girl when she was twelve or fourteen. The girl is not sure how many years have passed on. She is conscious of one thing only: "her husband beats her/for the fun of it .... "It is pathetic to see the "weals on the back and thighs." But she complains before her mistress; not before her husband. Here is a typically suppressed Indian wife. The poet is "absorbed in news of brutal stories" on his breakfast table. That disturbs the bright vision of the poet and compels him to term the world as "The Godless World."
Thus we see a kind of faithful description of the immediate situations by Ezekiel. He is alert on every detail and paints them without distortion. With his simple diction Ezekiel gives stress on his ironical statements. It is very difficult to miss the Indian smell in Ezekiel's poetry.