CHAPTER I
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Nissim Ezekiel (b-1924) is a well-known Indian poet of the mid-twentieth century post-independence period. He is, by common consent of critical opinion, one of the major poets in the modern post-World War II phase of Indian poetry in English. "He has emerged as most outstanding," writes Linda Hess, "in craftsmanship, maturity, range and depth of sensibility." In fact, he is regarded as a sort of pater familias of many young modern Indian poets in English. "It is significant that Ezekiel is among the older poets of the present Indo-English generation," writes Rajeev Taranath. He has the kind of achievement "which makes him one of the most adult and consistently meaningful poets in Indo-English Writing."²

Nissim Ezekiel is a poet with "the fresh inward eye."³ He also firmly believes that "the best poets wait for words."⁴ He is a spokesman of his age.

4. "Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher."
As a modern poet, Nissim Ezekiel cannot give an "idyllic" picture of India, like the earlier poets. He gives an authentic picture of the disillusion, disgust, sorrow and the sad plight, which are part of the city-dweller's existence. That is why the city grows to a prominent position in the poet's consciousness. Like Robert Graves, Ezekiel believes that "poetry demands independence of spirit, originality of thought, integrity of expression, contempt for popular fame, and above all true love."\(^5\) He accepts the influence of Graves, Yeats, and Frost on him.

Ezekiel is a dextrous craftsman and a diligent artist. He is a follower of Yeats' dictum "We must labour to be beautiful."\(^6\) He believes that the end of poetry is to do "human good," that is, to bring prosperity to humanity at large. He prays to God thus:

Grant me metaphor
to make it human good.\(^7\)

Though an esthete, he never separates art from life, and the emotions connected with the daily business

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of living form the central part of his poetic philosophy. Within a short time, he earned for himself a world-wide reputation and high honours in his motherland. He has so far published seven volumes in India. The first collection *A Time to Change* (1952) was published in London. The collection *Latter-Day Psalms* was published in 1982 for which he won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1983.

Like Eliot, Ezekiel believes in the perfection of the craft of writing. He is a pioneer who changed the course of Indian poetry in English, both in theme and form, though he does not agree that he has done it with a pioneer spirit. It only shows the humility of the poet. But it is true that he emancipated poetry from 'gingling rhyme - schemes' and started practising it as an art with a serious purpose. This is a noteworthy contribution. Further, he changed the bucolic nature of Indian poetry to an urban one. This is a remarkable change indeed. These changes are so crucial for the art and craft of writing poetry that most of the devoted younger poets have felt their influence strongly and Nissim Ezekiel has become an object of emulation for the younger generation of the post-independence Indian poets in English.
The 'new' poetry of the post-independence period is a complete breakaway from the earlier romantic poetry which is mostly "derivative" in nature and decorative in form. Authenticity of expression has come to be recognised as its main feature.

Other poets like Ramanujan, Dom Moraes, P.Lal, Daruwalla and A.V.Mehrotra have also attempted new poetry. All these poets have successfully created their own individual styles of writing on the basis of their own experience and sensibilities.

As K.N.Daruwalla pointed out, Nissim Ezekiel was responsible for bringing about a total change in technique. According to Adil Jussawala, Ezekiel is "perhaps the first Indian poet consistently to show to the Indian readers that craftsmanship is as much important as its subject matter." Nissim Ezekiel went to England for higher studies and spent his impressionable years there. It is but natural that he came under the influence of the major poets of the thirties like Yeats, Eliot, and Auden. That is how he learnt to take the craft seriously.

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Eliot has said the modern poet's perceptions are complex; Ezekiel's perceptions too are complex. He accepts the influence of Rilke, the German myth maker, on him, which is seen in the isolation and introspective nature of his work. However, he is a poet working on a complex pattern of several traditions — both ancient and modern. As Michael Garman suggests, Ezekiel works at several "levels." 10

Ezekiel influenced many of the younger poets in the modern period as the first editor of Quest and as the guest editor of The Illustrated Weekly of India. He has made them realize the seriousness of creative writing. Ezekiel remarked on Dom Moraes' poetry thus: "These are not poetry, yet but they show some talent." 11 Dom Moraes took Ezekiel's advice seriously and improved his technique of writing enormously. There were several other poets whom he influenced directly or indirectly. He discovered the promise in poets like Adil Jussawala and A.V. Mehrotra and appreciate the merit in the poetry of A.K. Ramanujan and K.N. Daruwalla. He calls Ramanujan "a precision instrument" of modern poetry. He has said

of Daruwalla that he is "in a different class" because he possesses dramatic talent.

Ezekiel is one who has been constantly experimental with the technique of writing poetry. Not only that, the poet in him is also preoccupied with the way poetry and life should be related to each other. This accounts for the rich variety of technique and an agreeable thematic spectrum in his eight volumes of poetry published so far.

Being a Jew, the poet considers himself "a natural outsider." "Circumstances and decisions relate me to India," he says. But he also considers himself "a good native" who "belongs" to India. To a certain extent, his alienation finds a suitable solution in his "commitments" to India:

I have made my commitments now.
This is one: to stay where I am. 14

(Background casually)

That is why, Linda Hess is right when she says that the "acknowledge of a home' (thecity) in the last

two Volumes (is) adding 'a whole new dimension to his poetry.' Ezekiel expresses his affinity with "the kindred clamour" of the city in many poems of 'The Unfinished Man.' He says he "cannot shun his native place."

Ezekiel's early volumes are like some kind of exercises on the themes of love and sex. He gives expression to many of his experiences with women whom he met in his real life or in his imagination. In these early volumes, A Time to Change, Sixty Poems, The Third, and Pilgrimage, both religious and secular in nature, forms a recurring feature. It is in his third volume, The Third, that the poet begins to realise the holy nature of sex. This makes it possible for him to take a "positive view" of woman in The Unfinished Man. In the third volume, he realizes that the first sexual experience is as holy as the first baptism. That is why Anisur Rahman describes Ezekiel's pilgrimage as one from sex to super consciousness. He says, "No theme recurs in his poetry so frequently as does the theme of love."
Further, the early volumes are mostly a kind of experiment in writing, in terms of themes like love, sex and pilgrimage, viewing from the angle of technique. Only some pieces like "What Frightens Me" and "Double Horror" truly stand out. However, in the poems in The Third and The Unfinished Man which were written in 1959, the poet's art seems to achieve its full growth and force.

Ezekiel's "Night of the Scorpion" belongs to the class of poetry which may be designated the "poetry of situation" — an art in which Browning and Robert Frost excelled. It begins with an incident and ends by throwing light on significant aspects of human nature and life. The poem swiftly comes to the point without wasting words, the 'action' beginning with the very first line: "I remember the night my mother was stung by a Scorpion." The rustic setting too is sketched with deft strokes, with only a few essential details being stressed — the "Sack of rice," "the Sun-baked walls," "The dark room" and the absence of electricity (candles and lanterns). And the first of the four contrasted responses to the scorpion-bite makes its appearance as early as in line eight: "The peasants came like a swarm of flies." From this point onwards the poem moves
swiftly by the very momentum generated by the urgency of the situation being presented.

In The Exact Name, the next collection, there is no common theme. The poems are on a variety of themes like philosophy, love, and sex. Certain memory poems like "Night of the Scorpion"\(^\text{19}\) are also included in this volume.

"Hymns in Darkness" is an ironic comment of the poet on common sayings and naked truths:

The darkness has its secrets which light does not know.

(No.12, "Hymns in Darkness")

"Poster poems," which are included in Hymns in Darkness, form an ironic view of certain maxims. The entire volume is expigrammatic and conversational in expression.

Crocodile tears
are unknown to Crocodiles.

(No.4, "Poster poems")

The poet reaches the perfection of conversational technique in Latter-Day Psalms (1982). Here he is seen talking directly to God, as to a friend.

Thus, as we proceed from the first to the fourth volume, there is a recognizable improvement in

\(^\text{19}\) Nissim Ezekiel, Hymns in Darkness, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1976).
style and technique. The expression in the early volumes is direct, whereas in the later volumes it is cryptic. The poet explores the technique of irony in all its possibilities. There is no direct utterance except in "The Egoist's Prayers"\textsuperscript{20} where the poet switches over to the conversational tone of expression which is easy and effortless. There is maturity in the later volumes as is seen in the variations on the technique of irony.

\textbf{The Unfinished Man} is unique in many ways. There is a new myth created by the poet in which the hero, the woman, and the city are the central figures. The 'hills' are a recurring image. There is movement and action, attempt and failure, on the part of the protagonist. There is thus more of drama here than in the earlier volumes, where there is more statement.

In "Poems 1965-74"\textsuperscript{21} the use of many-sided irony reaches perfection in poetic expression. For example, in "Background Casually," irony is self-directed, while in the poem "Lawn," we see a remarkable brevity of expression and a clever use of irony.

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  \item \textsuperscript{20} Nissim Ezekiel, \textit{The Unfinished Man}, Op.cit.
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The author has said in an interview that *The Unfinished Man* may be his best work, but that he likes *The Exact Name* best. While *The Unfinished Man* like the earlier volumes, follows scrupulously rules of prosody and rhyme, it is only in *The Exact Name* that the poet emancipates verse from the clutches of tradition.