CHAPTER IV

FROM ALIENATION TO COMMUNITY

Poetry is a nourishment of soul and society ... it keeps alive the sense of self and the correlated sense of community.

(R.P. Warren)

The movement of the poetic self from the posture of alienation to that of community is possible not merely due to the recognition of the power of love but also because of the self's response to its own need for fellowship and relationship outside sexual love. This is accentuated in the schizoid world of to-day which sees the diagnostic and therapeutic value of art as a felt - need for human relationships to survive. Correlated to this need for community is the society orientation of art.

The main objection to the depiction of this sense of community and fellowship in art as against alienation is that it tends to become less of art and verges on to propaganda as its society - orientation becomes marked. The purpose or intention gains supremacy over its intrinsic aesthetic value.

The sense of community as a theme in literature ranges from the lukewarm spirit of accommodation and tolerant acceptance to a total involvement in society, a commitment that is almost morally binding. In this situation, at least
three choices are open to the poet. He can isolate himself completely from his social milieu and eschew all sense of community verging on to a Bohemian way of life or he can effect a romantic ivory tower escape from the chaos of modern living. Secondly, he can be totally involved in the society, placing himself without reserve at the service of social forces. Thirdly he can be a rebel and raise the voice of protest, the result of militant involvement. 1

The stance of Indian poets is a fluid amalgam of the three postures. The lack of a sense of community stems from the use of English in India which is not its home. The Indian poet is thus isolated from his milieu. However, he does not rise to the intensity of becoming a Bohemian artist. The Indian poet chooses the obvious alternative of looking into himself, of making the self the archetypal entity to illustrate general life-truths. The orientation towards its environs through self-scrutiny shows the self's awareness of life and its problems.

This escape into self so obvious in *Rough Passage* is highly suggestive of a romantic attitude. Social confrontation is almost always avoided and the romantic artist leaves the world either in the Keatsian manner losing himself completely in the song of the Nightingale or in the Wordsworthian style where the egoistical sublime gains pre-eminence. Indian poetry in English after the fifties avoids both romantic

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stances. The 'romanticism' of the poets in their experimentation with technique and image orientation is tempered by the mood of critical introspection. This makes the poetry realistic rather than romantic. The penchant for self-irony and self-criticism without Shelleyan sentimentality as in 'Ode to the West Wind' results in the self-maintaining communication links with society. This link is only loosely forged to enable the self to shed the feeling of community and escape into its 'self' as and when it pleases to do so. With the mounting pressures of social change, the artist for pragmatic reasons, realises that a romantic escape from life is as impossible as a romantic involvement. The urge to escape is seen in the adoption of a 'persona' as in Hughes' 'Crow', or even the use of 'I' for an implied voice which apparently has nothing to do with the poet.¹ Only the 'mask' is too transparent for anyone to miss the identity.

Since irony and self-criticism characterise the poetry of introspection, protest has no real place. Prithish Nandy strongly avers that unless Indian poets in English raise the voice of protest against the growing evils of the day, they cannot really make any significant contribution either to poetry or to society for only in protest or dissent can be discovered the germ of great art.² While this is true of the intensely moving poetry of Bharathi or Neruda or the fiery but reasoned prose of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, the claim of Nandy

¹ See Chapter I.

is not axiomatic. Not all great literature is born of protest and literature born out of a genuine urge for self-expression can aspire to greatness. Good poetry balances the tensions between self and community without sacrificing the demands of art.

Protest is a misnomer to use in the case of Ezekiel, Ramanujan and Parthasarathy who are too controlled and refined in their approach to art and life. They do not hit out violently against any problem. Theirs is a detached critical gaze and they prefer to present in sharply defined terms the incongruities of life. They show that they are keenly aware of the human problem of values and relationships and point to a general goal of perfection without prescriptive morals. They are no propagandists writing poetry. They pursue poetry for its own sake and in their pursuit they make of poetry a life- oriented art. They are 'committed' poets but not in the traditional sense. These poets do not champion any political ideology. They are tentatively marking time in the periphery of Indian social and political problems and have not fully entered into the vortex of Indian life. Their academic orientation and their practice of poetry as a part-time vocation are possible reasons for this deliberate distancing. This has resulted in a criticalness bordering on irony and an objectivity which resorts to mere presentation of graphic details. The poetry involving the self is technically flawless but in the manner of Andrea del Sarto's paintings lack real soul. It is significant because of its pioneering quality for it has paved the way for the social satire that
has become an essential ingredient of the poetry of the seventies. All these poets are keenly aware of the self's need for community and fellowship in spite of their individual stance.

The sense of community as fellowship and 'social awareness' is a significant theme in the poetry of Ezekiel Ramanujan and Parthasarathy. However, it is not antithetical to the sense of alienation. In their poetry, these two states are complementary. Alienation involves a sense of community bordering on commitment and vice versa. In a committed Marxist is implicit his alienation from capitalism, in a Wordsworthian worship of the Nature principle is implicit an absence of faith in the city. And this implication is obvious even without protest marches. While 'alienation', either linguistic, cultural or temporal with 'self' at the centre is a patent theme in Ramanujan, Parthasarathy and Ezekiel, 'commitment' as a sense of community is a parallel theme. The poetry can be said to move in a concentric frame. Parthasarathy's poetry is the poetry of 'commitment' to self, its passage through the rough and tumble of life to achieve self - perfection. In Ramanujan's preoccupation with a familial past is evident his 'committedness' to human values which are fast disappearing even in a family set - up. Ezekiel's 'commitment' is to people and is not contained by individual

1 This is seen in the poetry of Daruwalla and Kolatkar.

or familial considerations. Even in his 'alienation' poems what is repeatedly underscored is the active need to belong and only then, can the self feel the sense of community which can result in commitment. A rootless self has little chance of expressing any fellow feeling.

Parthasarathy's Rough Passage is clearly and unequivocally a poem about the progress of the human self in the obstacle-ridden, rugged journey through life. But the obstacles in the way such as the guilt in the use of English or the awareness of one's inadequacy are self-generated. The self feels trapped in a cultural and linguistic maze and at last partially extricates itself by making the mental adjustment for peaceful co-existence with its own self, by deciding to 'go through life with the small change of uncertainties' after reaching home base. This accommodation with self is an obvious prerequisite for accommodation with the outside world.

The preoccupation with self which is almost solipsistic in Parthasarathy's case is marked by an intense self-examination. There is a positive withdrawal of the self from the outside world to gaze into the mirror in isolation to discover its identity. Since the self is at the centre of the poet's universe and is in fact his universe, and its sole business is self-scrutiny, it shuns any involvement and does not concern itself with the social and political issues of the times and the resultant human misery and suffering. Jussawalla's criticism that Indian poets are at a political distance from their subject is partially true of Rough
The poet is tight-lipped about social evils; he is no poet of protest for he maintains no close relationship with society without which no protest is possible. In fact S. Gupta questions the international reputation of such poetry in which 'Vietnam', the third world and neo-colonialism have been neatly omitted.

In being concerned with the individual self and its intensely personal travails, Parthasarathy shows himself to be ego-centric. However true to the view that the ego has no real existence without other selves, the poet in spite of the ego-centredness is not irrationally blind to the world outside. In the manner of the Augustan poets, he moves from the particular to the universal, from the self to society at large. This trend is obvious in his comments on life, aphoristic utterances sprinkled through the corpus of the poems. His poetry approximates to the Arnoldian criticism of life with some brilliant lines on accepted life-truths.

In 'Exile 1' he admits that 'Experience doesn't always make for knowledge' for in spite of his years he has committed the grave mistake of 'whoring after English gods'. In 'Exile 2' he shows his mental maturity in accepting with good grace the folly of exile. 'There is something to be said for exile', for the experience has made him realise the value of his native roots and has made him more mature and

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self-aware. The human craving for affection is evident in the line, 'the heart needs all' and the transitoriness of life in 'we live our lives for ever taking leaves'. Again the restlessness of the human spirit, its estrangement even in love is poignantly expressed in Trial 14: 'Only the heart isn't hospitable anywhere'. The final philosophy that emerges after he asserts that his life has come full circle is this:

... I should be content,
I think, to go through life
with the small change of uncertainties.

It is because of such universal truths that the poem is no mere personal effusion of a private dilemma. It moves from the abstract problem of language and culture to the individual's predicament of living, of confronting the realities of life and accepting them for what they are with a 'philosophic mind'. The experience of life has enabled him to come to terms with it and understand it not as something spectacular or glorious but as one of ordinariness. This realisation Parthasarathy shares with Ezekiel, as also the inescapable fact that the human self is flawed and needs to be perfected. The desire to perfect the individual self is a significant even if oblique contribution to society which is made up of individuals and the health of which depends upon the nature of the individual.

Parthasarathy is not always wholly preoccupied with self. He places the self in its milieu, its urban setting. As in Auden's poetry, in Rough Passage there are concrete and vivid
visualisations of the city. He has sharply focussed the city landscape through a powerful lens and has obtained these well-defined photographic vignettes. His city is never without people and is invested with life because of the jostling crowds. But the poet’s self desires no intercourse either with the city or its people. It prefers to be the detached observer as in ‘Exile 1’ when he vividly etches the English scene with an uncaring eye for detail. In the basement room, ‘Ravishankar and cigarette stubs’ are thrown together even as Pope’s ‘bibles and billet-doux’. It is in such a collocation that social criticism can be discovered and the traditional Indian sensibility which holds music in sanctity is outraged.

The irony in the socio-cultural acceptance of the music of Ravishankar, the great Indian Sitar maestro along with the shallow and sensual symbols of relaxation like smoking and drinking characteristic of Western culture is underscored in the context of the persona not being accepted — ‘coloured’ is what they call us over there” in spite of his English education. The global problem of racial discrimination is thus presented in an over-simplified generalisation. It is a mere peep into the Pandora’s box and the poet sees the aftermath only in relation to himself — how his Indianness has been corroded by the English colonial influence. Even London is ‘no jewel’ being very much like an Indian city with its litter, smoke and the unwashed children playing in the puddles of water. The dull drab routine of urban life which deadens one to the freshness and beauty of nature irks the sensibility of the poet who is forced to return to it. In
Bombay, he flees to the sea-shore, suffocated by the smoke of the city's industry.

In 'Exile 7' he raises the social problem of language and culture. 'Language is a tree / loses colour under another sky.' It is also mere noise. His return home to his language and culture narrated in 'Homacoming' is as disturbing an experience as that in England. He finds that with his 'tongue in English chains' he cannot really embrace Tamil. Further the Tamil language also needs to be cleansed and he is convinced that it is his bounden duty to do so. While he is committed to his language and culture, he finds he is helpless to contribute positively to its growth. He is therefore oppressed by the brooding sense of unease and guilt as in 'Exile' as he cannot really conquer 'The bull Namalwar took by the horns'. The wild nature of language symbolised by the bull cannot really be schooled and refined by him. It needs a Namalwar to do it.1

'Home' therefore in the 'Parthasarathy passage' is no real home. In the Indian context, it is the centre of the Indian family, the repository of traditions and values

1 Namalvar, a great Vaishnava saint of the ninth century has contributed about thousand verses to the Thiruvaimozhi or Nalayira Prabandham (the 'Four thousand') the standard exposition of Vaishnava Philosophy. It is said that Sage Agastya's prayers that the Tamil language should attain the glory of the Vedic language was answered by Lord Siva who said that an Alwar (one continuously contemplating God) would be born to bring glory to Tamil. R.K.Das, Temples of Tamilnad, Bombay, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1964, pp. 24-25.
and like the family it is a channel of the transmission of culture. But, the 'passage' becomes a dead end on reaching home, for cultural values are lost without the power of language to keep them alive. To Parthasarathy, Tamil remains almost impotent to his purpose and in spite of his avowed commitment to his native language with its 'agglutinative touch' his imperfect knowledge makes him 'falter, stumble'. His is an anachronistic tongue 'wrenched from the Kural' and is as foreign to the current spoken idiom as the current English idiom is to the Indian.

While none can question his integrity in the change of heart, it is obvious that his commitment does not result in any personal or social change of a cataclysmic nature. Only he has realised the need to confront reality as it is. Yet the ideal artist that he yearns to be is not totally crushed by the anguished awareness of his linguistic and cultural confusions for he makes the promise of writing a sequel to *Rough Passage* in Tamil or settle to translation of his poem into Tamil or Tamil poems into English.¹

The alienation from English results in a commitment to his mother tongue Tamil and indicates the genesis of a sense of social and cultural responsibility. It is significant to note that this responsibility is expressed in English, the very language which had 'alienated' him.

¹ *Tenor*, 2, Jan., 1979, p.21. He calls it 'Thiruvarangathil'.
from his native culture. This only shows that even in the
language-issue one has to compromise and Parthasarathy
cannot be another Madhusudhan Dut. English is in his blood
as it were and like the mother tongue votaries who argue
their cause in English. Parthasarathy has to take up the
onerous task of purifying Tamil by outlining the predicament
in English. Somehow 'the communication gap' has to be
bridged and Parthasarathy strikes an elegiac note in his
first encounter with Tamil. The bull is 'ridden with
Kodambakkam fleas' and does not have the power and grace
of yore. It 'reels down plush corridors' because of the
influence of cinema and to revive its glorious past attuned
to a living present, the poet directs his efforts. The
beginning is made in the poetry through the recollection of
the Brahmin past.

'Home-Coming 2' depicts the return of the prodigal
son to his native environment. Only there is no rousing
welcome. The dependence on foreign poets is strongly
criticised for the conviction is that one's life in one's
natural milieu alone can inspire great poetry:

... How long can foreign poets provide the
staple of your lines?
Scrape the bottom of your past, ...

That genuine art can spring from a confrontation with life
is implied. This reveals the poet-self's 'commitment' to
art and to life. The return home also signifies an implicit
commitment to the values of the past. Tradition cannot be

\footnote{Chapter I, p. 1}
thrown overboard as meaningless, dead or defunct in any context and the individual past contained in the family past has to be reckoned with. In fact, the recollection of 'Cousin Sundari' only underscores the importance of family not merely to the individual but to society. The growing atomisation and secularisation of modern society has not yet corroded the family as a social, cultural and ethical root of society.

In 'Home-Coming 3' the past is graphically recreated in a family re-union after a lapse of years. The Hindu joint family comes together at the time of births, weddings, deaths and annual ceremonies. Here, the occasion is a wedding and the relatives sit together on the steps of a choultry and recall 'rice-and-pickle afternoons.' Cousin Sundari is remembered vividly for she used to climb up tamarind trees and is now 'forty years' with three daughters 'like safe planets' around her. The poet avers that the poem has autobiographical authority and this leads to idle speculation about a childhood love (almost similar to the speculations regarding Lucy). The memory of the past acts as a screen to the events of the present which provide the 'occasion' for the journey into the past. The past is a comfortable refuge from the present problems of life and the mood of nostalgia serves to alleviate the present pains which is also seen in 'Home-Coming 2'.

1 The reference is of cultural import as food is a matter of culture. - rice is the South Indian staple food.
'Home Coming 3' like 'Trial 2' deals with the theme of death and the maturing influence it exerts on the bereaved poet-self. Partha Sarathy's brilliant visual imagination coupled with his almost fanatic dedication to perfect craft invests the poem with quality.

He becomes 'in glass house hit by the stone of father's death'. The shattering nature of the experience is beautifully crystallised in the image of the 'glasshouse'. With grim humour, he admits that he has made himself an 'expert in farewells' and this is an irrevocable one. The only consolation is that tradition will not snap with the death of father. It will continue - even as he lives in his father so will he live in his unborn son. The continuity of tradition through familial likenesses serves to ensure at least a stability in self-identity. The faith in the past and in the future progeny is testimony to a commitment even if seminal, to traditional human values like love and kinship.

Father and mother are the twin poles around which the life of the child moves and in 'Home-Coming 4', the loving mother becomes a symbol of the child's need to belong. This poetic celebration of the mother is a reflection of a life-truth reiterated by sociologists that a child needs his mother's love most and she is the pivot in any family relationships.  

1 A.K. Ramanujan's 'Self Portrait'.
Mother's 'Nanjangud days' fills him with nostalgia and acts as a soothing balm to the wounds of the English past. The recollection of mother and her 'turmeric days' is in the idyllic rural landscape. The poem though admirable in voicing a traditional and much respected sentiment is stilted in expression as the 'academic' words like 'ensconced' 'eviscerated' detract from the poetic quality.

From a recollection of the personal past, the poet-self moves to a recreation of a historical Tamil past, with a poem on the river Vaigai, on the banks of which was forged the splendour of the Sangam Age. The poem is an unconscious echo of Ramanujan's 'A River' and Ezekiel's 'The Truth About the Floods' but the individuality of their style and the focus of their vision make any comparison out of place. The poem strikes an elegaic note without the sentimentality characteristic of this poetic mode. What is bemoaned is the loss of beauty of the Vaigai "river once, sewer now". With scathing realism, he exposes the ugliness and aridity that surround it, symbolic of an indifferent people blind to nature and values. Man has no 'social conscience' and he pollutes rivers and monuments alike. In a way, like the poets of Ramanujan's poem, he is dead to human suffering and degeneracy. Any poem on rivers, will suggest an automatic parallel in the attitude of English poets from Spenser to Eliot to the Thames - the London river which is a strange blend of ugliness and beauty. Ironically, even though rivers in India are associated with goddesses and symbolise the Mother Figure, they are
polluted beyond imagination. If Parthasarathy can be made to have a 'social conscience', it is possibly in this awareness of man's callous neglect of his surroundings.

'Home-Coming' is another poem on the past and Parthasarathy goes back to the historical past of Tamil Nadu, rich in its artistic treasures. 'Mahabalipuram', the sculptural treasure-house of the ancient Pallavas is recreated in brilliant lines. Parthasarathy's gift of perfect description with attention to detail and his epigrammatic style bring to life the stone monuments:

... Rocks dream in stone. Here, a King and his people built....

History is seen in relation to the people, the foreign tourists with cameras. No comment is made and the poem like the poem on 'Goa' is a remarkable example of pure poetry with an undercurrent of a sense of loss.

The impact of the immediate environs on these three poets is seen in their urban orientation. The city landscape figures prominently in all their art. Parthasarathy has a penchant for coastal cities and this facilitates escape to the sea-shore from the stifling influence of the city. To Ezekiel, the city is barbaric, sick with slums. But it is indispensable to his life and art. Parthasarathy cannot tolerate its squalour but realises he has no choice but to accept it. And this acceptance of what is unpalatable is fundamental to the maturing of the introverted self in its movement towards community.

It is the city that introduced the poet to western
culture and hence carries pleasant associations with it except possibly the initiation into love. City life alienates him from his culture and he has become an anglophile, an English Brahmin. However, the tremendous impact of materialistic western urban culture serves to alienate him from it and bring him home to his Indian past. The poetry in the last section is highly self-critical for the self stands as the epitome of all the false values assimilated from a foreign culture. An individual who apishly imitates another culture is a social liability. Parthasarathy saves himself from becoming one, by being sensitively aware of his mistake and trying to effect a return to his roots. The commitment then is to self and art and in so far as the perfection of these contributes to the well-being of society, the poet is a 'committed artist', his ideal is to make the self 'a cultural achievement.'

In this context, love is also a social value and Parthasarathy, as has already been discussed, celebrates it as a dynamic force to give stability and meaning to the self's maturing. Through love, it learns the true nature of values and the need for community. This serves to counteract the feeling of alienation.

Ramanujan's poetry is concerned vitally with reality as it exists without any frills attached to it, with the contemporary human predicament of living. In his poetic preoccupation with life and the problem of living which has

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nothing of fantasia or Utopia in it, he makes the family central to his poetic medium. In this, he merely reiterates the age-old view of the importance of the family as a fundamental social unit in all human life. Further, as a Hindu born and brought up in an orthodox joint family set up, Ramanujan, like Parthasarathy and many other Indian artists is very much family oriented. This social unit becomes too compulsive and demanding an institution not merely in life but in art as well and is an insistent and repeated theme. Also as an expatriate Indian, he has become totally alien to the traditional Indian family and recreates it in his poetry. What A. S. P. Iyer observes of the family in the context of East-West encounters becomes true of Ramanujan's poetry:

The family which is our centre, falls only on the Englishman's circumference, and Society, which is our circumference, is his centre. 1

And Ramanujan cannot let the family be his circumference however much he has been influenced by Western thought and culture.

The vision of family in the two volumes of Ramanujan's poetry is conditioned and modified by his education and experience. The family as a unit of society is not ideally what it should be—the essence of ethics and morality, the transmitter of the good and a symbol of the harmony of

1 'The English Family and the Indian', An Indian in Western Europe, Coomaraswamy Naidu & Sons, Madras, 1948, p. 466.
enduring individualities in a common frame of reference.\textsuperscript{1}
Even as non-relationship is central to his vision of love, so non-love and selfishness, in his portrayal of the hypocrisy and deception practised in the name of so sacred an institution as family. This attitude is possibly fostered by his expatriate status.

The decline of family values is a world-wide phenomenon and parallels the decline of philosophy, morality and religion in the life of man.\textsuperscript{2} This disintegration is mainly due to the social crisis of modern times which makes self-preservation an end in itself, with man becoming a "victim of the expansion of the abstract subject, the ego."\textsuperscript{3} This cultural necrosis is a part of the history of civilisations like Greece, Sparta and even India. In literary history, the self has become more and more the burden of poetry as a result of the bifurcation of the individual and the society, of the separation of man from the community in which he lived and from the family into which he was born. As one who has uprooted himself from his familial and cultural tradition, Ramanujan sees the family as no force of integration or the preserver of human values. It

\begin{enumerate}
\item Anshen, p.4.
\item Anshen, p.9.
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is a victim of the ills that flesh is heir to. Ramanujan
dwells on this aspect of family, how the joint family is
'joint' only at the superficial level. He can be said to be
viewing the institution, in which there is still a great deal
of vitality and validity, from the other end of the telescope
in the manner of Swift and his picture of Brobdignag.

The poetry with the thematic centre as family can be
seen under two heads, poems which deal directly with the
members of the family as for example 'Still Another For
Mother', 'Of Mothers, Among Others Things', 'Lines to a
Grandmother', 'A Hindu to his Unborn Daughter', and poems
in which the family and its association are deployed as
'occasions' to illustrate or amplify his theme as in 'The
Opposable Thumb' or 'A Leaky Tap at Sister's Wedding' or
'Snakes'. The synthesis of family as unit and as metaphor
reaches its apotheosis in 'Small-Scale Reflections on a
Great House'.

The poetic manner in all these is marked by a
brilliance of realistic detail. The confrontation with
reality as it is, is made without inhibitions and the
exposure as in the poems dealing with love or alienation
is ruthless. The felicity of diction shows beyond doubt the
superb command that Ramanujan has over English and silences
any stale controversy about thinking in the mother tongue
and translating in English.

In 'Still Another for Mother', he recollects in an
oblique manner his affection for his mother in his
oblique manner. The affection is only inferred and not
directly spoken of. He operates through indirections and the
whole poem with the exception of the title, of the
last four lines and the simile in the sixth line that she
was large, buxom, / like some friend's mother', has really
nothing of mother in it.

The woman of Hyde Park Street 'who will not let him
rest' is responsible for his journey down memory lane, to
reach the home of mother. However, he insistently dwells on
the present, in fact, the near past - how he has been the
town's brown stranger and guest', and sees her as the
archetypal mother figure. The comparison to the friend's
buxom mother and not his own makes for objectivity. The
poet deliberately loses himself in description in the next
movement of the poem. He speaks of the handsome short-
limbed man 'with a five finger patch of grey laid on his
widow's peak', of her dress 'as fuzz-red', 'the wishbone
shadows on the cat - walk' and 'keys which become words'.
The three people - the man, the woman and the narrator
continue to walk: 'I discovered that mere walking was
polite / and walked on, as if, nothing had happened / to
her, or to me'. What would have been an intensely absorbing
drama peters to nothing - Ramanujan cheats us out of a
complex human problem of relationship. The poem very
nearly degenerates into an exercise in verbal dexterity.

1 Selected Poems, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1976,
pp.6-7.
The conclusion saves the poem from its mediocrity, with the syntax with its continuous flow reminiscent of Lawrence's poem 'Snake':

... something opened... in the past and I heard something shut in the future quietly,
like the heavy door of mother's black-pillared nineteenth-century silent house, given on her marriage day to my father, for a dowry.

The reminiscence is teasingly vague: the 'something that opened in the past' and that 'shut itself quietly in the future' is not identified. It is further lost in the concreteness of the epithet-laden simile. By inference, it is the door of the house of memory that is closed to futile reminiscences, and in the act shuts the mind forcibly to a tradition lost irrevocably. Again, the future without the solid past is bleak - as eerily silent and standstill as the ancestral mansion given as dowry. The poem is thus not really a poem on mother as the title suggests. It is a poem on losses, the chief being the loss of family affection and tradition in which the mother figure is the dominant force.

'OF MOTHERS, among other Things', is a more direct reminiscence of mother and striking in its pictorial quality. The title is misleading with the use of the plural for mother and its mixing of capitals and small letters. The natural instinct for indirection rears its

1 Selected Poems, p. 22.
mischief and head but is put down. The capitalisation in the title shows that mothers are really more important than other things. The result is pure poetry of a high order, rich in sensuous images.

The very opening is suggestive of the intimacy with mother, the closeness of physical contact:

I smell upon this twisted blackbone tree the silk and white petal of my mother's youth...

The softness and tenderness coupled with the sheer beauty of mother is beautifully immortalised in the silk and white petal of her youth. The mother is remembered in her everyday action which she performs with dedication. The attention to meticulous detail seen even in such a trivial action as picking a grain of rice from the kitchen floor characterises not merely her fastidiousness but the poet's craft as well. Even as the mother is not indifferent to the little grain of rice, so the poet who is scrupulous about giving this apparently insignificant detail, whether it is looking after babies or attending to daily chores, she is the symbol of religious dedication. The poet vividly recalls how she runs back from 'rain' to the crying cradles' and quietly slips in the garden accident. He casually speaks of her sarees hanging, 'loose feather of a onetime wing'. And it is at the end that feeling chokes him for he cannot really feel

1 The mother's action is fundamental to a traditional orthodox Hindu upbringing. Rice is 'Annalakshmi' and no grain should be insulted by stamping on it. The mother's action is thus involuntary.
as he is numbed with pain and sorrow:

... My cold parchment tongue licks bark
in the mouth when I see her four
still sensible fingers slowly flex
to pick a grain of rice from the kitchen floor.

However, the mother continues her routine as if nothing
has happened, displaying the same selflessness as Ezakiel's
mother figure in 'Night of the Scorpion'.

Two images stand out for their brilliant evocative
power: one is the picture of the rain:

... The rains tuck and sew
with broken thread the rags
of the tree-tasselled light.

The beautiful image of raindrops acting like thread to sew
'tassels of light' is striking and almost metaphysical in
effect.

The other image which is equally striking in its
beauty and precision is the description of the mother's hand:

... But her hands are a wet eagle's
two black pink-crinkled feet,
one talon crippled in a garden-
trap set for a mouse....

The ambiguity, characteristic of the poet's art, makes for
the surprise at the end. The reference is to the eagle
which has lost a talon in the mouse-trap. It is in the last
stanza that the reader realises that the metaphor is
perfect in its attention to minute detail: the mother too
has lost one of her fingers. A close reading of the poem
shows that Ramanujan has already prepared the reader for
the comparison as the sarees worn by mother have been
compared to the feathers of a bird. The simile shows that
his mother stands as a symbol of both power and grace and he recalls her with tenderness and love.

In 'Obituary', the penultimate poem in the volume Relations, the theme is the death of father which rings the death - knell of any relations with a world built round the family. The tragedy of the bereavement is minimised as the poet's self loses itself in trivial details. This oblique technique as in the mother poems, accentuates the greatness of the less. It is surprising that nothing edifying is said of father who when he 'passed on':

... left dust
on a table full of papers,
left debts and daughters
a bedwetting grandson
named by the toss
of a coin after him,

a house that leaned
slowly through our growing
years on a bent coconut
tree in the yard....

Dust, debts, daughters and grandsons are all the grammatical objects of the verb 'left' and in collocating them thus in alliterative rhythm the poet confronts realistically what the dead in effect leave behind. Marriages of daughters invariably involve debts. However, the grandson is named after him not out of love or as a traditional practice but absurdly enough 'by the toss of a coin'. Again, the house is no mansion but is an old, dilapidated structure. All this ironically

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1 The father is remembered not with the same affection or closeness as the mother. His natural affection is tempered by his critical stance.
points to the obvious glaring detail: the family of which
the dead father was the head is by no means an affluent
one. The poet - narrator seems to be critical of upholding
such tradition which can ruin even a 'Great House'.

The effort to remain detached is seen in the cryptic
utterance. 'Being the burning type, / he burned properly /
at the cremation as before.' The aftermath of the cremation,
the rites performed are given in bald diction:

... left his eye coins
in the ashes that didn't
look one bit different,
several spinal discs, rough,
some burned to coal, for sons
to pick gingerly
and throw as the priest
said, facing east
where three rivers met
near the railway station....

Since father was cremated he had no headstone to speak of
his birth and death. This would have had 'his full name and
two dates / to hold in their parentheses everything he didn't
quite manage to do himself.' The deflation is obviously in
the word 'everything' which includes:

... his caesarian birth
in a brahmin ghetto
and his death by heart -
failure in the fruit market....

Whatever be the manner of disposing the dead, the poet
seems skeptical about it though he cleverly avoids direct
comment on any traditional practice and confines himself
to objective narration. However the father's death had
... he got two lines
in an inside column
of a Madras newspaper
sold by the kilo
exactly four weeks later
to street hawkers

who sell it in turn
to the small groceries
where I buy salt,
coriander,
and jaggery
in newspaper cones
that I usually read

for fun...

And natural curiosity and not fun impels him to
continue this 'in the hope of finding / these obituary
lines'. Ramanujan's sidetracking into such trivia as to
what is done with newspapers shows his reluctance to
confront the intensity of the grief due to bereavement. As
in other poems, he makes even so serious a theme as death
in the family an excuse for escaping into other details.
However, in his characteristic fashion he saves the poem
in the last poignant lines:

And he left us
a changed mother
and more than
one annual ritual.

And this inheritance bears no relation to debts, daughters
bedwetting grandsons or dilapidated house. The mother is
the most affected by father's death and she is changed in
every sense of the word. It is here that the tragedy of
the bereavement lies: Ritual cannot bring back father,
and mother can never be the same again.
In 'Lines to a Granny' he immortalises the archetype of the Hindu joint family, the grandmother who symbolises affection tempered with home-truths to last for a lifetime. She is the eternal story-teller and the poem is a direct apostrophe to her. The tale she weaves is exotic, a fantasy to hold spellbound any youngster. It is similar to the Arthurian knights' tales where knights go in search of adventure and rescue damsels in distress. This particular tale has filigree finesss: the wandering prince 'will prance / again to splash his noonday image in the sleep of these pools'. He knows language 'unknown to man; which 'will break with sesame words / known only to the birds / the cobweb curtained door.' At his entry, as in the romantic tale of Sleeping Beauty, 'the sentinel, the bawdy cook; / and even the parrot in the cage will shout his name / to the gossip of the kitchen's blousy flame'. A tale of which any grandchild will never tire, the post-narrator naturally wants the story to be repeated:

... Let him, dear granny,  
shape the darkness  
and take again  
the princess  
whose breath would hardly strain  
the spider's design. ...

The conclusion brings both the reader and narrator to the plane of reality though it is difficult to accept the end unquestioningly:

... But tell me now; was it for some irony  
you have waited in death
to let me learn again what once you learnt in youth, that this is no tale, but truth?

This is one of those rare poems without any tinge of cynicism or satire. The poet feels the touch of romance in real life through his affectionate grandmother and her romantic tales lovingly told.

Grandmother is also recalled in two other poems 'The Opposable Thumb' and 'The Hindoo: he doesn't Hurt a Fly or a Spider either'. In 'The Opposable Thumb' she is still the narrator of a story but her missing fingers are the focus of interest: 1

... said my granny, rolling her elephant leg like a log in a ruined mill:

'One two three four five
five princes in a forest
each one different like the fingers on a hand'.

But her thrilling fairytale is lost in her personal tragedy:

... and we always looked to find on her paw just one finger left of five: a real thumb, no longer usual, casual, or opposable after her husband's
knifing temper one sunday morning half a century ago.

In spite of this, the grandmother has not lost faith in life and is still able to regale her grandchildren with stories.

The other reference in the Hindoo poem makes her the heroine of a love triangle and she is used as the pretext to show why a Hindoo doesn't hurt a fly or spider. This reveals Ramanujan's flair for the absurd. It is possible that the poet is trying to break the blind acceptance of elders by

1 *The Striders*, p. 5.
showing even they have their faults.

By making these family members people his poems, the poet shows his concern for the family as an institution. To him, it is the microcosm of human life. He verbalises what is embarrassingly intimate to its members. While grandmother and mother escape at least in part from his disapproving gaze and censure, the other members of the family are exposed for their foibles.

In 'Real Estate' is the ironic portrait of the cousin who 'knows buildings; / he knows them well.' With a keen sense of humour, the poet observes:

... He can even tell their gender by one look at the basement... 

The whole portrait is full of irony. As an architect he is full of knowledge about his profession. There is a humorous reference to the fact that he constructs only tall buildings and is the 'Architect of our vertical / future'. Also 'where he is / there are cranes in the sky,'. As a modern architect, he knows 'glass was good' and invests it with human qualities. The irony is that while 'it's rational, / it reflects,' it also 'refracts all things for the man within,'

The sharpest irony lies in the cousin being described as a humanist:

... Humanist, he calculates stress and strain on wood

1. Relations, p.35.
and steel, on liver and lower brain.
When the lift gets stuck
in the marble quarry
or workmen go berserk
on the thirtieth floor,
his men collect within the hour
for the widows and the clerk
who lost his head in that altitude.

What is exposed is the callous indifference to human life.
The architect is no real humanist for though he takes great care about how much stress his wood and steel can bear, he overlooks the capacity of his workers and makes them do things beyond their limited powers. This results in tragedy - the death of workers when the lift gets stuck or when in high altitudes. However, he is a 'humanist' of some sort as the workers are allowed to make a collection to give to the destitute family.

The hit at this architect is aimed with the greatest force at his professional acumen. Though he professed that glass and steel were indispensable, it seems as if he had something to do with the 'reeking / crotches of rotting timber / bought years ago / for my uncle's / very carefully imagined / houses.' There is no direct evidence, only the 'uncle's nephews, know / windows without walls / or the kinds of grass that grow / in the twinkle of an uncle's eye.'

In 'Any Cow's Horn Can Do It', he exposes the idiosyncrasies of a woman who will be affected by many things, but not a poem: 'nothing you say with words / in a poem will make her scream.' In 'When It Happens' is the frank narration of  

1 Relations, pp.37-38.
brutal behaviour in the family to a girl who has transgressed when even 'mothers mean harm' and 'brothers practise cirrus knives'.

The most telling exposure of the lack of codes of behaviour is that of the petite aunt in 'History'. The title 'History' is misleading for it is not about cataclysmic events. It is all about an aunt and how the family history 'changes sometimes during a single conversation'. The poem rests on the insignificant detail: 'the petite little aunt / in her garden of sweet limes / now carries a different / face, not merely older or colder / or made holy / by deaths and children's failures.'

The single conversation with mother enables him to fix the expression on the little aunt's face. The poem glides to the past, to 'the day my great aunt died'. As a little child, totally unaffected by the tragedy of death and the changes in its wake, the poet-narrator is present:

. . . by one of those chances children never miss,
looking for a green ball I never lost. . . .

He vividly recollects the dead aunt, 'face incurious / eyes yet unshut, / between glass curio bureau / under a naked cobweb bulb / next to a yellow dim window.' He also remembers the 'little dark aunt's face.' Where in the first flash of the photographic memory, the setting of the drawing room is caught almost with clinical precision, in the next

1 Relations, p. 39.
it is the portrait that the lens catches with sheer clarity and finesse:

... And my little dark aunt was there
-nose eyes and knees-bend out
fresh from stone for a Parvathi statue...

The comparison of the aunt to the statue of goddess Parvathi whose perfection of form and face fills Hindu religious lore is striking in effect - for ironically enough the aunt does not possess any divine qualities to warrant the metaphor. It is an exaggerated comparison to emphasize the contrary that the aunt was least divine in her character. However, the poet-narrator objectively recalls the episode of the aunt looking for something under the cot which, in his childhood innocence, he thought:

... may be a rolling pin
her little son had brought for play
from under the kitchen mob
of cooking and washing relatives...

The poet's flair for precise narration and for suspense is obvious. The aunt was not looking for something so harmless as a rolling pin. She was not prompted by any philanthropic intention of returning it to the kitchen but was actually with her fair sister but 'unknown to her' in the act 'of picking her mother's body clean'. Of course, it is the mother's story recreated but has the graphic and authentic quality of first person narration:

... But yesterday
my mother said, I've never told
anyone what happened that day your great-aunt died:
with all those children in and out of the death-room, all the kith and kin milling in the kitchen, wet faggot smoke,
and rumours about the will, her two
daughters, one dark one fair,
unknown each to the other
alternately picked their mother's body clean
before it was cold
or the eyes were shut,
of diamond ear-rings,
bangles, anklets, the pin
in her hair,
the toe-rings from her wedding
the previous century
all except the gold
in her teeth and the silver g-string
they didn't know she wore . . .

The day is recalled with vividness and the horrible deed of
the daughters is described with unerring precision—such that i
cannot never be forgotten. Their crass materialism makes them
so thoroughly inhuman that they even fail to pay the last
respect to the dead, of closing the eyes which even a stranger
would have done. This recreation of the family history serves
only this purpose:

. . . and the dark
stone face of my little aunt
acquired some expression
at last.

Her face is not made holy by death. The expression is
indescribable, her inhuman deed makes it more so. Ramanujan
avoids describing it directly and only tells us what it is
not, leaving us to draw our own inferences. The narrative is
tautly woven through verbal patterning, the recurrent word
motifs are 'dark' 'stone' 'face' and 'little'. In the end,
the little aunt is no longer the same person. The poem
indirectly mourns the loss of values such as love and
affection, respect for the aged and dead which are
traditionally upheld in a Hindu family. It points to the
degeneracy of human nature. Ramanujan's poetic power, verbal felicity and penetrating insight into life implies it, such is the potency of his craft. The aunt's sub-human act is almost parallel to the ant in the previous poem 'Old Indian Belief' where the ant is said to stay away from live cobras but will 'pick the flesh off dead ones to the last ivory rib.'

Among relations, daughters are frequently mentioned in the poem and he has one poem on an unborn daughter. This is significant in a tradition which attaches enormous importance to the birth of a son. With reference to the unborn daughter in the poem 'It does not follow but in the street' he speaks of having a sharp and gentle daughter 'in the future along with old age, a fire, a clean first floor'. In 'Entries for a Catalogue of Fears', the association is none too pleasant when he collocates 'sudden knives and urchin / laughter / in the night alley / add now / the men in line behind my daughter'. In 'Routine Day', it is a pleasant recollection of a walk before dark with the daughter 'to mark / another cross on the papaya tree;'. This is followed by 'dinner, coffee, bedtime story / of dog, bone and shadow.' In 'Any Cow's Horn Can Do It', the reference is to the daughter caught in a clandestine affair and getting belted by father. Very rarely do these references touch on loving relationships. He seems to suggest that non-relationship rather than a sense of community characterises human action.

The preoccupation with family reaches its peak in
The baffling complex of a huge joint family is presented simply in terms of things that come in everyday into the house 'to lose themselves among other things / lost long ago among / other things lost long ago;'. The repetition of 'lost long ago' with the alliteration of 'l' and the assonance of the vowel 'o' invests the lines with an incantatory music and the vowel length takes us back in time. The present tense signifies the universal and makes the events of long ago appear recent, fresh and vibrant. The obvious symbol is the endlessness of the family as institution and the first person narrator becomes as much a part of the family in the past as of the present.

The casualness of 'Small-Scale Reflections' is struck in the very opening lines:

Sometimes I think that nothing that ever comes into this house goes out. . . .

The ensuing casual details suggest a wealth of association that are a peculiar blend of the pleasant and the unsavoury. The great house obviously symbolises the huge joint family. It possesses an infinite capacity to allow many diverse things ranging from lame cows, books, ideas, relatives and even corpses to enter it and amazingly enough retains all. Paradoxically whatever leaves it returns like the prodigal

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1 The title has been adopted by Walsh in his article 'Small-Scale Reflections on a Large Subject' and by S.C. Harrex, 'Small-Scale Reflections on Indian English Language Poetry'.

son, transformed. The meticulous attention to detail, and
the fastidious selection make the reflection by no means
small-scale.

The craft also is testimony to this. A striking feature
of the poem is its balanced structure: the equipoise is
maintained between things that enter the house and the things
that leave it. The number is eight each, and this coincids
seems the crafting of over-scrupulousness. Again, each verse
paragraph has seventeen lines - each sub-divided into four
units of three run-on lines with a last line forming a
separate end. However, as in Eliot's 'Preludes' where there
is unity in fragmentation, here the verse paragraph cannot
be taken out and read as a complete unit especially as the
lines run into one another, and the sense never stops with the
technical ending. The effect of continuity with uneven run-on
lines is also suggestive of the 'perennial' nature of fami

One theme is the overwhelming generosity of the Great
House in permitting anything to enter or leave it. The
implied criticism is the lack of discrimination, the absence
of selection which will ensure quality. Anyone is free to
enter the house and therefore its greatness suffers. Even
lame cows have 'known to be tethere'd / given a name
encouraged / to get pregnant in the broad daylight'. The
Great House is not really great for these 'wandering cows
came from nowhere'. The act of tethering them is petty;
but the irony is that a 'small-scale reflection' is bound
to take only this line of thought, to detract from the
greatness of the institution.
The inmates of a 'Great House' do not read the library books that enter it. What is revealing is that they do not bother to return them on time which shows their complacency and indifference. That the books have been kept for a long time is mentioned with a fine ironic narration:

... begin to lay a row
of little eggs in the ledgers
for fines, as silverfish
in the old man's office room

bread dynasties among long legal words
in the succulence
of Victorian parchment...

Humour and irony result from the keen perception of incongruities silver fish can hardly be substitute for silver coins.

The third entry into the house - 'neighbour's dishes' is mentioned without any critical remark. Only they 'never leave the house they enter, / like the servants, the phonographs, / the epilepsies in the blood'. The unusual collocation of eatables, people, mechanical objects and even hereditary diseases only shows the keen powers of observation of the poet-narrator who sharply focusses on the incongruities associated with the house.

The last entrant 'the sons-in-law who forget / their mothers, but stay to check / accounts or teach arithmetic to nieces,' is sarcastically viewed. A 'Great House' has to uphold tradition and here it is patriarchal where the son stays in his ancestral house with his parents. And the 'Great House' fails to respect this tradition by harbouring
the son-in-law. Whether the Great House champions tradition or flouts it, is left to be inferred from this detail quietly given.

From Stanza IV the things that leave the Great House are mentioned and they boomerang into it after being transformed. The hoop e bales of raw cotton come back processed and often with long bills attached. This happens after they had been sent to Manchester:

... shipped off to invisible Manchesters and brought back milled and folded
for a price, cloth for our days' middle-class loins, and muslin for our richer nights...

Letters too came back:

... have a way of finding their way back with many re-directions to wrong addresses and red ink marks
earned in Tiruvella and Sialkot...

The criticism of academics who steal ideas which become as popular and as irrelevant is quietly given alongside this comparatively significant detail. It is given as a 'rumour' and this makes it more effective:

... like what Uncle said the other day:

that every Plotinus we read is what some Alexander looted between the malarial rivers...

An equally telling example to illustrate that 'ideas behave like rumours, / once casually mentioned somewhere / they come back to the door as prodigies / born to prodigal fathers' is that of the beggar:
A beggar once came with a violin
to croak out a prostitute song
that our voicelass cook sang
all the time in our backyard...

All this shows that the Great House is really great in its
capacity to accommodate everyone and does not alienate anyone
from it.

This is reinforced by the point-blank beginning of the
penultimate stanza: 'nothing stays out'. Whether they leave or
enter, the Great House belongs to all. So the widowed
daughters who 'get married to short-lived idiots' come back.
As if to balance this, the sons run away leaving their progeny.
Irony pervades the lines: 'sons who runaway come back / in
grandchildren who recite Sanskrit / to approving old men, or
bring / betelnut for visiting uncles'. Also the uncles are
ironised as gossips, who keep the grandchildren 'gaping with /
anecdotes of unseen fathers,'. The mention of 'ganges water'
may seem an irrelevancy but 'Ganges water pots' adorn every
Hindu household altar. Only the incongruity of treating
betelnuts and Ganges water on par can be questioned but this
observation of the incongruous is Ramanujan's forte.

The continuity of the poem is emphasised in the first
line of the last stanza forming the last line of the
penultimate one. The 'many times' is reduced to twice and the
suspense of what it denotes is prolonged. The event in
1943 is cursorily mentioned with the gruesome detail of the
body brought home 'half-gnawed by desert foxes'. The recent
event which marks another entry into the Great House is the
result of 'an incident on the border' - the death of a
nephew in the war:
... a nephew with stripes
on his shoulder was called
an incident on the border
and was brought back in plane
and train and military truck
even before the telegrams reached,
on a perfectly good
chatty afternoon.

The poem ends on the brilliant understatement. Death too
freely enters the Great House and the shock of this untimely
intrusion is left to be imagined. The and seems abrupt but
as usual Ramanujan leaves everything to the imagination
after the description.

All the poems show the commitment to the Indian way of
life in their critical stance. The 'intallaction' serves to
mitigate the emotional intensity. Ramanujan and other poets
do not espouse any political cause; theirs is the concern
with life and living in their native milieu to which they are
unequivocally committed. Their poetry with its human and
urban orientation is 'committed' in so far as it expresses the
human predicament and settles for 'compromise' rather than
protest with the awareness that the individual self has to
turn from its own self to the outside and the sense of
community that Ramanujan feels is overshadowed by his
criticalness. However he sees the need for the sense of
community in returning to his family in his poetry even if
it is only to expose its flaws.

Nissim Ezekiel's peculiar position as a Jew of the Bené-
Israel community can to a certain extent justify the absence
of a 'social conscience'. Surprisingly his deep-rooted conviction to belong, his desire to be very much an insider in spite of being an outsider is translated into poetry. His latest volume, *Hymns in Darkness* forms the climactic point of his committedness to India and its people and he has many poems depicting vividly the Indian scene with sympathy and understanding. As Birje-Patil remarks: Ezekiel's voice grows more ironic and detached as he develops, and one notices a distinct tilt towards social concern.1

As in his poems on love and self-alienation, here too, he practises moderation. There is no intense emotion to animate the poetry. In striking contrast to Pratish Nandy who is prone to excesses of emotion and extravagance of expression, Ezekiel's poetry is characterized by 'a human balance humanly acquired, / fruitful in the common hour'. The creed is moderation which alone will preserve the social structure which can be built securely only with slowness and steadiness. This creed is expressed in 'A Poem of Dedication':

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\ldots all organic growth is slow
Both poetry and living illustrate
Each season brings its own peculiar fruits
A time to act, a time to contemplate.2
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In the pursuit of moderation he has to reject 'the yogi's concentration or the perfect charity of saints or the tyrant's endless power'. And in the rejection of these extremes,

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2 *Sixty Poems*, p.3.
protest is also given up. The poetry expressing the need for
and awareness of community and revealing a sense of commitment
thus exposes quietly—but forcefully—human attitudes. There is
no bitterness, no anger, only an ironic accommodation typical
of the poetic stance after the fifties.

The human balance of Ezekiel's vision is seen in his
active concern for people. His poetry invariably has a human
centre—as does that of Parthasarathy and Ramanujan. He is
able to delineate sympathetically the poorer class of people
like Yashwant Jagtap, Ganga, the servant, the suffering mother
and the railway clerk. His mischievous irony is evident in
his depiction of the behaviour of the Muslim girl, in the
portrait of the Boss and the visitor. His poems on people
form a veritable portrait gallery and stand as ample testimony
to his feeling of community with other
selves. This is more evident in his earlier volumes. In
The Exact Name and in Hymns in Darkness, people are linked
with social problems and the problem becomes the poetic concern
Sixty Poems, the second volume, reveals Ezekiel's
preoccupation with people. His sense of community here
manifests itself as something generic and not specific,
relating to a particular issue. The focus is on an isolated
situation with a human fulcrum. The possibility of this small
beginning is great, the human interest can develop into a
commitment to society. This proves true in Ezekiel's case
as interest in people like the Boss and the visitor leads to
an interest in man's collective problems later on.
'A Visitor', dealing with the theme of human relationship is a short poem of four stanzas written in the conventional metrical and rhyme pattern - sadata pentameter lines with alternate rhyme - the poet-self gives the conventional clichéd advice to the visitor. Only the touch of irony which prepares us for the surprise turn at the end of the poem, lifts it out of its commonplace quality. The technique of reported speech for narration while spotlighting the narrator also allows for a certain detachment. This is in contrast to the use of direct speech in 'Case Study' and 'Situation' for the same effect of emphasis. Irony - which is Ezekiel's forte is two-edged here - as the visitor and the poet in the role of adviser are in the same dilemma: the visitor seeks the advice of a person who cannot extricate himself from the same situation. The image of the tree of life uprooted by a sudden storm, though a hackneyed image with obvious Biblical overtones has not lost its vividness. In Ezekiel's style, images are few and after this effort at image-making, he falls a prey to a rather weak line, 'And what he did to set it right again'. The pronominal reference 'it' is ambiguous as both 'tree' and 'life', are possible substitutes. Only an uprooted tree cannot be 'set right' and the confusion of terms makes for loss of poetic quality. But the sheer simplicity of diction coupled with the gentle irony makes the portrait come alive.  

1 Chetan Karnani singles out this quality with reference to this poem. As a verbal portraitist, Ezekiel
The poem in *The Exact Name* with the same title is better structured with the carefully controlled movement to its conclusion. Compared to Oum Morasa's 'The Visitor', it is a simple piece. Written in stanzas of six uneven lines with no end-rhyme, the poem adequately illustrates Ezekiel's development in technique: he has freed himself from the clipped effect of rhyme and has achieved a quieter even flow in verse. The suppleness and fluidity of the verse movement is enhanced due to this eschewal of rhyme.

The prose rhythms of an easy conversational style account for its charming simplicity. The poem is based on so flimsy a folk-belief 'that following the coming of a crow a visitor would come'. Ezekiel has perfect mastery over the situation that the interest never flags. The crow is the focal point of attention in the first stanza, coming thrice and 'filling the room with voice and presence'. The portrait of the crow is finally etched with an eye for detail:

... wings slightly raised
In sinister poise, body tense
And neck craned like a nagging woman's...

The meticulousness of the observation is seen in noting that the wings are only slightly raised and not fully so, as is characteristic of this cawing posture. The poise is naturally sinister, the crow being a carrion bird and in

... can bring a person alive, through the use of ordinary or commonplace words. 'A Visitor' provides a good illustration of his practice'. Karnani, p.32.
the context, the sense of foreboding to these, for the kind of visitor who will come is a mystery. The homely comparison of the cawing crow to a nagging woman is tinged with humour for no one can turn a deaf ear to the insistent demands of both. The persona is forced to heed its message even though he has been 'sleep walking on the air of thought'. Rudely interrupted in his reverie, he floats down, overruled by his 'concern for all created things'. Like the poet, lover or bird-watcher he waits patiently for 'the visitor whose terms would compromise (his) own'.

The animated suspense and guesswork about the identity of the portentous visitor is depicted in stanza 3:

... An angel in disguise, perhaps,
Or else temptation in unlikely shape
To test my promises, ruin my sleep...

Whether an angel or devil, the poet-narrator is faced with a reckoning as the last line clearly reveals.

In the last two stanzas, there is a confrontation with reality which in true Ezekiel fashion deflates the imaginative anticipation of the third stanza. Only Ezekiel's respect for tradition permits no mockery of the belief for the visitor does arrive but not as expected: 'He was not like that at all'. With delicacy and refinement, he contrasts what might have been with what is. The visitor is neither angel nor tempter:

... His hands were empty his need
Only to kill a little time
Between his good intentions
And my sympathy, the cigarette smoke
was more substantial than our talk...
The gentle irony is the paradox of even the Prufrockian smoke having more substance to it than their idle talk. From this experience of meeting an aimless visitor who just wanted company, a life truth emerges: the ordinariness of most events. The poet-self's commitment to life and living things cannot reveal anything spectacular. It only sharpens his awareness of the commonplace quality of life. In this, Ezekiel is a poet of the ordinary even as R.K. Narayan is a novelist of the average. What prevails ultimately in life is the quicksands of routine even though there are occasional 'miracles of mind, blazing figures, ebb-flow of sea and the seasons.'

'Portrait' and 'Boss', like 'A Visitor' are man-oriented and illustrate the truth brought out in 'A Visitor' that life is mostly ordinary routine. The picture is essentially that of the urban man who moves from the phenomenal world of nature to the 'rough-textured uncertainties of city life.' 'Portrait' lists the trivia of city life and the tone oscillates between irony and seriousness without any antagonism towards life. The looseness of structure detracts from poetic quality but can be taken to symbolise the chaos of urban living.

1 The expression is a parallel to Parthasarathy's 'small change of uncertainties'.

2 Taranath's comment is worth noting: The casual conventional tone links itself with an urban motif which incidentally defines a modern stance. The purely contemporary in the above poem however is present as details of urban life. The Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel, Calcutta, Writers Workshop, 1966, pp.7-8.
In 'Boss', a short poem of three stanzas of differing number of lines (the first two have three and the last four lines) the realistic picture of an urban office is vividly drawn. What is ironised is the dull routine of office which comes home forcefully through the repetition of such phrases as 'bent and busy head', 'the fan turns', 'no fire burns but bells ring'. As in 'Visitor' in which the protagonist dreams of 'angels in disguise' here too there is a 'dream-window'. But it is not the Keatsian 'charm'd magic easement' looking out into faery lands forlorn. The grim irony is that the window stares back into the busy room emphasising not merely the unromantic routine of officialdom but also its tentacular hold from which there can be no escape. The big boss is irrevocably committed to the routine of business life.

In 'Servant' (not collected in a volume) he sympathetically portrays the routine of the servant class which even like the 'Boss' is fated to be chained to the drudgery of everyday living. The poem is a simple, straightforward and unvarnished narration. The artistic objectivity saves it from being just another pedestrian verse.

Where these earlier poems on people have only a generic title, in others like 'Yashwant Jagtap' and 'Ganga', (Also 'For William Carlos Williams', 'Jamini Ray', 'Satish Gujral') the characters are given names to invest their situation with greater realism and credibility. This particularization in giving a 'local habitation and name' to the poetic
character adds to the realism, the modus operandi of Ezekiel's poetic vision which makes it a part of the mainstream of English Poetry.

While Jatish Gujral shows his concern for art and artists and can be placed alongside Jamini Ray in this respect, Ganga and Yashwant Jagtap are poems of social concern. That he makes such insignificant folk the theme of his poetry is testimony to his sense of community which sees no class barriers. Both Ganga the servant maid and Jagtap, the poor peasant share a fatalistic acceptance of their abject lot. Jagtap's terrible poverty and his suffering in the rain in silence are depicted with almost clinical objectivity:

A true-blue Indian he
who cannot sleep because
it rains. The water gushes
through his roof. There is
a cot for him, his wife
a son, a brother's son;
they perch on it
and wait for light.

Yashwant Jagtap demonstrates
how he spends the night
when the water rises high:
He places the child on his shoulder
that is where he sleeps, ...

The reader is left numb and helpless and the implied irony
is that in similar life-situations the same attitude
characterises the onlookers.

In 'Ganga' the stinging irony, though couched in simple
terms, of man's inhumanity to man and in particular the
servant class is hard to miss. The veiled protest made
through mere delineation of the situation is against the
ill-treatment of servants, Ganga is the arch-type of this oppressed class whose problem is as perennial as the overflowing Ganga.  

Ironic barbs fill the poem giving it the critical intensity of a stung social conscience. A striking example is the use of the word 'generosity', an understatement for the callous behaviour of the employers in doling out one stale 'chapathi' to her. Again since she is satisfied with minimal wages, she is retained though "she leaves a small behind her."

The irony is three-fold: first it is directed against the master who is sub-human in his treatment of the servant; second it is directed against the servant who has become so immune to her miserable state that she raises no voice of protest and third against the reader who is a daily witness to such situations and does nothing about it. The poet however is not absolved totally of the guilt of indifference: he only brings it to the public gaze. There is no angry protest, only an awareness. Hence whatever 'commitment' to society can be discerned in the poems is only of a limited kind as the poetic self prefers to be ambiguous.

Yet, the poem succeeds because of the sympathetic delineation and the ironic technique. The irony is effectively brought in the technique of listing what is

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Note: The servant has nothing of the poetry that Jawaharlal Nehru finds in the river as vividly described in his 'Last Will and Testament'. It is more the Wordsworthian 'still sad music of humanity' that she
given to her with a qualifying remark: She always gets / a cup of tea / preserved for her / from the previous 
evening, / and a Chapati, stale / but in good condition. / Once a year, an old / sari and a blouse / ... small coins 
for Pan / or a sweet for her child. The clever use of mere 
statement also reveals the critical stance. While the 
intensity of feeling is lacking and prevents the poem from 
reaching great heights, to inject it would be 
uncharacteristic of Ezekiel's style. 1

In 'Guru', the ironic stance is illustrative of 
Ezekiel's genuine concern for social problems. Here the 
irony extends to the very title for the so called 'Guru' 
is no real 'Guru', the traditionally venerated preceptor 
and teacher but represents the modern cult of materialism. 
The 'Guru' as an exemplar has ceased to be one of the 
themes of literature. It is the worldliness of 'Guru' that 
finds extensive treatment in the Indian drama and the 
novel. The true nature of the 'Guru' stands exposed as in 
Tagore's Sanyasi or Kamala Markandaya's Possession. 
Ezekiel's 'Guru' identifies himself with the crowd of 
worshippers and makes no claim to uniqueness. In this he is 
like R.K.Narayan's Raju, the hero of The Guide who becomes 
more saintly in the eyes of the villagers when he confesses 
to a rakish past. This possibly irritates in them the self-indulgent hope that they too may grow up like him. The 
casual tone of the poem intensifies the irony: the Guru

1 See Appendix.
had no spectacular sins to his credit as some others. He only shed his ordinary sins like 'old clothes' or 'creeds' which action suggests even if mischievously, that becoming a 'guru' is within the reach of the common man.

The second half of the poem contains the volte-face: the saint continues to be an ordinary man and what is more possesses still the faults of non-saints, 'especially men'. Deftly using the technique of deflation and paradox, Ezekiel paints the modern 'Guru' as being in truth an anti-guru with his gross materialism and sensuality. Ezekiel's poetic skill lies in his clever avoidance of affirmation. It is only an ironic accommodation with the tongue-in-cheek suggestion that if saints are not virtuous, there is no hope for ordinary mortals who by force of circumstances are constrained to be less virtuous than saints. The coup d'etat is in the glaring implication that ordinary man can be better than saints.

The poem is a rare example of irony becoming satire, though of a very gentle kind. What the poet criticises is the hypocrisy that man perpetrates in the name of religion even in India which is known for her spiritual heritage:

... But then we learn the saint is still a faithless friend, obstinate in argument, ungrateful for favours done, hard with servants and the poor, discourteous to disciples, especially man, condescending, even rude to visitors (except the foreigners) and overscrupulous in checking the accounts of the ashram He is also rather fat...
If 'Guru' is a mild satire on the religious hypocrisy, 'Entertainment' and 'The Truth about the Floods' deal directly with human attitudes to poverty and suffering. The three poems share the irony in the title. Just as the Guru proves to be no guru, so the entertainment is no mirth-spinner and the truth is not fully revealed about the floods.

'Entertainment' is a pin-prick to the complacent public who watch the show unfeelingly. The poem is one long unbroken piece without stanzaic divisions as if to project the continuity of the show. The poem and the show end only to begin again. Ezekiel's power of simple, well-defined description is the hallmark of the poem. As an experienced art critic who brings to bear on his poetry his critical acumen, he has the flair for focussing on the distinct image. The poem is dramatic in its frontal directness and has two movements which show the 'committedness' of the poet working at two levels: first is the picture of the participants who prepare for the show, delineated objectively:

... patient girl on haunches
holds the strings,
a baby in her arms,
Two tiny monkeys
in red and purple pantaloons
prepare to dance....

The picture is very similar to the actual scene that is witnessed in street corners, the stunts of the 'street dancers'. The girl has to be patient for both baby and monkeys can throw up tambourines. The baby is the 'lure' to draw sympathy—nothing can so effectively elicit concern
as a poor baby in indigent arms. The irony is even this
bait fails to get money in the end. Even as the crowd
collects:

... the Master of Ceremonies
drums frenzied, cracks whip,
calls the tricks
to earn applause and copper coins....

The second level of poetic awareness is in the
delineation of the audience. The observant eye of the
post-narrator catches the reaction of the audience - the
laughter of the children who are truly entertained. Among
his audience are the coolie and the untouchable woman
thrown in for an Indian flavour. It is the poet who
sympathetically visualises the show: he sees the sad eye
of the monkey which to him, unlike to the audience, is not
a source of fun but an object of sympathy in its fettered
state. The others are blind to its sadness for their
purpose is to be entertained even if it is at the expense
of another's pain. The baby's crying is the bell for
dismissal for no more entertainment is possible. The crowd,
anticipating the time for payment, dissolves - a typical
human reaction. The irony is that true to life, many prefer
to be entertained gratis and only 'some in shame part with
the smallest coin they have'. Yet, the Master of Ceremonies
continues the show at the next place for every copper coin
counts - Entertainment to him is a matter of life and death.

Karnani's criticism tends to generalise when he states
that the poet describes the amusing reactions of the
audience. Only the children are amused, the untouchable
woman is indifferent, the post-narrator is not at all amused. The poem is a muted awareness of the social scene where poverty is taken for granted and charitable instincts are almost dead.

If poverty has a deadening influence and anaesthetizes human values in 'Entertainment', it is politics in 'The Truth About the Floods'. The bald description of the floods in Bihar (an annual feature alternating with drought) is only a means to expose sharply the inefficient and inhuman political bureaucracy which operates at snail's pace. The ills of bureaucracy are not peculiar to India alone and this poem by itself cannot make Ezekiel a very Indian poet as Karnani observes. He transcends regional and national barriers and is truly universal.

The pungent irony implicit in every movement of the poem exposes the hypocrisy and stony-heartedness of the officials, and the student social workers. Ezekiel does not indulge in extravagant or vituperative diction. With his flair for irony and understatement and using his skill of repetition for effect, he makes the poem move slowly but steadily towards its foregone conclusion that the truth about the floods can never be fully told. The slow movement of the poem contrasts sharply with the urgency that such an emergency situation demands. But there is no quickness on the part of the people in taking action.

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1 Missim Ezekiel. Delhi, Arnold Heinemann, 1974, pp.95-110.
The analysis of the poem exposes this without doubt and Ezekiel in choosing to be quietly objective reveals his 'human balance' for he is neither vituperative nor sentimental.

The opening of the poem faces squarely the specific problem of the floods in 'the villages of Balasore, Mayurbhanj and Cuttack in North Bihar and Orissa.' To the reporter, it is a job to get at the truth and the whole poem vividly illustrates this. Dramatic speech and description alternate to heighten poetic impact. First is heard the self-important voice of stern officialdom and red tape:

... Meet any official, he will claim his district, sub-division or block is the 'worst-hit', and pass on a hand-out with statistics of relief work....

That officials can think only in terms of statistics of relief work and boast of something that hardly warrants pride is neatly exposed.

Stanza 3 rich in the description of the flood, also looks at the flood in terms of personal loss. It is here that the 'human' touch so needed to elicit sympathy is given to the poem. The tragedy of Mandaspur, the granary of Orissa is that it has no crop to harvest:

... paddy fields with knee-deep water ... 
... all the houses had collapsed....

The plight of the villagers is heart-rending:
... I have eleven children
Two I have left to the mercy of God.
The rest are begging, somewhere....

Stanzas 3 and 4 quietly but effectively depict the contrast between the attitude of the official who is vain about the statistics of the flood and that of the suffering villager who has lost everything in the havoc and has not really enjoyed the little benefit of the 'relief work'.

The description of the reaction of the people not affected by the floods to those affected by it serves as a revealing comment on human behaviour. While the mental trauma of the village folk silences them, their loss in terms of goods and morale cannot really be computed. They merely 'gazed at the sky'. Their silence is not due to their suffering alone; it is also due to fear. They refuse to speak to the poet-narrator till he convinces them that he is not a government official. By cleverly repeating this line thrice, Ezekial exposes the tyranny of the government which has done nothing to alleviate suffering or redeem losses and has only threatened the flood-hit people into silence. This can be an example to show how power corrupts. Yet so obvious a truth does not need a poetic outlet and even the poem becomes an exercise in futility for all its worth.

In Stanzas 5, a cogent picture of the floods is given in fearful anonymity as they do not want to be identified as anything they say would displease the government officials. The villagers are totally unprepared to meet the contingency of floods, which highlights their pathetic situation after
the havoc. Humour and grir irony characterize the fact that their only fortuitous mode of self-preservation was to take shelter on tree tops.

Stanza 6 grimly exposes the truth of the statistics of relief work: five students with 'relief' in the form of 'a tin of biscuits, a transistor and a camera'. The absurdity of the 'relief' is underscored in the technique of giving a line each to 'transistor' and 'camera'. The poet's intention is clear: a natural calamity like floods is an occasion for people to show off, to indulge in self-edification and not render selfless service.

In Stanza 7 and 9 is depicted the interaction of those affected by the floods directly and those who have come to give 'help'. While the former craves for sympathy in their hour of distress, the latter is most chary to give it - 'Don't make a noise', the students said and 'left humming a tune of a popular Hindi film song'. Cowed down by the cruelty of nature and the callous indifference of men, the villagers take refuge in silence. In Arda, they feared harassment if they told the truth. The poem in simple diction suggests powerfully the terrible fear of the villagers and their despair.

The conclusion of the poem is that the truth is never told fully. Though obviously the government had failed, it claimed with a sanctimonious air that 'it couldn't have done better'. And Ezekiel couldn't have done better than write a fine poem on the subject. To Karnani, this deserves special mention.
It is creditable that Ezekiel has turned out a rhythmic piece out of everyday life: but he has such a mastery of the muse that it seems, even in his occasional verse, he can turn out a fine poem on any subject.

A problem is hardly ever treated by Ezekiel in a non-human setting: the abstract concept is never preferred to the concrete. For example in 'On Bellasis Road', he is more preoccupied with the character and plight of the prostitute rather than the evil of prostitution. In 'Guru' too he is concerned with the hypocrisy of this particular sadhu rather than religious deception in general. In poems like 'The Railway Clerk', 'Rural Suite', 'In India', 'On Bellasis Road', 'Night of the Scorpion' and 'How the English Lessons Endad', he sees the problem in relation to the individuals affected by it. Irony is inherent in the treatment. In 'The Railway Clerk' as in 'The Truth About the Floods', while he uses the clerk to lay bare the inefficient and corrupt administration, it is the individual predicament of the clerk that is highlighted: 'Money, money, where to get money', with no overtime or bribes and with wife, irresponsible children and sick mother-in-law to look after - 'I am her only support'. The Indianisms which do not really make for correct English usage invest the poem with humour but also serve to intensify the pathos of the emotionally strung clerk, nursing a grouse against the whole world.

Nissim Ezekiel, Arnold Heinemann, Delhi, 1974, p.100.
'On Bellasis Road', one of the many poems in the tradition of Shaw's 'Mrs. Warren's Profession' elevates the prostitute who is faithful to her usual client by. Implicit is the censure of society which looks down on her. In 'Rural Suite' he exposes the exploitation of simple village folk by the wicked mendicants who take advantage of their gullibility and belief in superstition. 'How the English Lessons Ended' is an ironic and humorous comment on conservative attitudes towards sex. It is in 'Night of the Scorpion' and 'In India' that Ezekiel's humanistic yet ironic vision of life as it is, is seen at its realistic best. The poems relate very closely to the Indian culture and yet by their intense simplicity acquire universal appeal.

'Night of the Scorpion' is a poem with an Indian setting. It depicts the world of simple rural folk with their naive superstitions and charming human concern. On the rainy night when the devilish scorpion bit the mother, the peasants swarmed the place — no indifference of the urban neighbour — and searched for the scorpion with lanterns throwing huge scorpion shadows on the walls. What is more, they prayed together for the mother's relief. In contrast to this simple and touching gesture is the world of magic represented by the holy man and that of the skeptic father swayed by science and reason. The father tries to counteract the effect of poison by 'powder, mixture, herb and hybrid' in impassive manner, while the holy man chants the mantras and the peasants pray. Ezekiel's mastery over technique is seen in the incantatory rhythms of the prayer through the repetition of the syntax with 'may':
... May he sit still, they said.
May the sins of your previous birth
be burned away tonight, they said.
May your suffering decrease
the misfortunes of your next birth, they said.
May the sum of evil
balanced in this unreal world
against the sum of good
become diminished by your pain.
May the poison purify your flesh
of desire, and your spirit of ambition,...

The world of the mother does not have these cogitations.
It spins on the axis of simple selfless love. 'Thank God
the scorpion picked on me / and spared my children'. It is
the 'Evil one' and she is glad her children are spared
and she alone suffers. The post-narrator's stance of
onlooker contributes to the 'aesthetic distancing' leading
to the 'willing suspension of disbelief'. The peasants are
the 'involved' choric characters, and even like the father
and the holy man are protagonist-oriented. The mother's
reaction is given separately in two lines at the end of
the poem and forms a perfect ending to a poem of
kaleidoscopic human attitudes to the same event. The
peasants 'clicked their tongues' in sympathy, the mother
silently bore her pain, 'twisted through and through /
groaning on a mat'. The father adopts a detached attitude:

... My father, sceptic, rationalist,
trying every curse and blessing,
powder, mixture, herb and hybrid ...

The post-narrator is filled with awe - 'I watched the flame
feeding on my mother'. The holy man in objective fashion
'performed his rites / to tame the poison with an
incantation.' The free verse in conversational rhythm
adds to the impact of the poem. Ezekiel's humanity fills the poem for as in 'A Visitor', he respects the simple folk belief of the peasants and has no contempt for them.

'In India' is an important poem in Ezekiel's ironic stance for the irony imperceptibly moves to satire which as Taranath points out remains at the social satire level. In effect, sure strokes he paints a vivid picture of the Indian scene, a bleak landscape:

Always, in the sun's eye,
Here among the beggars,
Hawkers, pavement sleapors,
Hutment dwellers, slums,
Dead souls of men and gods,
Burnt-out mothers, frighted
Virgins, wasted child
And tortured animal,
All in noisy silence
suffering the place and time,
I ride my elephant of thought,
A Cezanne slung around my neck...

The 'Cezanne slung around his neck' indicates the need to be detached from the misery and noise around. Even in a poem like 'And I reject the Indian Noise' he desperately wants to remain aloof. However, he sees it in all its minutiae and merely reports like the 'newsman' in 'The Truth about the Floods'. There is no protest or criticism - hence the 'Commitment' is of an extremely limited kind. Surrounded by the noise of the market place, his silence stands in relief as he 'rides an elephant of thought' - an obvious hit at himself, his thoughts are incongruous in the market place, bustling with noisy activity.

In Stanza 2, Ezekiel's insight into the world of routine is seen as he perceptively exposes the meaninglessness of the prayers of the boys of different religious sects. Prayer too becomes a matter of routine and has no bearing on their personal lives filled with quarrels. The technique of repeating the word 'Prayer' serves to highlight the fact that it has become an irreligious ritual tinged with hypocrisy.

While the Hindu, Jewish and Christian youth pray and yet act violently, the man are no better. At the party, they too act indiscreetly (the post-narrator not excepted). Ezekiel sharply exposes the inherent incongruity of the situation. The man cannot feel at home in this strange world. They do not have the courage to criticise openly the artificiality and hypocrisy. Their wives too are ill-at-ease in such company and sit apart. This can be contrasted with the behaviour of the club female in 'At The Party'. The poet laments the loss of values, the failure to stand up for one's way of life.

It is in the fourth section that the satire comes through with the force of a whiplash. The cultivation of artificial values especially in the relationship between the sexes of different nations results in a tragic loss of character. The plight of the self-deceived woman, a prey to British lust is a case in point. The situation is no doubt reminiscent of a similar one in 'The Waste Land'. The Indian secretary thinks that her English boss will bestow on her the riches of Western culture. Her high
hopes are rudely shattered for like many men in that situation, 
he only wants to satisfy his lust. Only 'with true British 
courtesy / He lent her a safety pin' to set right the 
tear in her blouse.

These poems which relate to the Indian social scene 
because of their theme and setting achieve a universality 
due to penetrating insight into human behavior. Ezekiel's 
brilliant clarity, his sharp and precise descriptions 
coupled with his objective and ironic stance invest them 
with an immediacy of appeal. They also testify to his 
absorbing interest in the contemporary human predicament.

All the three poets in their preoccupation with the 
human and the contemporary can be likened to Larkin and 
the Movement Poets. Only they are not apish followers and 
maintain the integrity and individuality of their vision. 
Their sense of community is both the need for fellowship 
and awareness of society and this finds expression in their 
poetry in realistic terms.