CHAPTER-IV

EZEGIEL'S HUMANISTIC POETRY
A TIME TO CHANGE (1952)

A Time to Change

Nissim Ezekiel’s ‘A Time to Change’ is coincidentally the first poem of his first collected volume. It was the time for him to change, to switch over from philosophy to poetry. Since then, he dedicated his mind to the cultivation of poetry with zeal and determination. Ezekiel treated poetry as a way of life, as a continuous flow, and as something, which is inextricably related to existence. The poem forms the nucleus of understanding Ezekiel as a humanist poet. Ezekiel’s art, thus, is directly based on life. This poem, as a whole, shows Ezekiel’s immense passion for the body, God and poetry – the three major constituents of his essential self. The poem shows, a remarkable synthesis of the religious, the secular outlook and his personal view. The poem has the epigraph from Revelation (3:16), which runs:

so then because thou art luke-warm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.¹
According to Anisur Rahman, the epigraph is “highly functional and underlines the tortured self with an acute consciousness of the over-rehearsed sexual desire and defiled flesh”. This is the message of the spirit to the angel of the Church of the Laodiceans, the physical rejection of the uncommitted man. Not only the epigraph but also the title of the poem, ‘A time to Change’ has Biblical allusions. The moral resonance of such words as “time” and “change” reminds us of Ecclesiastes chapter-3 of the Old Testament; “To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven ...” [ Ecclesiastes 3:1].Ezekiel’s poem opens on a note of exhaustion and disillusionment:

We who leave the house in April, Lord,  
How shall we return?  
Debtors to the whore of love,  
Corrupted by the things imagined  
Through the winter nights, alone,  
The flesh defiled by dreams of flesh,  
Rehearsed desire dead in spring,  
How shall we return?  
The juice of life is in us still  
But when the mind determines everything  
The leap is never made, the music  
Never quite completed, redemption  
Never fully won

This section is deeply introspective in its tone. And it tells us about a man’s departure from home, and the consequent desolation and the search for a new life. It points out that the mind of a man is the source of everything, and yet we are the slaves of our passions and sometimes of nightmares of sex and ego. Chetan Karnani on his analysis of the poem says, “it has a fine sense of structure with an inevitable self-evolving logic.” In order to attain redemption, one should confess faults. A servitude to sinful life has drawn a man away from the virtuous world. Redemption is to be acquired and won through leading a harmonious life.
Ezekiel's self in this poem is in quest of an ideal, which is found neither in the past nor in the present. The past is full of "amputated gestures" and the present has only the nightmares of sex and ego. Ezekiel examines man-woman relationship from various angles and he does not consider man or woman superior or inferior to one another. They are equal, one being incomplete without the other. Like the lovers of John Donne, Ezekiel's lovers make one unite in one entity. He opines, the young lovers may be satisfied by consummation. He also reflects on man-woman relationship as husband and wife after marriage:

For lovers may be satisfied with love  
Or sated with a woman  
But who can say:  
There shall be no more surprises,  

K.R.S. Iyengar and V.A. Shahane, the pioneer critics of Indian English Poetry opine that Ezekiel's early poetry was haunted by the longings of physical union between lovers and the unrequited love affairs. It is important to note that love, city and the self are the major preoccupations of the beginning of Ezekiel's poetic career. The mood of his early poetry is dominated by unrequited love and resultant disappointment. Torments caused by the desire of the flesh and the spirit resulting from the unfulfilled love governs Ezekiel's attitude to life. His desire to come to terms with reality seems to overwhelm his sensibility. Perhaps he is a bitter man as a result of his failure to achieve a goal. His wishful longing to be a successful poet and a lover worries him without end. He says:

Youth runs out of song  
Until one learns to start again –  
Love of life can always be renewed.  

[CP, p.4]
Ezekiel in the third section of his poem looks into the desired pattern for the future. The fulfilment in life is to come through marital bliss and good human relationship. His concern for the layman wherever he may be, gives his poetry a kind of authenticity and liveliness which at once distinguishes him from other poets. A serious reader will easily understand this humanistic approach in his poetry. Ezekiel is aware of the need of a common person. He writes:

To own a singing voice and a talking voice,
A bit of land, a woman and a child or two,
Accommodated to their needs and changing moods
And patiently to build a life with these; [CP, p.4]

Akshaya Kumar, opines that the attitude of Nissim Ezekiel towards man traditionally condemned as immoral, degenerated and fallen is humanistic in the sense that he well understands the demands of life that are not the same as those of the organised and traditional morality. For Ezekiel the individual stands redeemed in the sense that each one of us has to be his own Messiah. The body and the transition are the heritage of man but it is for man to accept the conflicts of life and resolve them himself. Nissim Ezekiel asserts, “Life is not as simple as morality.” To reaffirm his humanistic stance, Ezekiel writes:

Flawless doctrines, certainty of God,
These are merely dreams; but I am human
And must testify to what they mean. [CP, p.5]

Commitment

‘Commitment’ is a two-stanza poem, comprising of eleven lines and ten lines respectively. Ezekiel uses the first person narrative technique but this does not necessarily mean that the poem is an autobiographical poem. Though, of course, it tells some truth about the poet’s life. The poem vividly states the
appearance of two facets of life. One reveals the hypocrisy while another tells the desire to live to the true self. A man, who wears a mask of human face, prowls about the streets and towns with murderous claws, that signifies the animal character to kill and harm others. But this man would wisely escape and take refuge to a safer place before being attacked by the stronger creatures. He also admits that his consorting with the world contracts his love. His lust for money and fame leads to futility because it only sucked the marrows from his bones:

Truly, I am betrayed, consorting with  
The world contracts my love, vast organised  
Futilities suck the marrow from my bones  
And put a fever there for cash and fame.  
Huge posters dwarf my thought, I am reduced  
To appetites and godlessness, I wear  
A human face but prowl about the streets  
Of towns with murderous claws and anxious ears,  
Recognising all the jungles sounds of fear  
And hunger, wise in tracking down my prey  
And wise in taking refuge when the stronger roam. [CP, p.26]

Ezekiel uses the image of huge posters, which diminishes the size of man not only physically but also mentally. Ezekiel portrays a dehumanised man who wanders like hungry animal in search of its prey. However, this act does not please Ezekiel. He expresses his desire to be a man and enter a world of simplicities. In ‘Commitment’ Ezekiel emphasizes the human aspect in clear-cut terms. Thus, his statement is a sure proof of his humanistic attitude:

Truly, I wish to be a man. Alone  
Or in the crowd this is my only guide.  
There is a world of old simplicities  
To which my calling calls me, turbulence  
Is stilled in it and slowly understood,

In another poem ‘The Double Horror’ Ezekiel acknowledges:
I am corrupted by the world, continually
Reduced to something less than human by the crowd, [CP, p.7]

Again, in the beginning of the third stanza of the same poem he repeats:

Corrupted by the world I must infect the world
With my corruption. [CP, p.8]

The truth is that the corrupted individual contributes to the further corruption of the society. There is indeed a remorseful tone because Ezekiel wishes truly to be a man.

**SIXTY POEMS (1953)**

**A Poem of Dedication**

The first poem from Ezekiel's second volume, 'A Poem of Dedication' consists three stanzas and each of them is made up of twelve lines. Sanjit Mishra, in his book *The Poetic Art of Nissim Ezekiel* says the Poem “reads almost like a manifesto”:

Not to seek release but resolution,
Not to hanker for a wide, god-like range
Of thought, nor the matador's dexterity.
I do not want the yogi's concentration,
I do not want the perfect charity
Of saints nor the tyrants' endless power. [CP, p.40]

Though, these lines are but the last stanza of the poem, Ezekiel has emitted his sense of humanism through these lines. The abundant mark of negative words, one each in every line demonstrates that Ezekiel has deliberated extensively on the possibilities and the avenues available to him. The incessant
craze to resolve the conflict, however, cannot compel him to withdraw from his surroundings because he wants to grapple with all odds on his own terms. He once again resolves to remain a modest and a humble man without hankering for the thought of god-like range and the matador's dexterity. Nor does Ezekiel seek Yogi's concentration or the tyrant's endless power. 'Yogi' and 'Tyrant' symbolise the extremity of values. Both reject the society but Ezekiel accepts human failure and does not want to escape from the reality of the world. He knows that perfection is a non-human quality; he is determined not to be a human like the yogi or inhuman like the tyrant. The poem stresses the need for a poetic culture of a sympathetic brand with the humanity around. Ezekiel writes:

I want a human balance humanly
Acquired, fruitful in the common hour. [CP, P.40]

Ezekiel's wish is to acquire a human balance by exploring his existence through ordinary means without resorting to superhuman or sub-human distortions. Ezekiel has no desire for the super human powers of a yogi or the great mind's concentration or the perfect ways and the philanthropic ideas of a saint. Moreover, he also does not like to possess the endless power of a tyrant. Ezekiel thinks that these great powers of the yogi's and the tyrant's are not human. All that Ezekiel wants is human qualities.

Prayer 1

This poem is published for the first time in his second volume, Sixty Poems (1953). Seems to be occupied with an ethical anxiety and a sense of sin in his Sixty Poems, Ezekiel is more submissive than introspective in the Poem 'Prayer 1'. Prayer is no monopoly of the religious minded people alone. Every sinner yearns for forgiveness and redemption. It is true to say that Ezekiel
Philosophical humanism but it is not quite proper to question his prayer. The truth is that the theme of prayer occurs in his poetry with frequency and Nissim Ezekiel is occupied at some remote level with the creation of a world of his own desire. His lack of commitment to embrace a particular religion does not essentially make him a pagan. If Ezekiel could pray, most of his prayer would be “quietude” and “the ordered mind”. The prayer he may not only be for himself but for other fellow beings too. In this regard, Basuwal says:

It is surprising how often the word ‘prayer’ occurs in the work of a poet whose approach to life far from being religious is one of philosophical humanism.

The opening lines of the poem ‘Prayer I’ indicate such an attitude of philosophical humanism:

If I could pray, the gist of my
Demanding world be simply this:
Quietude. The ordered mind.
Erasure of the inner lie.
And only love in every kiss.
For puerile past a healing find
In what the future may unwind. [CP, p.54]

This prayer is again a blending of the secular and the religious. According to Anisur Rahman Ezekiel does not address God directly nor does he seek mercy in the manner of George Herbert. He does not also soar higher as Vaughan but remains ever on the earth with eyes fixed on the horizon of life. Though his early poems transmute a sense of guilt and sin much like the sonnets of Donne, he does not seek resolution in his way:
Impute me righteous, thus purg'd of evil,  
For thus I leave the world, the flesh, the devil."^9

But as for Ezekiel neither the world nor flesh repels him, rather committed to both of these, he affirms his faith in them again and again. Being intensely aware of his “fluent wrong,” he earnestly prays:

Save me from the fluent wrong.  
For only roots of reason bind  
To social good the things we do, [CP, p.54]

Ezekiel in these lines expresses his deep regret that he is intensely aware of the rational self, which binds his deeds with the social good. Ezekiel uses the images of eunuch and broken wheels in order to express his rage against himself. He writes:

Eunuchs of the deed when one is young,  
Or broken wheels—both life and art  
Are ground and bogged in crudity.  
Compounded of reality  
Are individual idiocies  
Which, mind—bessed is the tamed mind—*  
Can mend, and build the Holy City,  
Till people seem to walk, like trees,  
And Man is measure of mankind. [CP,p.54]

He thinks that his past deeds expressed in poetic words are nothing but ‘Eunuchs of the deed’, which again are compared with broken wheels because life and art “Are ground and bogged in crudity”. To find shelter for his restless soul Ezekiel turns to Buddha’s Dhammapad that enunciates “blessed is the tamed mind”. Only such a mind can mend his self and transform the urban environment into the Holy city where people can walk like trees. The image of trees suggests both dignity and shelter. The poem ends with the maxim that “Man is measure of mankind.” The real test of any human achievement is how it benefits or view
man. Ezekiel does not ask for God's mercy when he prays. By looking at the horizon, he hopes for dawn. He approaches God in friendly and informal way. According to Anisur Rahman, Ezekiel in his religious poems does not consider himself to be alien or an outsider but exercises his will to claim God's love whether or not it comes to him. Gieve Patel says:

Ezekiel's God has a much more common unpedigreed denomination to Him in his presence as a kill-all, cure-all, pop God, a metropolitan Bombay, an urban contemporary without hang-ups about origin.¹⁰

Ezekiel's quest for quietude in this poem address to God leads us to consider the angst engendered by the urban experience. Originally, a German word, angst means anxiety caused by considering the sad state of the world affairs or the human condition. Since the Second World War the philosophical idea of 'Existentialism' has become popular in the literary circles of Europe. Z.F. Molvi writes:

It has had its impact on Indian writers also. Jean Paul Sartre, the existentialist thinker argues that existence precede essence. According to him man is free to act but he should act to be free. Existentialist literature expresses the insecurity and loneliness of man which he usually experiences in the city life. In the urban environment life is caught in a perpetual sense of crisis. Though Ezekiel does not openly subscribe to this line of thinking, there are traces of existentialist points of view in his poetry as his poems portray the complexities of the human situation in the urban environment.¹¹

Prayer II

A man who truly wishes to be a man, who wants a "human balance humanly" and who believes that "man is measure of mankind", prays now to the
almighty to grant him to dream the dreams of man in ‘Prayer II’. In this poem, called ‘Prayer II’ Ezekiel states his desire to associate himself with the activity of a defeated man and reiterates his commitment to human betterment:

Let me not be isolated
Uninvolved in Man’s defeat,
But know my love reciprocated
Dancing in the neutral street.

Ezekiel does not like to be isolated and uninvolved in the sufferings of others. In this regard his views are quite different from that of Naipaul. If Ezekiel had quarrelled with Naipaul for the latter’s uninvolved and unconcerned nature for writing exclusively from his dilemma point of view, Ezekiel time and again affirms his involvement to his environment. His is the opposite of what Naipaul does. He writes:

My quarrel with Mr. Naipaul, which I hope to conduct in a way that will be understandable to him, is not because of these condemnatory judgements of his, so fiercely, so blazingly expressed. My quarrel is that Mr. Naipaul is so often uninvolved and unconcerned. He writes exclusively from the point of view of his own dilemma, his temperamental alienation from his mixed background, his choice and escape. That temperament is not universal, not even widely distributed, that choice is not open to all, the escape for most is not from the community but into it.

The kind of poetry Ezekiel writes manifest that he is not an isolated man. He shows his sympathetic attitude towards the underprivileged people whom he comes across. In several of his poems, he exceedingly has shown his involvement as being part of his environment. His pathetic description of the monkey and the patient girl in ‘Entertainment,’ the clerk in ‘The Railway Clerk’
and his reaction to the flood affected areas in ‘The Truth about the Floods’ is a proven fact that Ezekiel gets involve in the intense suffering of the people of his country.

THE UNFINISHED MAN (1960)

Urban

‘Urban’ is the first poem of the volume The Unfinished Man (1960), consisting of only three stanzas, with six lines each. Ezekiel employs the third person narrator; however, it appears that the protagonist seems to be Ezekiel himself. He studies his own temperament here. Even while treating on the beaten track of monotonous routine of urban life, Ezekiel loves and seeks his freedom. The poem emphasizes on the personal reality of the individual and highlights his own fears and hopes, his encounters and his crises. He reveals his intuitive nature in the poem. The hills, which symbolize vision, unity and perfection is at a distant place and is far beyond his approach. Ezekiel at this particular stage experiences a decaying human predicament. Even Nature cannot refresh his mind and life. The far away hills, the dry river and the dead winds, depict Ezekiel’s state of mind. He writes:

The hills are always far away.
He knows the broken roads, and moves
In circles tracked within his head.
Before he wakes and has his say,
The river which he claims he loves
Is dry, and all the winds lie dead. [CP, p.117]

Suresh Chandra Dwivedi says, the first line, “The hills are always far away” reminds me Frost’s Famous sentence “And miles to go before I sleep.” The broken roads are the hazards for the traveller, so are trials in the life of an
individual making a rugged life. The next two lines throw light upon Ezekiel’s
own frame of reference in meeting the reality. He shows his readers the most
basic inner problems calling him away from abstractions and conformity. The
hills, even though may be far away but we cannot stop aspiring them. The winds
may go dry and dead and the rivers may be without water but man is destined to
aspire for higher level of thought and action. Nor can anyone, even for an
instance remain actionless for everyone is helplessly driven to action by qualities
born of nature. Nissim Ezekiel is a humanist poet who tries to grasp and put
down the experiential reality and the ontology of human existence with nature.

Ezekiel in this poem is completely ignorant of the existence of the natural
phenomena. He does not have the sense to mark the beauty of the morning sky
or to feel the mystery of the approaching night. He finds his life meaningless as
such; he welcomes neither sun nor rain. Having had no meaningful life, he is
unable to apprehend the skies at dawn and the shadows of the night which
symbolise the principles of light and darkness. Moreover, he does not respond to
the sun and the rain, the symbols of life in the cosmos. His landscape that is with
no depth or height is a flattened landscape of emptiness and nothingness.

At dawn he never sees the skies
Which, silently, are born again.
Nor feels the shadows of the night
Recline their fingers on his eyes.
He welcomes neither sun nor rain,
His landscape has no depth or height.  [CP, p.117]

The place of Readymoney Mansion or Mazda Mansion or even the
basement room in London where Ezekiel had lived may also be recalled here.
These places where Ezekiel lived had a relatively small building complex from
where he could neither see the sky nor experience a sense of depth or height. He
draws a precise picture of his surrounding in the last stanza:

The city like a passion burns.
He dreams of morning walks, alone,
And floating on a wave of sand.
But still his mind its traffic turns
Away from beach and tree and stone
To kindred clamour close at hand.  [CP, p.117]

Bijay Kumar Das in his book, *The Horizon of Nissim Ezekiel's Poetry* writes:

“Urban” is a very compact poem so far as the imagery
is concerned. The city that ‘like a passion burns’ is the
image of the bride, and in an ideal sense, a complete
sexual union would mark the realization of fullness
and identity. Since the persona merely ‘dreams’ and
shies away from her, the use of the keyword ‘kindred’
in the last line turns out to be ironical. Thus, what the
persona achieves is a kind of illusory union with the
‘city’ and this forms a kind of habitual response to it.14

It can also be said that as the city burns like a passion, Ezekiel cannot find
a companion and therefore dreams of morning walk alone. “And floating on a
wave of sand” is a terrifying line where the persona communicates the terrifying
loneliness. According to Sanjit Mishra:

The analogy drawn between city and passion -
between something concrete and abstract- is a typical
Modernist device imitated after the German poet Rilke
to communicate a startling experience. The instinctive
mindset for ‘a kindred clamour close at hand’ foils all
dreams of morning walks and their attendant joys. The
allusions to ‘beach’, ‘tree’ and ‘stone’ represent three
cherished realms of human involvement. ‘Beach’
recalls Ulysses’s enchanted love with sea creatures
while ‘tree’ stands for natural flora. ‘Stone’ in the form
of temple is a living embodiment of communal life, an archetypal symbol of community existence.\textsuperscript{15}

The persona quickly lapses into “kindred clamour” of the city even when he dreams of morning walk alone. But while the complex symbols in the poem delineate the fallen world, it ironically and paradoxically suggest the ideal state from which man fell, and a structure of validity of these symbols. In the ideal sense, hills, river, sun, rain, beach, tree and stone are archetypal life-symbols of man’s ideal dream of the dwelling place or the Garden of Eden, the place of man’s first existence. The images project a pastoral vision of a fully refulgent and harmonious life, a pattern in which man enters into sacred communion with his cosmos. The stone signifies a living embodiment of a communal temple, and archetypal symbol of a community of worshipers. It is not just a dead object or a meaningless idol, but has affinity with the hills. The river, which is an ancient symbol with manifold allusions, represents a flowing and creative life as well as communed consciousness, while beaches by implication suggest a point of contact with the holy and pure waters of life. The tree is a symbol of communal sanctity, harmony and growth.\textsuperscript{16}

The problem with the persona in this poem is that he cannot respond to the life-symbols, because he knows only the broken roads and moves in ritualistic circles of custom and habit deeply tracked within his head. The various symbols cease to become true-life symbols because he is unable to enter into the absolute relationship with the object-world.

\textbf{A Morning Walk}

‘A Morning Walk’ consists of six stanzas, with seven lines each. The poem is a depiction of the exhaustive and elaborate picture of the city of
Bombay as Ezekiel sees it. It also reveals the persona’s inner turmoil and utter confusion of his life. To Ezekiel, the city appears to be transformed into a symbol of decomposed garbage “where only human hands sell cheap”. He writes:

Driven from his bed by troubled sleep  
In which he dreamt of being lost  
Upon a hill too high for him  
(A modest hill whose sides grew steep),  
He stood where several highways crossed  
And saw the city, cold and dim,  
Where only human hands sell cheap.

His native place he could not shun  
The marsh where things are what they seem? [CP, p.119]

A chain of metaphors succinctly suggest the paralysis of the will and the finer emotions, which a man at Bombay suffers. The ‘cold and dim city is his purgatory. “His native place he could not shun” suggests that the avenues for him are pitiably restricted. The rampant squalor and chaos are conveyed by the image of ‘marsh’. The marshy world without the creative and sustaining sight signifies the sub-human level of individual and communal existence, a condition in which man’s vision and humanity are lost. This city of history is dehumanized in contrast to the ideal city of vision. According to Suresh Chandra Dwivedi,

The poem demonstrates the cautious, discriminating style with its conscious rejection of the sentimental and the sluggish. Here we get Ezekiel’s perfect craft, beautiful rhymes and rhythms, lines that are nicely balanced and poised. It is this characteristic of his style that accords him a place with contemporary British and American poets, i.e. Thom Gunn, R.S. Thomas, and Elizabeth Zennings. Like Eliot and Dante, he not only finds poetry through suffering but finds its material only in suffering.
K.P. Ramachandran Nair giving his view on the poem says:

‘A morning walk’ is a walk intended to be out of the city’s fatal grip but ends up once again as a walk towards the city’s fettering fascinations. The marsh of reality and the distant (but troublesome to the city dweller) hills are the counterparts, in terms of landscape, to the old dichotomies in Ezekiel’s work, between sex and the unrealised goal of an all-inclusive love, between body and soul, a sense of sin and the prospect of redemption, action and patience.

About Ezekiel’s use of metre, it is at times rigid and inflexible, but there is usually some justification for it. In ‘A Morning Walk’ for example, the rigid metre with its complex rhyme scheme (abcabca) is quite appropriate to the constricting, claustrophobic life the poem describes. The poem translates the sense of bustle of the ‘barbaric city’ into a gnawing pain that oppresses Ezekiel’s memory.

Barbaric city sick with slums,
Deprived of seasons, blessed with rains,
Its hawkers, beggars, iron-lunged,
Processions led by frantic drums,
A million purgatorial lanes,
And child-like masses, many-tongued,
Whose wages are in words and crumbs. [CP, p. 119]

The essential components of the picture of the city are slums, hawkers, beggars, drums and purgatorial lanes. The unusual character of the city is imprintingly drawn with the help of modifiers like barbaric, deprived, frantic and purgatorial. The poem offers a graphic descriptions of his native place whose million purgatorial lanes and the barbaric city with its slum leave only a depressing effect on his mind. He finds it neither a fit place to work nor a place to pray properly. Ezekiel cannot pass a happy community life nor can he pass his
days and nights in worship of God. He finds his life wasted all with his generation.

Ezekiel’s vision however is limited to the material and mundane concerns of his fellow inhabitants while Eliot harps on spiritual values. Ezekiel’s humanism rests on his concern for his immediate surroundings. His disillusionment is born out of the failure to achieve worldly success while Eliot’s thrust is on spiritual bankruptcy in the midst of pleasure excesses.

He turned away. The morning breeze
Released no secrets to his ears
The more he stared the less he saw
Among the individual trees,
The middle of his journey nears.
Is he among the men of straw
Who think they go which way they please? [CP, p.119]

Ezekiel has starkly represented the scenario. The city referred may not necessarily be Bombay, but any place where man loses identity. Ezekiel has come to face not only his own personal defeats but also that of a whole generation. This poem depicts the meaninglessness of life in the urban societies. We can find an echo of Eliot’s The Waste Land where the modern city has its dehumanising effect on man. It has rendered man as ‘the men of straw’.

According to K.P.Ramachandra Nair, ‘A Morning Walk’ in spite of its unquestioned originality compels comparison with Eliot’s ‘The Waste Land’. Eliot’s theme is the drabness of European civilization immediately after the First World War. Ezekiel’s theme is a walk through the decadence of Bombay’s soul, which began immediately after the Second World War. Both have their purgatory of existence in the turpitude of lost values. Both search for new insights in a world where new insights are only those of agony and frustration. K.P.Ramachandra Nair writes:
The central image of ‘The Waste Land’ is that of a land blighted by a curse where crops do not grow and animals are cursed with sterility. Ezekiel’s morning walks resembles the journey of the protagonist in Eliot’s poem to the Chapel Perilous through a parching and agonising area of horror and darkness where one can neither stand nor lie nor sit.21

Malikarjun Patil too says, “‘A Morning Walk’ resembles T.S. Eliot’s ‘The Waste Land’.”22 Ezekiel finds all things in the city chaos and rootless. In Ezekiel’s view, a writer has an immense responsibility to society. A writer can make life more meaningful and endurable. He can acquire a better life by discovering his own identity and find a sense of belonging to his own place. What one finds in Ezekiel’s poem is his dealing with the infinite variations of this humanizing experience.

The garden on the hill is cool,
Its hedges cut to look like birds
Or mythic beast are still asleep. [CP, p.120]

The allusions to garden and city instinctively recall the Garden of Eden and the City of God. The garden on the hill referring to the Garden of Eden is cool, illusory and asleep, but the “barbaric city” of history, with its fallen humanity, is awake. Yet, paradoxically, it is to the latter to which the persona belongs. The morning breeze and trees, the cool garden on the hill and the hedges cut to look like birds are the symbols of man’s unattained and unattainable hopes. While many critics and poet establish the influence of T.S Eliot’s ‘The Waste Land’ on Ezekiel’s ‘A Morning Walk’, Anisur Rahman thinks that “it would be rather unfair to establish the influence of Eliot and Auden on Ezekiel for projecting such an image of city. Ezekiel does not assume a mask in such poems but accepts himself as a defeated and disillusioned
man”. Thus, the whole poem becomes a fit saga of utter futility and meaninglessness of contemporary life. The last two lines sums up the whole poem:

The city wakes, where fame is cheap,
And he belongs, an active fool. [CP, p.120]

Adil Jussawalla, a noted Indian poet and critic comment on ‘A Morning Walk’ as expressing “not only his (poet’s) own personal defeat but the whole of a generation” is intensely thought provoking. Ezekiel, no doubt feels lonely and suffers, but does not lack to communicate with the people. He does not remain aloof from the real world. His poetry shares the attitudes and experiences, joys, despairs and suffering of the people and his generation. This involvement with the reality is because of his possession of humanistic concern to his surrounding.

**Morning Prayer**

This poem consists of four stanzas. Each stanza is a repository of hopes and desires. The prayer is exclusively personal. Ezekiel tries to break his established musical pattern in order to achieve intensity, and thereby impart certain otherness to it.

God grant me privacy,
Secretive as the mole,
Inaccessibility,
But only of the soul.

Restore my waking time
To vital present tense,
And dreams of love or crime
To primal quiescence. [CP, p.122]
Ezekiel shows a better technical proficiency. It is significant to note in this context that no prayer preceding it was written within the limits of rhyme. This poem unlike other of his prayer poems shows not a tortured soul or a grief-ridden persona articulating his pains. But the poem gives expression to a relaxed mood with an equally relaxed pace of lines. This poem distils many desires into one and Nissim Ezekiel prays to God for their fulfilment. This preoccupation with prayer is rather constant and each stanza reflects a different mood, with direct tone. K.D. Verma writes:

This time, there is no sceptical irony, frustration and doubt resulting from the collapse of vision; instead, we have a frank, positive and definitive statement of the artist’s personal faith in his art, and of his sincerity, integrity and commitment. The poet prays for the unity of perfection and the vital power of making poetry. He seeks privacy and inaccessibility of the soul, because the world of imagination and art demands a personal and subjective realization of the self. He asks for the restoration of his “Waking time/To vital present tense”, because it is only by existing in the moment, the now, that the imagination experiences eternity and identity. He aspires to the condition of “primal quiescence” because the imagination can reconcile the so-called dualism between good and evil and experience original unity and harmony of consciousness.25

Ezekiel prays in the following:

God grant me certainty
In kinship with the sky,
Air, earth, fire, sea—
And the fresh inward eye. [CP, p.122]
According to Suresh Chandra Dwivedi, ‘Morning Prayer’ presents the existential encounter of Nissim Ezekiel as subjective truth. An attempt is made in this poem to realise even the objective truths subjectively. He prays to God for the privacy of the soul but he wants to enjoy the social life like other people. Through a kinship with the sky, air, fire, earth and sea, Ezekiel wants to encounter his own inwardness. The third stanza of ‘Morning Prayer’ runs:

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Whatever the enigma,
The passion of the blood,
Grant me the metaphor
To make it human good.  [CP, p.122]
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Ezekiel might start his prayer for his privacy and quietude but the end of his prayer shows that it is for human good that he prays most of all. Ezekiel’s “lines devour his poetic energy, ‘the passion of the blood’, his flesh, his soul and also ‘his dreams of love or crime’.” The concluding lines throw ample light on his humanistic passion. Ezekiel here combines both the passion of the blood while keeping an eye on the human good. He derives his theme and wisdom from his own experiences and the experiences of the people around him whom he has observed closely. From an analysis of the poem, it appears that Nissim Ezekiel at no stage has taken an escapist’s stance. Though his moods of reverence, submission and defiance have varied from time to time, yet he has depended exclusively upon God’s truthfulness and looks to Him for all his resolutions. His real objective has been to enliven the rhythm of human existence. Truly, his effort is embedded in his life and at the same time it emerges into meditation.
THE EXACT NAME (1965)

Night of the Scorpion

The second poem of *The Exact Name* (1965) ‘Night of the Scorpion’ was written in mid January 1964 while Ezekiel visited the University of Leeds, England, as a visiting professor. Sanjit Mishra pointed out that Ezekiel composed this piece on a moving childhood incident embedded in his psyche. The idea of writing the poem was born out of Ezekiel’s mother being stung by a scorpion at night in the 1930’s. R. Raj Rao, Nissim Ezekiel’s biographer too said the poem was composed when Ezekiel was a visiting professor in the University of Leeds. And it was supposed to have been written at the request of the students and faculty at Leeds, who wanted him to capture the essence of India for them in a poem. He further said the poem is based on an incident that actually took place in Nissim Ezekiel’s grandfather’s house in the village of Tal.²⁷

The incident might be actual or imaginary but the narrator very convincingly set it in a perfectly realistic situation. The manner in which the poem is told in the first person, without poetic devices such as a third-person mask, convinces us that the narrator is Ezekiel himself. The poem is written in informal style, braking free from the constraints of stanza, rhyme and metre. Christopher Wiseman says, ‘Night of the Scorpion’ “demonstrates a deliberate attempt at formal innovation by using a loose, seemingly free-verse narrative structure. The poem is much more relaxed and open-worked than Ezekiel’s formal poetry, with a new quality of natural colloquialism in diction and tone”:²⁸

I remember the night my mother was stung by a scorpion. Ten hours of steady rain had driven him to crawl beneath a sack of rice. [CP, p.130]
Ezekiel consciously draws an attention to the typical Indian scene where he is ironical about the superstitious belief of the people. The poem articulates a typical Indian situation in which superstition and scientific outlook co-exist and make the situation poignant. An entire community is involved in the poem over a case of a scorpion-sting:

The peasants came like swarms of flies
and buzzed the Name of God a hundred times
to paralyse the Evil One.
With candles and with lanterns
throwing giant scorpion shadows
on the sun-baked walls
they search for him: he was not found. [CP, p.130]

The manner in which the narrator narrates the coming of peasants like swamps of flies is very interesting. They not only gathered but also buzzed the name of God in order to paralyse the agony of the mother. Their action reveals the concern of the villagers to the suffering of their fellow. In a sense, this incident clearly depicts the sense of humanism of the ignorant and the superstitious people who live in the rural India. While Ezekiel is trying ironically to describe the incident he is also simultaneously trying to highlight the sense of humanism in it. In the poem, the abandonment of capitals at the start of each line gives an impression of Ezekiel's experiment with free verse. The dramatic casualness of the recalled crisis and the long paragraph set abruptly from the three-lines climax, give 'Night of the Scorpion' a new feel, a new appearance, a new sense of unhurried lucid progression through time. The apparently true verse is not so on closer inspection as regular iambic lines keep insisting upon their own pattern.

They clicked their tongues.
With every movement that the scorpion made
his poison moved in Mother's blood, they said.
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,
they said, and they sat around
on the floor with my mother in the centre,
the peace o understanding on each face.
... ... ... ... ... ... ... ...
to tame the poison with an incantation. [CP, p.130-131]

Christopher Wiseman says:

Of the forty-eight lines, fifteen are regular tetrameters
and seven are pentameters. The result is less than
satisfactory, being too regular for good natural free
verse and too free for good formal verse. It is as if
Ezekiel's, iambic rhythms running instinctively in his
mind after years of metrical writing, cannot quite make
the complete break into the free verse he clearly aspires
to. 'Night of the Scorpion' remains an interesting and
very valid poem, containing a fascinating tension
between personal crises and mocking social
observation, but the discrepancies of form confuse the
tone, which swings between the natural and colloquial
reporting of experience and a more removed literary
formality. 29

Everyone in the poem renders their utmost help, the rationalist and
sceptical father tries every curse and blessing, powder, mixture, herb and hybrid
even as the peasants swarm in to console the suffering mother with their prayer.
Ezekiel has thrown in an element of the marvellous into the common place, making it natural-supernatural. The compact emotion of the last three lines voices the powerful theme of intense feelings, that of maternal affection and readiness to suffer and sacrifice for the sake of her children. Ezekiel writes:

My mother only said;  
Thank God the scorpion picked on me  
and spared my children.  [CP, p.131]

Ezekiel’s ‘Night of the Scorpion’ helps us to define the humanist element in his poetry. The mother in the poem is a typical Indian mother who is superstitious, religious and deeply concerned with the well-being of her son. The naturalist father is also a common figure who can be encountered in several educated Indian families. Ezekiel evokes the rural reaction to the catastrophe of the scorpion bite with remarkable precision. What the poem informs as a whole is the ironic detachment of the urban individual who is not part of the scene. But the triumph of the humanity in the end survives even the ironic sarcasm of the urbanised poet. ‘Night of the Scorpion’ thus, shows that Ezekiel’s poetry is concerned with the basic struggle of the individual to remain humane by showing a concern with other’s suffering.

**In India**

Ezekiel’s social awareness of his surroundings is indeed a testimony to his essential humanness. Ezekiel has underlined the three basic requirements of a good poet in his essay on Keki Daruwalla, which appeared in *The Times of India (Sunday Review)*. They are: “Literary stamina, intellectual strength and social awareness.” In regards to his awareness of the society, Ezekiel writes:

Always, in the sun’s eye,
Here among the beggars,
Hawkers, pavement sleepers,
Hutment dwellers, slums,
Dead souls of men and gods,
Burnt-out mothers, frightened
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.  [CP, p.131]

The ‘noisy silence’ in the poem is claustrophobic, and reaches a breaking point in Ezekiel’s mind, hence, paradoxically; it is a “noisy silence.” This description of the city is about Bombay, the city where he lives and which he has known since his childhood.

Instead of attempting a whole poem in a new style Ezekiel breaks this poem into four sections of varying degrees of formal freedom and each section is different and modifies the others. The first stanza gives a classic example of the transitional state between formal and free verse. Christopher Wiseman writes:

Clearly it is neither fully regular verse nor fully free verse. The first nine lines are based on a three-foot pattern, predominantly in trochaic rhythm, but including iambics, a trochee and occasional missing syllables, while the last three lines are tetrameters with a strongly iambic base. The whole section forms one long sentence, driven forward by the list of suffering humanity observed by the seeking eye and climaxing with the observer’s own presence and reaction.31

The second section of the poem runs:

The Roman Catholic Goan boys
The whitewashed Anglo-Indian boys
The musclebound Islamic boys
Were earnest in their prayers.

They copied, bullied, stole in pairs
They bragged about their love affairs
They carved the table broke the chairs
But never missed their prayers.

The Roman Catholic Goan boys
Confessed their solitary joys
Confessed their games with high-heeled toys
And hastened to the prayers.

The Anglo-Indian gentlemen
Drank whisky in some Jewish den
With Muslims slowly creeping in
Before or after prayers. [CP, p.132]

Christopher Wiseman regarding the form of the poem says:

This form is, of course, the second part of Tennyson’s
"The Lady of Shalott" stanza and is highly effective in
combining its formal, romantic literary echoes with the
satirical colloquial content.32

It also emits a signal of certain reality in Ezekiel’s observation. Ezekiel’s
irony is at its best in ‘In India.’ With him irony is like a moving search light that
sheds its brilliance on undiscovered corners of our dark existence enabling us to
see the reality that lurks behind appearances. The Roman Catholic Goan boys
hasten to prayers after having their “solitary joys” with “high heeled toys”. The
Anglo-Indian men drink whisky in company with secretive Muslims. The
wooden Indian wives sit apart at parties because they do not drink, do not talk
and do not kiss. Her English boss seduces the ubiquitous Bombay typist or
secretary after an initial struggle. These are some of the tinged close-ups
presented in the poem. In terms of technical development, 'In India' is interesting, containing in microcosm Ezekiel's struggles to free himself from restriction, and the poem concludes with a breakthrough.

In the Theatre

In the poem, 'In the Theatre' Nissim Ezekiel presents the world as a stage where the actor's talent tries to interpret the sense of 'transparent existence.' The actor's movement is compared to the flight of a migrating bird. The poem expresses Ezekiel's desires to end the acting but is willing to know, to be new, and to discover his relevance to cosmos. He says:

I act to end the acting,
not to be known but to know,
to be new, to become a form and find
my relevance. [CP, p.151]

Ezekiel's constant stress on humanism as his basic belief is given poetical expression through the images of human face, and the state of being intensely human is conveyed through an encounter with reason:

It's not the artifice
It's the art that finally
entrances reason
and makes us human. [CP, p.152]

Ezekiel has a feeling of staying still "behind the sad mask of reason" and prays to God to grant him strength to encounter all obstacles in the way of knowing the life of the spirit. This humanistic stance is brought into close association with the element of his art. Ezekiel expresses his desires to "act" and compose his work in "the script of the universal theatre." Thus, he says:

I act, create
the script of the universal theatre-
this is common place. [CP, p.152]

There is an intermingling of art, philosophy and religion in Ezekiel’s world. Originality in art has a metaphysical dimension and a quality of transcendence, which is very natural in its making:

Originality is metaphysical,  
transcending consciousness  
yet falling like rain  
by a natural process. [CP, p.152]

However, Vasant A. Shahane says, “many of Ezekiel’s poems do not give me this feeling of “falling like rain” so naturally and their artistic flow is impeded by many obtrusive ideas and intellectualism.”34 Perhaps, what Shahane says about Ezekiel’s poem is true, as the reading of Ezekiel’s poems do not exactly give the sense of falling like rain. Shahane also thinks that Ezekiel is not contented with playing the role of a poet, pure and simple, but he seems rather fascinated by a wider world. Firstly, there is the world of poetry and art and secondly, there is the larger world of reality and facts which attract Ezekiel. If Keats’ sensibility moves primarily into the world of art and beauty, Shelley’s operates between one world and another. This explains why Shelley called the poet as an unacknowledged legislator of the world. In Ezekiel, the stress in a minor key is usually on the world of reality. 35

Happening

The setting of this poem ‘Happening’ is perhaps Nissim Ezekiel’s own room, which holds his writing desk. The poem also depicts many of his upsurges, abysses, paradoxes and transcendent moments. The poem begins:
A man withdrawn into himself may be a man moving forward. [CP, p.163]

Ezekiel here wishes to resolve his philosophical dilemma, though the light in the room gets dim. This dim room suggests the spiritual state of his groping in darkness. Ezekiel states man's utter confusion which gropes for a thing but could not find it in spite of being in the midst of it. This can apply to either a spiritual or a mental unrest of a person. He writes:

We grope among the signs and symbols for the source of signs and symbols. In making love Upon this bed I am dependent on a fire from heaven [CP, p.163]

Man needs a fire from heaven to make love. God is a source of love. In First John, the Bible says:

Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another. [I John 4:11]

This is God's commandment that man should love one another. According to Shahane "'Happening' is a moment of intense revelation of the self, it is expressed in a language, and a mode characteristic of Ezekiel's pinning his faith in liberal, emotive, and philosophical humanism." He states:

The food I eat cannot nourish me unless I love the human face. I closed the door and sit alone in kinship with the world. [CP, p.164]
The Bible again in I John chapter 3 says:

My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth. [I John 3:18]

A real love is shown not by word and tongue but in deed. The poem ‘Happening’ brings Ezekiel’s sensibility in intense “kinship with the world.” And he realizes the unity of nature and man and the links that bind man with his fellowmen. If Ezekiel withdraws into himself, he is reaching out to other people. If he thinks for himself, he also thinks for others. He writes:

I am near everybody
being near myself alone. [CP, p.164]

HYMNS IN DARKNESS (1976)

The Railway Clerk

The poem ‘The Railway Clerk’ is the first poem to be taken up from Ezekiel’s six volume Hymns in Darkness (1976). Ezekiel’s poems are concerned with the theme of life and love, which in fact are the characteristics of humanism. He draws his immediate surrounding and the life of a common and ordinary man in his poems. He voiced very candidly the frustrated life of a railway clerk in the poem ‘The Railway Clerk’, who is blamed for no fault of his. His leave application has been refused twice a year. To add to his woes is his undergraduate standard that debarred him for further promotion. Ezekiel states:

It isn’t my fault.
I do what I’m told
but still I am blamed.
This year, my leave application
Ezekiel describes the kind of life a railway clerk lives both in the office and at home. He uses a very colloquial language, perhaps, the language a railway clerk employs in a real life situation. The pity is that the railway clerk gets blame even if he does what he is ordered to do. There is so much work for him to do. The peace at his home is ruined by the demand of money by his wife. In the office, nobody gives him bribe as it is done to other clerks, who are placed in a fortunate position. Both the situation in the office and at home upset him and he wishes to be a bird:

I wish I was a bird. [CP, p.184]

Ezekiel catches the visual quality of Bombay life in all its reality. He shows a sympathetic attitude towards the marginal man of the city of Bombay, manifesting his interest in the well-being of the community. Ezekiel's social self finds expression in this aspect of his personality:

I am never neglecting my responsibility.
I am discharging it properly,
I am doing my duty,
But who is appreciating?
Nobody, I am telling you. [CP, p.184]

In spite of his proper discharge of duty, nobody appreciates him. Again besides, the small size of his desk, the fan in his office room is not repaired for
because this becomes a way of life in the present society. And the majority of people in our country have accepted this tradition.

This poignant poem entitled ‘The Railway Clerk’ shows Nissim Ezekiel’s concern for human beings. He has reacted with great sensitivity to the various facets of the Indian environment. The genuine concern he has for his environment places Ezekiel as a marked humanist. When Naipaul rails against the inefficiency of the clerk and steno, Ezekiel looks upon them as persons, with private lives outside their functions at work. In his essay, “Naipaul’s India and Mine” Ezekiel writes:

In Naipaul’s India, the clerk will not bring you a glass of water even if you faint. In my India, a clerk will do virtually anything for you if he is treated humanely. I know those clerks, their background, their problems, their conditions of work, their income, how they are transported to and from their places of work, their humanity, in short.

Perhaps most of the persons who Mr. Naipaul met in India are grotesques, contemptible or pathetic creatures. Ezekiel too shares most of Mr. Naipaul’s idea and problems about India. However, Ezekiel sees India in his own way, quite different from how Mr. Naipaul sees it. Towards the end of the essay, “Naipaul’s India and Mine.” Ezekiel states, “Criticism must attack, even denounce, but it must not deny human beings their humanity.”

The Egoist Prayer

The critical and ironical views on God leads to ambiguity as to what Nissim Ezekiel takes God to be. At times, there is humility and submission to God whereas in the next moment he pleads to God and drags Him at his will to
two or three months. His children are neglecting their studies. Every thing is a headache to him, be it in the office or at home. The railway clerk complains:

My desk is too small,
the fan is not repaired for two months,
three months.
I am living far off in Borivli,
my children are neglecting studies,
how long this can go on? [CP, p.185]

The railway clerk’s only happiness and consolation is to see a film once a week and to meet some of his good friends. While some of his friends think of going abroad but for him the circumstances at his home stops him for thinking of going abroad. Because he is the only bread earner of the family and his mother-in-law is confined to bed:

Once a week, I see film
and then I am happy, but not otherwise.
Also, I have good friends,
that is only consolation.
Sometimes we are meeting here or there
and having long chat.
We are discussing country’s problems.
Some are thinking of foreign
but due to circumstances, I cannot think.
My wife’s mother is confined to bed
and I am only support. [CP, p.185]

Ezekiel depicts here a situation which we encounter in our everyday life. He adopts a commonplace subject matter but gives a new treatment. His observation on the matter is authentic. Diving deeply into the psyche of the railway clerk, he describes the experiences of a lower middle class man. Those who do not fall in the line of passing the buck and who do not indulge in corrupt practices suffer,
make God’s will coincide with his. It is man’s desire to explore the new, the unexplored, and the unknown that feeds the flame and keeps it burning forever. Nissim Ezekiel wants to learn the truths of life. He will not mind even if the Lord in the process kicks him around:

Kick me around
a bit more, O Lord
I see at last
there’s no other way
for me to learn
your simplest truths. [CP, p.212]

Akshaya Kumar says that there is an echo of John Donne in this regard:

Batter my heart, three person’s God; for you
As ye but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend
That I may rise and stand, O’erthrew me, and bend
Your force, to breake, blowe burn and make me new.39

The Lord, God remains the first cause of truth and life. As a result, the inspiration of learning first truth comes from Him. God is the original source of scriptures that are believed to be the earliest revelations of truth. No Divine truth can stale or fade. Ezekiel supplies a new orientation to scriptural interpretation. “His approach towards Holy Scriptures as well as to life at large is unconventional, bold, and humanistic. He finds nothing final, finished and exclusive about the sectarian beliefs of the well-known organized religions of the world”40

This poem arouse the ironical effect in the sense that Ezekiel seems to be a man drawing the attention of his Almighty towards His duty as if God is unaware of the situation and the man like Ezekiel unveils His condition:

The vices I’ve always had
I still have.
The virtues I've never had
I still do not have.
From this Human Way of life
Who can rescue Man
If not his Maker?
Do thy duty, Lord. [CP, p.212]

These lines suggest that the spirit of the man becomes devoid of
humanism as man commits more vices and lacks virtue. Therefore, there is no
other way except 'a kick', a punishment to take him back on the right path of life
ordained by the Almighty. Ezekiel is aware of the power of the Almighty. He
also knows how he can learn the truth even if the situation is so grave as to
remind God what His duty is. Ezekiel understands the vices in himself, yet is
helpless to be free from that and request for a 'kick.' He believes that the kick
will be a warning or a means to bring him to the right path.

It is again difficult to comprehend Ezekiel's attitude towards God. Ezekiel
seems to be more ironical than earnest, for he prays:

No, Lord,
Not the fruit of action
is my motive.
But do you really mind
half a bite of it?
It tastes so sweet
and I'm so hungry. [CP, p.212]

According to Akshaya Kumar, the poem is a prayer, not a denial of The
Gita. This is a philosophy humanized with a bit of naughty laugh at the
enthusiasts. Ezekiel's approach is not that of an idealist, but has the undertones
of a realist. Evidently enough, Ezekiel's attitude towards God is intimate and
informal. It may be wrong to look Nissim Ezekiel's view of God in the
conventional religious Christian concept. The Christians completely surrender to
God for all things good and bad. Nissim Ezekiel’s poetry rather usually moves in the “ethical” level in the Kierkegardian sense.41

Ezekiel denies the preaching of the conventional myths and attitudes of Jewish religious traditions. He ridicules the concept of the ‘chosen nation of God’ who can only execute His will. Ezekiel cannot accept and agree that the facts of life and its problems be ruled and governed by religious and mythical truth. Ezekiel, by adopting a casual posture, asks God to spare him from His ordinances for he wants to prioritize his own problems and aspirations.

Do not choose me, O Lord
to carry out thy purposes.
I’m quite unworthy, of course,
but I have my own purposes
You have plenty of volunteers
to choose from, Lord.
Why pick on me, the selfish one? [CP, p.213]

We get in Nissim Ezekiel’s poetry a very individualistic and unique kind of Existentialism with immense irony. But there is no element of meaninglessness if one sees it from human point of view though, this would really be absurd from a religious point of view. His is not the kind of a devoted Christian prayer to say “do not choose me, O Lord?” This is a wishful rendering of the Lord’s Prayer in the Bible, “Thy will be done on earth as it is done in Heaven.” Akshaya Kumar interestingly says that Ezekiel would mean “as it ought to be done and is done on earth”42. He translates the absolute will of God into the social will in the poem. The material concerns become important when one shifts its focus from heaven to earth. Ezekiel prays:

Let me be, O Lord,
the Camel of the Higher Income Group
who passes smoothly through
the eye of that needle. [CP, p.213]

**Hymns in Darkness**

‘Hymns in darkness’ consisting of sixteen stanzas is composed under varied form and structure. It is not an easy poem, which is equally complex in its structure and thought. According to K. G. Srisvastava Ezekiel’s ‘Hymns in Darkness’ expresses:

the best piece from his pen- intellectually complex,
mobile in phrasing, fastidious in diction and austere in acceptance.”

Darkness occurs as a prominent term both in Naipaul’s controversial travelogue *An Area of Darkness* and in Ezekiel’s ‘Hymns in Darkness’. The celebrated novelist Naipaul’s darkness means the external unhealthy manifestations like illiteracy and ignorance that characterize his ancestors’ country, India during his visit in the early sixties. Naipaul’s vision of darkness relate to the surface realities he sees in the country while the darkness in Ezekiel’s poem means the darkness of the fallen spirit in contrast to those who live by spiritual illumination.

The poem began as an exposition of the modern man. It is full of enlightenment, rationalism and scientific temper, proud of his knowledge and defiant in his attitude to the traditional values of morality. Man is a coward and a hypocrite, full of all kinds of ignorance but overconfident of his resources.

He knows how to speak of humility,
without humility.

He has exchanged the wisdom of youthfulness
for the follies of maturity.

What is lost is certain, what is gained of dubious value
Self-esteem stunts his growth. He has learnt how to be nobody

In the tenth stanza, Ezekiel talks of man as simple man. His age, physical appearance, marital status, profession, social position, and looks are not important to understand the nature of man. He is not particularizing a man with certain status and quality. The only one thing this man needs to possess is human speech. The means to understand this human speech is important. He writes:

A man, it’s often been said, is simply a man.

He’s not a middle-aged man. He’s not an old man.

He’s not a married man. He is not a man with children.

He’s not a professor or a journalist. He’s not a foolish man or a wise man.

He’s not tall and handsome or small and crabbed-looking.

He’s simply a man, and his speech is human.

The rest is important to understand that speech. [CP, p. 222]

The eleventh section depicts God as the enemy of man because He is not subject to change. God and religion are condemned here. God is described as “The absentee landlord” the belief in whose forms creates all rifts and divisions
in families, castes, communities, clubs, and political parties. All these social evils are stable and they torture man but other human activities are transitory. God is selfless, thus he is enemy to man. Ezekiel writes:

The enemy is God
as the Unchanging One.

All forms of God
and the God in all forms.

The absentee Landlord,
the official of all officials.

The oppressor who worships God
and the oppressed who worship God

are victims of the enemy.
They rot in families, in castes,
in communities, in clubs,
in political parties. [CP, p.222]

Dr P.R.Kher in his article "‘Existential’ Strains in Nisim Ezekiel" writes:

Though here Ezekiel seems to be waging a war against God, like an atheist, or a Marxist like Jean-Paul Sartre, he is deeply Kierkegaardian.45

In the thirteenth stanza is described a philanthropist who remained cheerful in the universal darkness by attending selflessly to the needs of others at the cost of his conveniences and comforts and by accepting defeat as a twin brother. The persona stood grimly in his little light contrary to the city dweller who in his complete ignorance of reality is cheerful. This implies that cheerfulness lies in selfless service to mankind, though to a rational and selfish being such a dedicated life may appear a wasted. The denier of one’s own life is
not acceptable for Ezekiel who seems to be all for a humanistic attitude according to which man must live both for himself and others and not exclusively for others only. He writes:

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

An energetic man, an active man.
I like his spirit
and saw no hope for him.

Yet, he had the common touch;
he could, for instance, work with his hands.

To others, all attentive.
To his own needs, indifferent.

A tireless social human being,
estined always
to know defeat
like a twin brother. [CP, p.223]

The astute knowledge that failure and man are twins, underlines the peculiarity of human situations, which can be redeemed by this realization alone. No wonder if he works out a fitting epitaph for himself, it will run in the following lines:

Here lies a poet whose theme was human failure
For which he was praised in a dozen famous obituaries
[CP, p.275]

The last stanza of ‘Hymns in Darkness’ expresses Ezekiel’s desire neither to the life of a sensualist nor to that of the philanthropist. The best way lies in
accepting life as it is and in feeling the unfathomable reality as it reveals its mysteries slowly and gradually without being bothered by belief or unbelief:

In the presence of death,
remember, do not console yourself;
there's only death here,
only life.

You are master
neither of death nor of life.

Belief will not safe you,
nor unbelief.

All you have
is the sense of reality,
unfathomable
as it yields its secrets
slowly
one
by
one. [CP, p.225]

Bijay Kumar Das says the lines, "there is only death here/ and life" reminds us of Eliot in his Rock Choruses and Four Quartets. In fact, death is the beginning of life. One dies a physical death when one enters into a spiritual life. According to Ezekiel, the awareness of reality is much more important than belief. No man on earth has the power over life and death. It is a fact that man cannot know how long he will live on this earth. It is this sense of reality, which unveils the secrets of life. K.G. Srivastava commenting on Ezekiel says:

The poet is a neo-stoic philosopher who has adopted a humanistic cum pragmatic stance whether one agrees with him or not. The poem is a testament of Ezekiel's humanistic worldview tinged with nihilism, which
denying old values of moral conduct tend towards the assertion of life. 

LATTER-DAY PSALMS (1982)

Counsel

'Counsel' is the first poem of Sahitya Akademi Award winning volume Latter-Day Psalms (1982). The poem is obviously influenced by 'Hymns in Darkness', which is its immediate predecessor. The poem briefly sums up the experiences of a despairing life. Sanjit Mishra says:

The title "Counsel" conveys a deeper sense of involvement than a casual word 'advice' might have done. It is only appropriate to old age that the poet of 'Barbaric city sick with slums' has been able to overcome his earlier disenchantment and has learnt to live in sickness and slums. Palpably in an endearing mood he wishes to pass on the encapsulated wisdom to the next generation.

Here Ezekiel seems to suggest the futility of the world and the helplessness of man:

Turn to silence, nothingness.
Where you are
Is where you have to be. [CP, 229]

In the concluding stanza of the poem, Ezekiel alerts us with his humanism. In the last stanza, he writes in order to celebrate life in all its folly and to imbibe a helping and sacrificing attitudes towards others. His advice is not to give in the hope of getting a return. Gratitude should be expressed by giving what one ought to give. One who gives in expectations of getting a return may be upset if he fails to get it. Ezekiel says:
Express your gratitude
By giving what you have to give.
You may get nothing in return. [CP, 230]

The last single line coda, pleads for putting up with the strife-torn life with grace becoming one created in the image of God. An honest giver with pure heart bears restlessness with grace. Thus, Ezekiel says.

And bear your restlessness with grace. [CP, 230]

Minority poem

In ‘Minority Poem’ Ezekiel as a humanist poet puts stress on how human values necessarily forge ties between individuals while language serves as a hurdle in the process. In this poem Ezekiel let the persona talk to his invisible guests, who quietly listen to his speech without any argument:

In my room, I talk
to my invisible guests:
they do not argue, but wait

Till I am exhausted
then they slip away
with inscrutable faces. [CP, p.236]

But his guests slip away with inscrutable faces when he explains to them to the extent of his exhaustion. Ezekiel ponders over the limitations of human language that fails to communicate to his listeners. However, he ultimately realises how human values such as care and love unite man while language reverses the process. Ezekiel through this poem shows that a compassionate deed is much more captivating and greater than a mere talk. Mother Teresa, a symbol
of love let her guests die in her arms, while a speaker talk till his exhaustion to his listeners who leave him and slip away with inscrutable faces. Ezekiel here wants to emphasize the value of a kind deed. He writes:

It's the language really separates, whatever else is shared. On the other hand,

Everyone understands Mother Teresa; her guests die visibly in her arms. [CP, p.236]

Ezekiel in his humanist phase is "preoccupied with perennial values, which defy barriers and discriminations." The concluding stanza emphasises that linguistic and technical expertise is of no avail "while the city burns." Driven by temporal concerns, the selfish inhabitants of the burning city have discarded human values:

Polish up your alien techniques of observation, while thy city burns. [CP, p.237]

**Undertrial Prisoners**

In this poem Ezekiel states the plight of the under trial poor prisoner in India. Ezekiel pities a man who is twice deprived of man’s created law, one for committing a negligible crime and the other for want of money to get bailed. Ezekiel here shows his disapproval of existing Colonial Jail laws with their complex and circuitous procedures to deliver justice from the humanistic point of view.

Let me show you, friends a man in jail they offered him bail
but he didn’t have the money
so he lives in jail
he did something wrong
he doesn’t know when
five years ago or may be ten. [CP, p.240]

The poem shows a compassionate feeling for the under-trial prisoner, who commits a minor crime but stays in jail for years even before trials are conducted. Ezekiel has no objection of a criminal being tried under the laws of the land. However, he sympathizes towards the suffering prisoner, who has no money to bail out themselves. Poverty becomes a double curse in his case. The line, “five years ago or may be ten” suggest the length of time taken for the trial of a trivial crime.

The prisoner hardly remembers when he committed a crime as he had overstayed in the jail. The jail keepers justify themselves of keeping the under trial prisoner under man made rules. Money too plays an important role in letting man keep the law. Ezekiel employs irony to criticise and convey his disgust against the injustice he finds in our society for which there is no remedy in law. ‘Undertrial Prisoners’ is one such case. The under trial prisoner is kept behind the bar for years before his case is heard and disposed of in which he turns out to be innocent. But he has spent years in prison for no fault of his.

We have our rules
made long ago
he’s got to wait,
the law says so.
It’s not our fault
he lives in jail.
he did something wrong
and he can’t pay bail. [CP, p.241]
Latter Day Psalms

'Latter-Day Psalms' is a poem having ten parts. Ezekiel wrote this poem in June 1978 when the Arts Council of Rotterdam invited him for poetry reading. In an interview with Malavika R. Khana Ezekiel states:

It was the total silence of my hotel room that made me to write. I had no reading material with me, but there was a copy of the Gideon Bible beside my bed. I read some of my favourite passages from Jonah and Job, then turned to the Psalms. I've had a special relationship with them since the age of twelve, a dissenting relationship which had been suppressed. Feelings stretching over 40 years suddenly crystallised. Before leaving Rotterdam, I had completed nine Latter-Day Psalms, the tenth and concluding one being written in Berlin.50

The first nine parts of 'Latter-Day Psalms' correspond to Psalm numbers 1,3,8,23,60,78,95,102 and 127 of the Old Testament Psalms. They set off echoing an identical language and imagery. Soon Ezekiel achieves ironic effects recasting their original sense in such a way as to overturn their meaning. Ezekiel seems to repudiate the Biblical Psalms which more or less deals with the Jews, the chosen race in the Bible. Sanjit Mishra giving his comment on Ezekiel's 'Latter-Day Psalms' says, "From a strictly religious angle such a proposition is highly blasphemous and amounts to insulting God"51. Mishra's statement is true if one looks it from a religious point of view. But Ezekiel's approach of God is very different from others. It is because, to him, God is conceived as the God of man. In this regard, Satyanarain rightly observes, "Ezekiel does not conceive of God in terms of His Olympian aloofness, or as an awesome supernatural reality"52.
The comparison of Ezekiel's first 'Latter Day Psalms' with its Biblical counterpart illuminates the humanistic aspect of the former with that of the religious concept of David, the Psalmist. The first Psalms begins:

**BLESSED is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful.**

**2 But his delight is in the law of the Lord; and in his law doth he meditate day and night.** [Psalms 1:1-2]

To David, the Biblical Psalmist, the person who is blessed is one who does not take the advice of the wicked nor associates himself with sinners and mockers. He receives his delight only from the law of the Lord, which he meditates day and night. Whereas the first 'Latter-Day Psalms I' of Ezekiel begins:

Blessed is the man that walketh not in the council of the conventional, and is at home with sin as with a wife. He shall listen patiently to the scornful, and understand the sources of their scorn. [CP, p.252]

Ezekiel advocates man's involvement of both good and evil in life. He emphasizes that good and evil are part of our life; as such, we cannot be separated from evil completely. A man cannot live apart from his wife so is he with sin. Man is full of sinful nature. Ezekiel's man lives together with sin as he cannot be parted from his wife. A man of God who delights in the law of the Lord meditates day and night. But Ezekiel's man, whose 'delight is in action' has nothing to meditate on anything day and night. He is willing to sympathize the deprived by acquainting himself to their miserable situation. Nissim
Ezekiel’s plan to defy the accepted religious values has a humane logic behind it. Akshaya Kumar says that according to Ezekiel “rewarding/blessing is the result of modern rationalism coupled with humanism both pointing to the sort of humility of the religious mind”53. Meditating day and night without work has no meaning. Thus, meditation without action is a negation of life to Nissim Ezekiel:

He does not meditate day and night on anything; his delight is in action.  

[CP, p. 252]

However, he does not favour a complete abortion of meditation. He wants action and meditation to go in parallel. This means that faith should not be a substitute for action. He does not comply with the Psalmist who believes:

3 And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doth shall prosper.  

[Psalms 1:3]

The Blessed man in the Bible is compared to a tree which grows near the river. This tree produces good fruit in its season. Its leave will not wither as it enjoys a flourishing life. Like this tree, a blessed man lacks nothing and leads a prosperous and meaningful life. Unlike this blessed man mentioned in the Bible Ezekiel rarely finds a man who yields the fruit of his labour. Many people work but they do not get the result of their work. Even if some are apparently prospering, it is not so in reality. And it will not be everlasting as it had already been dying at the root. Nissim Ezekiel while rationalizing the view of the Psalmist says:

Rare is the man whose fruit is in his season. Yet his leaf must wither, and that which
appears to prosper, is often
dying at the root. [CP, p.253]

The wicked people mentioned in the Bible are like the chaff, which the wind blows away. They will not be able to stand in the judgement. Whereas the upright man will be like a tree planted by rivers of water that yields its fruit in season. But Nissim Ezekiel's godly and the ungodly blended well together that the ungodly are no more like the chaff which the wind blows away:

The ungodly are in the same condition, no more like the chaff which the wind driveth away than the godly. [CP, p.253]

Ezekiel's godly and the ungodly mingle together unlike that of the sinners in the Bible who will not be in the assembly of the righteous. Thus, in the 'Latter-Day Psalms', the sinners are well disguised in the congregation of the righteous. Ezekiel states:

The godly and the ungodly shall not stand in the judgement, for neither are worthy of their true Potential. In the congregation of the righteous, the sinners are well disguised. Do not seek to count them. [CP, p.253]

We live in the hypocritical society where the genuine cannot be easily identified from the hypocrite. The history of the world is the judgment of the world. But the judgment refers here is God's final judgment in the Bible. On this day the hypocrites, who try to maintain their place in "The congregations of the righteous" will be far removed. The Psalmist in the Bible says:
Therefore the ungodly shall not
stand in the judgment, nor sinners in
the congregation of the righteous.

H.C. Leupold writes that the familiar phrase of the King James:

"shall not stand in the judgment" is most plainly a
Hebraism. Its meaning is made clear by our translation:
Such a one "shall not be able to maintain himself" or
stand his ground when the judgment comes. Keeping
the same figure, he shall be obliged to sit down or to
retire in shame or confusion as one convicted of guilt.54

'Latter-Day Psalms II' is a parody of the Biblical Psalm Number 3. King
David in this number made his prayer for his deliverance when he fled from his
son Absalom. H.C. Leupold says that this Psalm is commonly called "a lament of
an individual".55 God is David's sustainer, protector of his life and a shield for
him. This is how David made his prayer in Psalm Number 3:

3 But thou, O Lord, art a shield for
me; my glory, and the lifter of mine
head.
5 I laid me down and slept; I awaked;
for the Lord sustained me. [Psalm 3:3, 5]

Whatever glory David achieves, he attributes solely to his God. "The
lifter of mine head" suggests that God is the source of any dignity that belongs to
David. The expression however has a broader meaning. The head drops when a
man is discouraged and disappointed. When God lifts up the head, He delivers a
man from all those things that depress him. Thus, God is the lifter of David's
head. Ezekiel too has made a prayer in 'Latter-Day Psalm II' as David the
Psalmist did. However, the mark of humanism glitters in Ezekiel's prayer
because he does pray not only for himself but also for others. He even prays for those who rise up against him. He cares for the welfare of others as he does it for himself. He prays:

Lord, few there are that trouble
me, fewer still that rise up aga­
against me. Be thou a shield for
them as for me. [CP, p.253]

In Ezekiel the selflessness only, allow him to say, “Be thou a shield for them as for me”. ‘Them’ signifies those who rise up against him. Ezekiel prays that God should not only be a shield for him but for those who rise up against him. Ezekiel’s prayer has close affinity with the teaching of Christ, who urges us to love our enemies as we love ourselves. He again, extends his prayer for everyman; woman and child that they be awaken by God’s sustainability. Ezekiel’s universe is not the universe devoid of God rather it is controlled by some supernatural power. God reigns supreme in his world. In view of this, Ezekiel states:

I laid me down and slept;
I awaked, for the lord su­
stained me. Let every man,
woman and child sleep and
awaken, sustained by thee. [CP, p.254]

Ezekiel agrees with the Bible that says salvation belongs to the Lord. This means salvation can only be acquired through the Lord and not through any other means. Christians believe that salvation is attainable only by the blood of Jesus Christ. The Psalmist prays, “thy blessing is upon thy people”. In the Old Testament God’s people generally means the Israelites. But in Ezekiel’s case, he does not pray for a particular people or the city of Bombay. He prays that God’s blessing reign upon all the people of the earth. The tremendous presence of a
humanist element in his poems especially in his prayer makes Ezekiel unique.

The last stanza of ‘Latter-Day Psalms II’ asserts:

Salvation belongeth unto the
Lord. It is not through
one or other Church.
Thy blessing is upon
all the people of the earth. [CP, p.254]

Ezekiel reaches out to the whole of mankind without giving a place of importance to one church or the other. His approach is liberal and secular by not conferring to a particular nation or race.

The fourth ‘Latter-Day Psalms’ is modeled after Psalm Number 23. There is an echo of Ezekiel’s humanism against David’s complete acknowledgement of God’s protection. When David asserts in the first line of Psalm Number 23 “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want”. Ezekiel begins his poem with a question:

Is the Lord my shepherd?
Shall I not want? [CP, p.255]

A general conception is that David, the shepherd, writes this Psalm. But it must also be pointed out that no really valid argument against the authorship of the Psalm by David has yet been advanced. Yet it is far less likely that “the sweet Psalmist of Israel” wrote this piece in his youthful days while he was still tending his father’s flock. However, details found in verse 2 convincingly indicate that David composed this Psalm when he was tending the flock:

2 He maketh me to lie down in green
pastures: he leadeth me beside the still
waters [Psalm 23:2]
The inquisitive spirit of Ezekiel questions the faith of David about God being the protector of all creatures as it is reflected in Psalm 23. Contrary to David, Ezekiel is not convinced that under God’s care he experience perfection. He also walks in the path of self-righteousness when his soul is restored. Ezekiel says:

When my soul is restored,
I walk the path of self-righteousness. [CP, p 255]

But David writes in the following lines:

He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me
in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. [Psalm 23:3]

The ardent wish to follow the path of self-righteousness bespeaks Ezekiel’s faith in human dignity, which he never puts on stake. Ezekiel keeps the human predicament in mind and takes nothing for granted forever. He says:

I do fear evil: thy rod
and thy staff do comfort me. [CP, p. 255]

The comfort Nissim Ezekiel receives from God’s rod and staff could not put away his fear of evil. He is preoccupied with all the passions and weaknesses, which the flesh is heir to an ordinary man. Not only does he fear evil but also affirms his non-expectancy of goodness and mercy throughout his life even when he dwells in the house of the Lord:

I shall not expect goodness
and mercy all the days of my life, even if I dwell
in the house of the Lord.  [CP, p. 255]

Ezekiel differs greatly from David who writes:

4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.  [Psalm 23: 4, 6]

The Psalmist words “and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever” does not express the physical presence in the Temple or Sanctuary but rather the spiritual communion with God. True, deep, and real fellowship with God is the climax of all the blessings enjoyed when a man is under the protecting care of the true shepherd, God. But Ezekiel opposes the Psalmist because he cannot accept the ancient message blindly. And he wants the relevance of this message to the modern world.

In the fifth ‘Latter Day Psalms’, Ezekiel reflects the Jewish Diaspora and the fragmentation of a well-knit community throughout the world. The Bible describes the Israelites as “God’s chosen race” who would inherit the promise land, a land of honey and milk called Canaan. But this people grumbled against God and disobeyed his command time and again. God was displeased for their disobedience, so he punished them for their sins. Ezekiel states:

Cast off, scattered for a thousand years, where shall We live in peace with our neighbours?  [CP, p.256]
This part of the poem is a collage of Psalm 60, which runs:

O God, thou hast cast us off, thou hast scattered us, thou hast been displeased; O turn thyself to us again. [Psalm 60:1]

The spirit of faith and prayer dominates the verse it is, however colored by a certain lament. The Israelites have suffered a severe defeat so they felt that God has cast them off and scattered them. There is also an implied confession of guilt at this point. Again Ezekiel expresses his desperate reminisce of the indiscriminate genocide of the Jews under the German regime in World War II, which is but alarmingly imprinted in his psyche. In regards to this Ezekiel writes:

Vain is the help of man, and vain everything else.
Did none pray who was caught in the Holocaust? [CP, p.256]

The 'Holocaust' refers to the killing of millions of Jews by the Nazis in the 1930s and 1940s. However David prays in the following:

11 Give us help from trouble: for vain is the help of man.
12 Through God we shall do valiantly:
for he it is that shall tread down our enemies. [Psalm 60:11-12]

Ezekiel alludes to the prayer David made in Psalms 60 but he does express the opposite concept to that of David. For, the former is in the spiritual tone while the latter is with that of the humanist tone. Thus, Ezekiel writes:

We do valiantly, and so do our enemies. [CP, p.257]
Ezekiel derives the VI section of his 'Latter Day Psalms' from Psalm 78. It is a lengthy number, giving a description of both the blessing and the curse fell upon the Jews. The Israelites were named the rebellious generation for their repeated disobedience to the Almighty. Thus, Ezekiel writes:

The testimony in Jacob, the covenant of God, were refused by the rebellious generation of the times; they are refused now, except in the doctrine. [CP, p. 257]

Ezekiel raises a question on how long his people should rely on those of God's marvelous deeds in Egypt while delivering them from the merciless hand of Pharaoh to bring them to the "Promised Land." God has done many great miracles for the Israelites but that does not keep their faith intact. Even manna in their mouths could not estrange them from their lust. Ezekiel in addition to the wonderful Biblical incidents add that of the events in Nazi Germany. Ezekiel perhaps is not concerned about the marvelous deeds in both the situations in Egypt and Nazi Germany. He is rather concerned with the desperate condition of the Jew in these two places, which he wishes to bring to the notice of the people. The Jews in ancient Egypt have led a suppressed and immense tragic life, before God does miraculous wonders to drive them out of the Egyptian slavery. He emphasizes on the non-dependability on the marvelous thing that does not keep happening. These acts are from the living God. Ezekiel as a whole is interested to the accountability of human action. Thus, he puts a question.

How long are we to rely
On those marvelous things
in ancient Egypt? Tell me of the marvelous things in Nazi Germany. Even with manna in our mouths, we are not estranged from our lust. [CP, p.257]
The seventh of Ezekiel’s ‘Latter-Day Psalms’ is formed after Psalm 95. Ezekiel acknowledges the incomprehensibility of God’s wonder and might to the unreligious mind by having transcribed Psalm 95:1-2 to be comprehensible to common human thought. The Psalmist sings:

O COME, let us sing unto the Lord: let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation.
2 Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving, and make a joyful noise unto him with Psalms. [Psalm 95:1-2]

Ezekiel borrows most of the initial lines of each stanza of ‘Latter-Days Psalms’ from the Biblical Psalms. But he ends up with his own contrasting conclusion in the end:

Come, let us make a joyful noise unto him with Psalms.

And a different noise with Latter-Day Psalms. [CP, p.258]

The Psalmist sings a joyful noise to the Lord where God is exalted and glorified through his creatures. All things great and small belong to him for He is the creator. But, Ezekiel makes a different noise. The different noise warns us of nature’s cruelty to destroy and make us suffer:

The sea is his; we may drown in it. He formed the dry land, on which many millions thirst to no end. [CP, p.258]

The Biblical Psalms glorifies God’s created macrocosm, its flora and fauna. But Ezekiel looks to the positive as well as the negative aspects of a thing.
He reviles nature. Sometimes we wonder if he is disgruntled with God. The third stanza is borrowed from Psalms 95:7b, which says, “and we are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand.” Ezekiel borrowing from the Psalmist writes:

We are the people of his pasture, we are the sheep of his hand. Baa Baa Black Sheep

Ezekiel ironically ends the verse with Baa Baa Black Sheep, taking it to a contrary meaning from its original verse. The sheep in the Bible refers to God’s people. Ezekiel toys with the literal meaning to ridicule the original context impregnated with deep symbolic undertones. Though he sounds so indifferent and irreligious, he admits in the end that it is a sheer folly of man to tempt and test God. The mistakes committed by his ancestors’ worries him. He expresses words of regret had his predecessors’ sin against God. Thus, he says:

To tempt God and seek to prove him is sheer folly.
If that’s what our fathers did, I’m sorry for them.  

Ezekiel’s the eighth ‘Later-Day Psalms’ is extensively based on Psalm 102. The afflicted devotee is complaining before the Lord about his temporal existence. He compares himself to be some birds that are symbols of sorrow but asserts he is not in misery. Ezekiel’s Latter-Day Psalms viii opens:

I am like a pelican of the wilderness, like an owl of the desert, like a sparrow alone upon the house top- but not in misery.
I forget to eat my bread,
not because my heart is
withered like grass. [CP, p.259]

The Biblical Psalms says:

6 I am like a pelican of the wilderness:
I am like an owl of the desert.
7 I watch, and am as a sparrow alone
upon the house top. [Psalm 102: 6, 7]

In this Psalm number 102, the afflicted man pours out his distress before
the Lord, by using various similes to describe his agony. The Psalmist’s
portrayal of a desert owl among the ruins, and a bird alone on a house roof
shows an intense loneliness and misery. Ezekiel employs all these pictures in his
poems but for a different cause. He states that he is not in misery. The psalmist
forgets to eat bread for his heart is blighted and withered like grass. The fact that
he sits on an ash heap, as men in affliction often seems to lend color to the
charge that the Psalmist is indeed a curse man.

Ezekiel in the second stanza forgets to eat his bread but his heart is not
withered like grass. Thus, we find that the result of what the two Psalmists do is
the same but they have different cause for their action. This second stanza is
borrowed from Psalm 102:4. The third stanza is drawn from Psalm 102: 9, 10.
The Psalmist here eats ashes as his food and mingles his drink with tears because
God’s great wrath has fallen upon him. He writes:

9 For I have eaten ashes like bread,
and mingled my drink with weeping.
10 Because of thine indignation and
thy wrath; for thou hast lifted me up,
and cast me down. [Psalm 102: 9, 10]
Both the writers have taken into the same act but for separate causes and purposes. Ezekiel has eaten ashes for some purpose and has mingled his drink with weeping for worthy causes. Ezekiel having transcended the individual ‘self’ expresses concern for mankind in general and the suffering people in particular. He disapproves of people who make divisions of men into different groups’ base on faith. Mankind is one in spite of following various kinds of faith and making artificial divisions. Ezekiel as a humanist sings a different voice in ‘Latter-Day Psalms’ but he is not an atheist. N. Mohanty describing the kind of God Ezekiel worship writes:

It is only to a humanized God that the poet can offer such friendly prayer with such unmeditative conversational ease. Ezekiel makes it clear in ‘Latter-Day Psalms’ when he appropriates his concept of God, which to my mind is essentially Jewish, for Jewish philosophy insists on humanism.57

Ezekiel’s wish to worship a merciful God affirms his faith in God. Ezekiel makes it clear in this poem the kind of God he worships:

I worship the God who regards
the prayer of the destitute,
who hears the groaning of the
prisoner, and of those who are
appointed to death.
I wax old as a garment;
as a vesture I am change.
In this I accept the condition of humanity. [CP, p.259]

Ezekiel chooses to worship the sympathetic God, who regards the prayer of the destitute. He accepts mutation as a condition of humanity. He waxes like a garment and changes like vesture. Man cannot remain unchanged. The first five lines reflect on the humanism of Jewish philosophy while the next three lines sum up the essence of life. Ezekiel simply borrows the metonymy in his Psalms
with no complaints as to his miasma. He agrees to the mutability of human being as well as to the continuity of man by procreation. He says:

My children shall continue, and their children shall continue.... [CP, p.259]

The ninth ‘Latter-Day Psalms’ is drawn from Psalm 127. Solomon writes this Psalm and he designs it to give instruction to the people of Israel. The need of the divine blessings in all undertakings is greatly emphasize above hard work and honest endeavor in Psalm 127:1. Rising up early and keeping tirelessly at one’s task until late at night is obviously not condemned but all is vain unless one puts his or her trust in the divine blessing. The Psalmist says:

EXCEPT the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it: except the Lord keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain.

2 It is vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late, to eat the bread of sorrows: for so he giveth his beloved sleep. [Psalm 127:1-2]

Ezekiel overhauls Solomon’s song of Psalms 127 in the penultimate ‘Latter-Day Psalms’. It begins:

Except the Lord build the house— and not even always then— they labour in vain that build it. Yet, it is better to build than to abstain from building, and no labour is altogether in vain. It is not vain to rise up early, to sit up late, to eat the bread of sorrow. [CP, p. 260]
Ezekiel like a layman favours that it is better to do something than to remain idle. Being a humanist, he opines that no labour, howsoever apparently unrewarding is not entirely wasted. T.S.Eliot says, "It is better to do evil than nothing, at least we exist." The second stanza is derived from Psalm 127:3, which says:

Lo, children are an heritage of the Lord: and the fruit of the womb is his reward. [Psalm 127:3]

Children are a gift of God, a token of His grace. The Hebraic designated them as "a heritage from the Lord" an expression often used in the Old Testament with reference to the "Promised Land." In olden days, a warrior without weapon or a mighty man without arrow is compared with a man without children. For there will be situations when he needs support and time when he cannot stand-alone. To have children, begotten early in life, who are ready to stand by a father in all kinds of situations is a happy state of affairs. A stalwart son to act as his backers for a man who encounters opponents is as lucky as a man who has a quiver full of arrows in a dangerous battle. Both face the enemy confidently. Ezekiel as a modern and a humanist poet interprets this verse in the modern context. He writes:

Children are as arrow in the hands of a mighty man, but not every man is mighty.
Lo, children are an heritage of the Lord, but a quiver full of them is not essential for happiness. [CP, p. 260]

The last and tenth piece titled 'Concluding Latter-Day Psalms' is a comment on the previous nine as well as on the 150 Old Testament Psalms. The
150 Biblical Psalms enjoin the reader to praise the Lord for his mighty deeds, on the other hand Ezekiel dismisses its content as all that fuss about faith. He finds the make-believe world of ritualistic verbosity and high sounding declarations trying and deplorable. To Ezekiel “All that fuss about faith” is highly boring and pathetic in the present day context, so he thinks it is better to watch and participate in the human folly of committing sins than talk of the dead past boisterously.

Ezekiel’s assessment of Psalms borders on eccentricity for a man of religious convictions. But Ezekiel, basically a humanist poet is endowed with an instinctive empathy for man’s weakness. Despite questioning the sincerity of the Psalmist’s feelings, Ezekiel admires them for they are human creations, destined to be flawed and incomplete. While commenting on the poetic virtues of the Psalms, he applauds the lyrical quality and the richness of images, and avers:

The images are beautiful birds
and colourful fish: they fly,
they swim in my Jewish consciousness. [CP, p. 261]

Ezekiel rewrites and transforms some of the 150 Biblical Psalms as ‘Latter-Day Psalms’. He modifies this Psalms from his point of view. As such, he sounds arguing the spiritual wisdom of the Psalmist in the Bible and seems to digress from the concept of the original text. But the penultimate stanza of the concluding ‘Latter-Day Psalms’ proves that Ezekiel admits God’s presence in the world:

God is a presence here
and his people are real.
I see their sins. I hear
His anger. [CP, p.261]
Ezekiel's realization of God's presence helps him to complete his 'Latter-Day Psalms'. The almighty is humanized here and the long cherished motto that "Service to man is service to God" is eventually realized. In an interview, Ezekiel observes:

If I write a religious poem, the next poem is likely to be very secular and skeptical. I attached a great deal of importance to the worldliness of the world, its independence.

The self same thought is repeated in poetic form in the following:

Now I am through with the psalms; they are part of my flesh [CP, p.261]

His way of ending the 'Latter-Day Psalms' proves his consciousness that he is a Jew in the Hindu dominated society in which he accepts both the Jewish and Hindu philosophical attributes. Ezekiel acknowledges his commitments to Bombay to naturalize it as his home from the physical perspective while from the spiritual context it can be discerned that Ezekiel has cemented his Psychic make up with the amalgamation and absorption of a Jewish and Hindu philosophy. Sanjit Mishra writes, to an interview with Dharkers in 1979, Ezekiel within a year of the completion of his poem honestly admits:

I think the problem of identity is important in all literary and cultural activity. I don't believe it possible to be a universal man without some specific roots which are strengthen, accepted or revolted against... Of late I've found myself more deliberate turning to Jewish sources and themes as though some inner movement has required it.
Ezekiel’s non-conformist response to psalms ingrained in the catholicity of human love, however, lacks spiritual ambience but its empirical character makes it more engaging and thought provoking. Bruce King observes:

The ‘Latter Day Psalms’ demolish claims by those in authority to know the good from the bad to be just or to represent the divine... The ‘Latter Day Psalms’ reflect Ezekiel’s struggle with his own Jewish heritage and end with an ironic ‘Jamini Roy’ conclusion in which the art of the psalms provides a model for his own work.62

Man is placed in the centre of this volume and it is not God as is in that of the psalmist. The poems in this volume, Latter-Day Psalms accord him the status of a religious philosophical poet. Ezekiel attaches a great deal of importance to every event and dreams of the world. It is for this that he has rewritten the Biblical themes to his own human view. But Suresh Chandra Dwivedi says, “he also keeps an eye on the divinity like Frost, Dickinson and Eliot.”63 Ezekiel aims to attain holiness in the world, as man cannot live by bread alone. Thus, ‘Latter-Day Psalms’ represents the summit of Ezekiel’s spiritual speculations though he has denied times without number that he is not a religious poet in the accepted sense of the term.
Notes


17 Suresh Chandra Dwivedi, *Perspectives on Nissim Ezekiel*, p. 135.


20 Sanjit Mishra "The Realist Phase", *The Poetic Art of Nissim Ezekiel*, p. 76.


23 Anisur Rahman, "Objectives Form in Nissim Ezekiel", *Perspectives on Nissim Ezekiel*, p. 244.

24 Sanjit Mishra (Quoted), *The Poetic Art of Nissim Ezekiel*, p; 77.


33 Vasant A. Shahane, "The Religious Philosophical Strain in Nissim Ezekiel's Poetry", *Perspectives on Nissim Ezekiel*, p. 29.


39 Akshaya Kumar, *Indian Writing in English*, pp.6-7.


41 P.R. Kher, "Existential Strains in Nissim Ezekiel's Poetry", *Perspectives on Nissim Ezekiel*, p. 10.


43 K.G. Srivastava, "Nissim Ezekiel's Hymns in Darkness and What It Tell Us", *Perspectives on Nissim Ezekiel*, p. 141.

44 P.R Kher, *Perspectives on Nissim Ezekiel*, p. 10.


46 Bijay Kumar Das, "The Attainment", *The Horizon of Nissim Ezekiel's*
Poetry, p. 47.

47 K.G. Srivastava, Perspectives on Nissim Ezekiel, p. 149.

48 Sanjit Mishra, The Poetic Art of Nissim Ezekiel, p. 131.

49 Sanjit Mishra, Ibid, p. 130.


51 Sanjit Mishra, The Poetic Art of Nissim Ezekiel, p. 137.

52 Sanjit Mishra, Ibid, p. 112.


57 Sanjit Mishra, The Poetic Art of Nissim Ezekiel, p. 145.


59 A.N. Dwivedi, Ibid.

60 Sanjit Mishra, The Poetic Art of Nissim Ezekiel, p. 147.


62 Suresh Chandra Dwivedi, Perspectives on Nissim Ezekiel, p. 138.