INTRODUCTION

Nissim Ezekiel occupies an important position among the Modern Indian poets writing in English. With the publication of A Time to Change he became an event in the history of Modern Indian Poetry in English. In its infant days when Modern Indian Poetry in English was struggling for existence and identity, he advised other poets, set standards and created places of publication. He introduced seriousness, authenticity, craftsmanship and dedication to poetry. Poetry ceased to be a hobby and became a profession. He was born in December 1929 in Bombay, of Jewish parents. Since his student days in 1947, he had been among other things politician, professor, editor, art critic, theatre-director and a relentless social worker.

His poetry collections include, among others, A Time to Change (1952), Sixty Poems (1953), The Third (1958), The Unfinished Man (1960), The Exact Name (1965) and Hymns in Darkness (1976). He had also experimented with play writing.

Modern Indian Poetry in English, as such, began around the 1950s. About this time certain writers emerged with a literature that by its style and content could be set apart from the English poetry that was being written by Indians before Independence. This poetry departed from its past,
became serious, gathered a canon around itself and clamoured for autonomy and identity. Its writers disowned descent from pre-independence poetry and tolerated it only within a relationship where it could be used as an antithesis, something that it can rebel against, avoid and depart from. They dismissed the “Poetry of the pre-independence period” as “a mass of sentiments, clichés, outdated language and conventions, the ossified remains of a colonial tradition”.¹ According to Parthasarathy “Indian verse in English did not seriously exist before independence.”² In these views and statements, Indian Poetry in English before Independence is treated as a single continuous whole, whereas, it can be also said that this tradition includes a period of more than a century and signify more than a generation of writers, since Derozio. According to Makaran Paranjape, this tradition has its origin in the arrival of Vasco da Gama in Calicut in 1498 and the whole cultural and linguistic process that this event set into motion. He says in his introduction to Indian Poetry in English: “A convenient starting point can be the landing of Vasco da Gama in Kerala in 1498.”³ Colonialism is imbedded in the very heart of Indian writings in English. All the same, the dismissive attitude of the post-colonial generation is legitimate. Up to their time this genre had no particular significance, as its function was undefined and its nature was
amorphous. Further it wasted itself in extra-curricular issues. Contrary to this, after the 1950s it became authentic, autonomous and autotelic.

K.N. Daruwalla situates the main flaw of pre-independence poetry in its disregard to reality. In his ‘Introduction’ to Two Decades of Indian Poetry, he says:

the final indictment of the earlier poets will be not on the score of their prosody, or their archaic, dandified georgianisms, but that they were untouched by either the reality around them, drought, famine, plague, colonial exploitation or by the reality within, namely erosion, of faith and the disintegration of the modern consciousness.4

The new poetry considered a closer relationship between art and reality. Nissim Ezekiel regarded poetry as a personal quest for a satisfactory way of living in the modern world. Of course such pursuits for a solution does not always end in success, but the search itself, in its own way is meaningful enough. Ezekiel regarded poetry as a corollary of life. He sought for a “life/whose texture is poetry.”5 What Ezekiel was trying to reach at through this alignments and realignments between life and poetry was an identity and a wholeness of being. These, Ezekiel believed were original human conditions that were essential to the self. The context to this essentiality comes from the non-human conditions of existence that are the unalienable features of modern civilization and culture. Awareness of this modern predicament was one of the elements, which the Modern
Indian poets, considered to be their discovery. Pre-independence poetry had failed to notice this inalienable aspect of the existential struggle.

Ezekiel's poetry belongs to that period of history, where the displaced, decentred plight of man was the main preoccupation of the major works in literature. The anti-humanist texts had firmly established their positions against the age-old, out-dated humanist assertions. Ezekiel's poetry is an attempt to withdraw into a position, which tries to arrive at a concept of the self, that derives from more than one tradition or school of thought. In this study, his concept of the self is being approached from various angles and it tries to include all these areas as an effort to justify the complexity of Nissim Ezekiel's poetry.
NOTES

1 King, Bruce, *Modern Indian Poetry in English* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987) 11.

2 King, Bruce, *Modern Indian Poetry in English* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987) 79.

3 Paranjape, M. *Indian Poetry in English* (Madras: Macmillan India Limited, 1993) 1.
