Chapter-III

REDEFINING THE SELF

It has been suggested in the preceding chapter that Ezekiel’s concept of the self is entangled in the post-colonial dialectics of his own poetry (which includes his study of his environment and his culture in his understanding of the self). The East-west ambivalence is treated as a relevant context of the self, since it informs his analysis of the self. This chapter while including the post-colonial subject goes beyond it to approach his concept of the self as an abstract construct which is available to the reader only as a rewriting of other texts and that is why it has been described as a redefinition of the self. The post-colonial effort itself cannot escape the circuit of theories, which operates as an inevitable given.

Ezekiel’s treatment of the self introduces the reader to an artifact, where a supposed origin or model has no light, no presence, no meaning. The self that he creates and presents in his writing has already been recognized and discovered by other writings; what he contributes is only a re-analysis and readjustment of these given ideas. In the epigraph to ‘The Unfinished Man’ (1960), he presents the self as an unfinished process/entity.

A living man is blind and drinks his drop.
What matter if the ditches are impure?
What matter if I live it all once more?
Endure that toil of growing up;
The ignominy of boyhood; the distress
Of boyhood changing into man;
The unfinished man and his pain
Brought face to face with his own clumsiness

- Yeats.


Yeats’ text is already incorporated in the poems of this collection and so are the traces of other contemporary writings equally legible in these poems. Poems such as ‘Urban’, ‘A Morning Walk’ and ‘Event’ views the self as a tormented area, deadened by extraneous conditions and patterns. The subject in ‘Urban’

never sees the skies
which, silently, are born again.
Nor feels the shadows of the night
Recline their fingers on his eyes.
His landscape has no depth or height.


In ‘A Morning Walk’

Alone, he waited for the sun
And felt his blood a sluggish stream.


In ‘Event’ the body and the mind are two irreconciliable entities.

The self is disintegrated

Remote from the exploring act
I knew that both were undefined,
Who lived in day-dreams, not in fact,
Reflections of the cheated mind.

This image of the self can be equated with many of the death-in-life conditions described in Eliot’s poetry.

In ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’, it is the evening of a civilization:

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherised upon a table;

In ‘Gerontion’, the desiccation of the old man shows the plight of a generation:

Here I am, an old man in a dry mouth,
Being read to by a boy, waiting for rain.
I was neither at the hot gates
Nor fought in the warm rain
Nor knee deep in the salt marsh, heaving cutlass,
Bitten by flies, fought.
My house is a decayed house,
And the Jew squats on the window-sill, the owner,
Spawned in some estaminet of Antwerp,
Blistered in Brussels, patched and peeled in London.
The goat coughs at night in the field overhead;
Rocks, moss, stonecrop, iron, merds.
The woman keeps the kitchen, makes tea,
Sneezes at evening, poking the peevish gutter.
I an old man,
A dull head among windy spaces.
Ezekiel’s text like Eliot’s, also includes the study of the environment to emphasize the predicament of the self. The self functions as an area, which is constantly being determined by the urban stasis. In ‘Urban’.

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.  


These texts addresses a civilization in disarray; in ‘Commitment’ “our bridges burnt ...” and “The fog is thick, and men are lost”. The pilgrimage in ‘Enterprise’ shows the journey of a disappointed civilization toward hope and revelation. In ‘A Morning Walk’ it is a

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.  


Perhaps, this is the only way in which his poetry could view the self and its environment. His writing is a part of the contemporaneity institutionalized by countless contemporary texts and at the same time, contemporaneity is itself a product of his writing. It is not something
beyond his writing, it is within his text and the countless other texts from which he derived it.

But it has been already said that Ezekiel believes in a human centre of the self. The predicament of the self in the contemporary matrix does not reduce his belief in an essential human self. The search for an integrated human self is one of the main preoccupations of his poetry. But even this idea of an essential self cannot be treated as the original self. It represents an idea whose relevance was being contested by other theories. It is another way of viewing man, positing in turn the perfect form of beauty and truth. It is the man of Hamlet:

What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form, in moving, how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals!

It is the original nature of man posited by Rousseau, whose given perfection was being destroyed by the accumulations of civilizations.

To trace the origin of Ezekiel’s notion of the self one cannot go beyond these already written texts. Loosely, it can be stated that Ezekiel’s concept of the self is affiliated to the various texts which can be categorised under the term humanism.

This is the form in which the self stands, it cannot be pushed further back, beyond the intervention of already existing ideas. It is available only
through and as a medium. This is not because Ezekiel’s writing is composed of one idea or the other which falls short of communicating the reality but because this is the only way in which reality can be transcribed. It only emphasizes the inherent limitations of texts. The text is not a window to a world beyond its borders; it is not a reflection, a symbol or a metaphor, “the mechanisms of the text, the ways in which it is constantly constructing, editing, ordering and juxtaposing its effects” endlessly refer back to itself. It is the end of the road, there is no beyond. The beyond is a product “of what Derrida calls “the exigent, powerful, systematic and irrepressible desire” for a transcendent signified.” The text itself is present at all levels only as

Allegory rather than symbols;
Fancy rather than Imagination;
Metonymy rather than Metaphor;
Grammar rather than rhetoric;

(Allegory rather than symbols;
Fancy rather than Imagination;
Metonymy rather than Metaphor;
Grammar rather than rhetoric;


It anticipates and cuts short all routes to a supposed original, an unwritten set of events or reality that is simply there outside and without the system of writing. The supposed actuality is a logo centric present against which there is only temporary disposable truths. It is a dream as old as man, a product of logo centric metaphysics, which established the
authority of both man and truth. It is necessary here perhaps to introduce
certain delimiting clauses to the concept of man. Michel Foucault writes:

As the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an
invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing the end.⁴

The truth about man, his understanding about himself and his world
is itself entangled in the dialectics of theories that can be read as metaphors
and illusions and no more. Truth itself is a norm invented and advanced by
man and nothing more. Nietzsche’s critique of western metaphysics
deserves mention here:

What then is truth? A mobile army of metaphors,
metonymies, anthropomorphisms – in short, a sum of human
relations which, poetically and rhetorically intensified,
became transposed and adorned, and which after long usage
by a people seem fixed, canonical and binding on them.
Truths are illusions which one has forgotten are illusions,
worn-out metaphors which have become powerless to affect
the senses. (Tony Davies, Humanism, London: Routledge,
1997, pp.36-37)

Although post-structuralist and deconstructionist theories
themselves are not exempt from the charge of making total claims, it can
be at least said for their theories, that in their scepticism they expose the
limitations of theories that make total claims and especially the
inconsistencies, gaps and aporias of the logo centric bourgeois ideology
which has become almost inseparable from the study of man and his
civilization. Using a post-structuralist commonplace, it can be said that no
single concept can fire an ultimate meaning to the self. Also the promise of a true self is misleading. The notion of a true self, which is simply there eluding the grasp of theories, representing a residual mystery, is apparently a myth and itself a concept with its own limitations. Concepts, theories, ideas and impressions are themselves the accidents and effects of thought processes, which are neither original nor lead to any absolute truth. As no concept of the self can defy and begin and proceed without and outside the structurality of language and the whole system of communications, concepts, it can be said, are only being written/rewritten/unwritten. Poetry and for that matter all literary productions necessitates and makes inevitable, interaction at all levels and a denial of this interactive complexity leads to denial of the very mechanism of art. At all its levels it is intertwined and enmeshed in a system of writing which cannot be reduced to and traced back to an unwritten, non-linguistic, non-literary source. The mechanism of art itself, its preoccupations, it endless play, its endless affiliations obfuscate transcendence and truth. Roland Barthes’ theory about text (in *The Death of the Author*) can be quoted here:

In the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be disentangled, nothing deciphered; the structure can be followed, ‘run’ (like the thread of a stocking) at every level, but there is nothing beneath; the space of writing is to be ranged over, not pierced.

There is no luxury of transcendence and theology, there is only pattern, design and structure. There is no central, reassuring hypostasis, essence or God.

The main assumption of this chapter is that Ezekiel’s concept of the self as an element of his poetry does not represent a substantial entity. It is enmeshed in a theoretical circuit that only returns and leads to other theories. Hence it is being proposed that his concept is a redefinition of the self, one of the many temporary combinations of ideas in the progression of theories. The complex relation between native and non-native discourses as a fall-out of colonialism has already been emphasized. It is surmised in this chapter that a humanist perspective inhere his poetry in the form of an unquestionable adherence to the notion of essence; the bourgeois obsession to a “transcendent signified” permeates his poetry.

The belief in an eternal human nature or a “transcendent signified” inspires his journey motifs. Bruce King writes about *A Time to Change*:

The subject is a mind tormented by awareness of following false gods, disgusted by continuing restlessness while desiring stability, quiet, discipline, purpose, order.

(Bruce King, *Modern Indian Poetry in English*, p.92)

The corruption that the subject encounters in London is countered against an essential code which consists in owning:
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;
A bit of land, a woman and a child or two
Accommodated to their needs and changing moods,
Practising a singing and a talking voice
Is all the creed a man of God requires.\(^5\)

According to Bruce King, again:

In these early poems desire and imagination lead the mind
into unquietness; the quest is for a way which will offer
wholeness and bring such restlessness to an end.\(^6\)

The restlessness and unquietness is expressed in the first stanza of
the poem:

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?\(^7\)

The return to wholeness and integrity of the self is however suspect.
In simplicity and quietness, wholeness of the self has been institutionalized
if by nothing atleast by common sense. The basic economics of shelter
manhood and family cannot guarantee wholeness. It remains in the last
analysis, a relation which has been institutionalized again as it seems by a
particular point of view and a particular interpretation which has its own
limitations. It is an absent code towards which the poet rallies his
existence. The disgust with the prevailing state of existence is ultimately compensated by a nostalgia and hope for an original state of existence, which had been, as it were, temporarily disrupted by the contingent forces of survival but not altogether dumped into oblivion. All originals however gather into a human centre. Judgement and values presuppose a human centre:

I am corrupted by the world, continually
Reduced to something less than human.

The human is the source of all essence, universals and truth. It is the whole, the completeness of this nature, which is left unnegotiated in relationship:

How much of me you leave untouched,
And yet you touch me well.

It is expressed in the spontaneous reaction of the mother, in ‘Night of the Scorpion’:

My mother only said:
Thank God the scorpion picked on me
and spared my children. (Collected Poems, p.131)

It is in such unwritten, uncorrupted areas of nature that Ezekiel seeks to find the essential self. Disappointed by the various intricacies of the self,
he resorts to a mere naming of things in *The Exact Name*. "The aim" in this collection, as Bruce King says "is not to explain but to make real by naming; by saying ‘common things’." The epigraph to *The Exact Name* (1965) reads:

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Intelligence, give me
The exact name of things
Let my word be
The thing itself,
Newly created by my soul.
Through me may all those
Who have no knowledge of things reach them;
Through me may all those
Who have forgotten things reach them;
Through me may all those
Who even love things reach them...
Intelligence, give me
The exact name, and yours,
And his, and mine, of things!
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- Juan Ramon Timenez


However, this ordinariness is also not simply available. It requires a particular set of mind, a specific eye to discover it. Prior abstractions, prior generalisations, prior institutionalization intervene even at this seemingly natural/common level. In *Philosophy* he says:

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What cannot be explained, do not explain.
The mundane language of the senses sings
Its own interpretations. Common things
Become, by virtue of their commoness,
An argument against the nakedness
That dies of cold to find the truth it brings.
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*(Collected Poems, p.129)*
The mere withdrawal of explanation, however, does not make truth more obvious or real. What remains or emerges is also an abstract that cannot be outside and without language. Ezekiel seeks to find the human as a truth which is simply present outside and without the communicative process and he makes his comments and judgement upon life and survival on the basis of such an essence. But his view, his position, is also a construct of theories, a contribution of existing ideas and beliefs. In his works, a humanist ideology presides over, analyses, explicates and judges reality. The universal, essential fall-out of this ideology only attests the success of propagation, the strength of eloquence, the extent of influence of a school of thought that postulates that ‘Man is the measure of all things.’

The order, the potential that is posited at the heart of the self promotes the idea of a prototype, an essence that has been temporarily lost. Contingence and the present conceals it.

Significantly, for Ezekiel, the human designates not an ascetic rigidity, a flawless perfection, but is more importantly an emphasis on nature and essence which might in its own way be imperfect and twisted. He does not

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 tyrant’s endless power.
I want a human balance humanly
Acquired, fruitful in the common hour.


A humanist norm presides in judgement over the corruptions of the world. The desiccation of human values is the shallowing of a humanist construct, a hierarchy which conceives man as “the measure of all things.” The vision of a disintegrated amorphous self presupposes a prior integrity and behind the loss of identity is a pre-established notion of identity; the entrapment of the self in the modern inferno derives its signification from a humanist thesis of individual freedom. Such concepts as “humanness”, “humanity”, “wholeness” and “individuality” are themselves the products of theorisations which have become too rigid, too indispensable and too old to be questioned. They have fossilized into what can be called truth, the ultimate inevitable, unquestionable grounds or bases which later thinkings or discourses find too obvious to proceed without or defy.

The conflicts of life, tend to lead the poet towards nature and home, which stipulates an essential preordained code of ethics and survival. Behind the horror of corruption that haunts the city dweller in ‘The Double Horror’ is a fear of displacement from the womb, a nostalgic exclamation
for a desecrated essence, the helpless cry of the exile who dreams of an original home. In ‘On Meeting a Pedant’, the insubstantiality of the pedant’s mind is exposed against a crystal clear vision of the substantial, sensual human world:

a patch
Of grass and not of words to roll upon.
Give me touch of men and give me smell of Fornication, pregnancy and spices.
(Collected Poems, p.9)

This is an assertion of a nature, which has been prescribed by a tradition of thought which has associated the human with nature in an almost axiomatic reduction. It is the effect of an anthropocentric tradition that has codified human nature as the basis of truth. The absence of this supposed essence, the lack of spontaneous feelings dehumanizes the woman in ‘An Affair’.

And then she said: I love you, just like this
As I had seen the yellow blondes declare
Upon the screen, and even stroked my hair.
But hates me now because I did not kiss. (p.11)

Love is frustrated and in the court of nature the lovers stand condemned. In ‘In Emptiness’, the door is left open to nourish the human core of the self:

Acquainted with the intricate
Bizarre movements of the heart
Inopportune desire, resentment
Of a service rendered, I am
Waiting now in emptiness,
Annulled, cancelled, made a blank,
Resolved to find another way.

But this, I am sure, can never be:
That I should shut the door on gods
Who may exist or men who do,
Living in abstractions, hostile
To the human, shocked by the free,
And make no rendezvous with love —
I would rather suffer when I must.

(Collected Poems, p.11)

The human provisions are again reintroduced to fill up the emptiness
of present conditions. The emptiness and abstraction is felt as the absence
of human interaction and love, a repression of emotions and an emptying
of “the house of words and music”. The impoverishment of the present
state of existence leads to a counter-image of existence which is fixed as
the original state of existence, which is perhaps a nostalgic construct of the
idea of balance:

Between the élan of desire
And the rational facilities.
(Collected Poems, p.12)

is a humanist construct which assigned the inner world of man with
“design and colour” and presented it as a paragon of beauty and
perfection.
Ezekiel’s view of man is summarised in ‘Commitment’:

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 slow understood,
Hearts of men are hearts of men, words have meanings,
Only good is praised, evil is condemned
Or forgiven, song and ceremony
Celebrate our flowing to appointed ends
And wisdom is not cautious fear but only love. (p.26)

The virtues that he associates with ‘man’ is a counterimage of the impoverished spiritual life that is described in the first stanza:

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 thoughts, 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 jungle sounds of fear
And hunger, wise in tracking down my prey
And wise in taking refuge when the stronger roam.(p.26)

Association with the world results in the betrayal of the self, an evacuation of essence. This reduction of the self is viewed against a preconceived notion of man and a hierarchy of values which describe the human nature. The bestial meanness that lurks behind the human mask, the loveless soul, the feverish futility of a material existence, the monstrous distortion of his thoughts are seen as the degradation of an ideal life which
exists beyond this vicious cycle of contemporaneity. Identity, wholeness and essence are transported to an abstract non-present, which transcends as well as restitutes the deficiencies, deprivations and disappointments of a hostile present. In the “world of old simplicities” humanity is restored to the self. There is a sense of belonging, a sense of homecoming, the security and properness of home and nature, to “which my calling calls me;” moral balance is restored: “only good is praised, evil is condemned/or forgiven”; direction and purpose are restored: “song and ceremony/celebrate our flowing to appointed ends”; order is restored: turbulence/is stilled in it “and the emotions and feelings find their proper frequency: “Hearts of men are hearts of men”. But the self envisions the “world of old simplicities” only through a wish: “I wish to be a man.” It is a vision from what he conceives to be the prison house of modern man: the world, in its urban, dehumanized state/ambiguity. But the ideal world does not represent an unwritten world outside and without the system of writing. It bears the indelible traces of other writings that disperses the readers’ response to other texts and drowns the authorial voice in a chorus of other voices; his writing coalesces into a semantic profusion that only show the endless flicker of allusions, metaphors, metonymies, signs and symbols. As it is the text far from providing a medium to an objective world overwhelms the reader’s attention unto itself. The ‘world of old simplicities’ describe a
world where the writer's belief in human virtues seem to effect a vision based on values which have been institutionalized by countless humanist texts or texts which considered certain humanist constructs as given truths. The traces of other discourses cannot be repressed; they already always anticipate and mediate the writing and reading of the particular text.

In 'A Poem of Dedication' the sea is evoked as a "symbol of the free/Demoniac life within," and the "surface facts" are only repudiated to establish a principle of existence, which is perhaps readable only as a counter-image of the absurd surrounding which breeds a meaningless circle of existence. The world of the basement rooms is constructed only to illuminate all the more attractively a preconceived opposite which compensates the emptiness of contemporary existence. At the core of this opposite is

a human balance humanly
Acquired, fruitful in the common hour. (p.40)

Organic growth ("Each season brings its own peculiar fruits")\textsuperscript{12} is posited against the monotony of existence ("It seems that nothing changes, nothing grows").\textsuperscript{13} The opposites are well-balanced to present all the more convincingly and nostalgically the absence of an ideal human condition.

The journey and quest motif is a frequent concern of Ezekiel's poetry. Bruce King writes:
Life is seen as a quest for wholeness, for intellectual and spiritual satisfaction, for maturity. While the aim is salvation of the spirit from distractions and obsessions, it is grounded in the physical and social. The quest essentially concerns how to live happily, calmly, ethically as an integrated human being.

(Modern Indian Poetry in English, p.92)

Many of his poems are journeys in search of ideality and wholeness. In ‘Enterprise’ the journey does not yield any dawn, any discovery of an ontological cure-all:

When, finally, we reached the place,
We hardly knew why we were there.
The trip had darkened every face,
Our deeds were neither great nor rare.

(Collected Poems, p.118)

But even in defeat and destitution, there is a belief in an essential order, a hidden identity, a potential wholeness that a renewed perspective can provide at home or in the here and now, in the very ordinariness of life, in “My backward place ... where I am.” It is this hidden essence, it is this given order (it is this elusive poetry), the other part of the here and now, the eternal of the moment, the universal that is beyond the limited appearances that direct and give a purpose to existence, amidst the chaos and futility of modern existence. It is the centre, the transcendental telos whose inevitability (whose indispensability, whose totality) is acknowledged even in its absence.
But this ideal, this transcendence cannot be transcribed. It is always repressed, absent in the text which only reveals at all levels the absence of the author, the irrelevance of the I, the disintegration and diffusion of individual identity, the ceaseless evacuation of the “I” from the self. There is no final turn of the journey leading to an eternal dawn. There is no final moment of glory. It is dissipated in the intricacies of the play, in the labours of the journey. The conditions of existence do not derive from any original state of existence. There is no corruption of nature; there is only conditions and the plurality of experience.

The concept of the self proposed by Ezekiel is a system of theories which leads nowhere except to other theories and the endless tangle of theories.

His poetry as well as his views about poetry reveals the blend and clash of conflicting ideologies and positions. His view of poetry as summarized by Bruce King in Modern Indian Poetry in English “would seem to and does, put more emphasis on poetry as communication of insight and experience, expressed in concentrated precise forms.” (p.78) Interestingly, while trying to reach at the formalistic rigour of pure poetry through the economy and precision, aesthetic distance and unified vision of the early-twentieth century poets, it appears as though Ezekiel also seeks to
reintroduce into his poetry the very things against whose excesses the Modernists reacted. Aesthetic distance implies distrust in the subjective nature of the self, as a result of which the self is treated as an object of study and not as something taken for granted. But in allowing self-knowledge, experience and insight into his poetry, he endangers the status of the impersonality in his poetry. Anglo-American Modernism had started as a movement away from the messiness of the human. T.E. Hulme dismissed any art expressive of human experience and aspirations as "slop and romanticism" and instead called for an aesthetic of geometric impersonality. W.B. Yeats, in his own way abandoned "all that is too personal" in favour of a poetry "cold and passionate as the dawn." T.S. Eliot insisted that "poetry is not the expression of personality, it is an escape from personality."

The impulse behind these Modernist outbursts betrays an authentic anti-humanism, a revulsion against the human. From their point of view the self is not seen as a unified entity, several cracks appear and it seems fragmentary, elusive and uncertain. This picture of the self conflicts with the humanist belief in an indivisible, reliable self. The opacity, the incommunicability, the mystery of the self is not the cause for a transcendent dream but an image of the inherent void. Irrationality implies
an absence of government and power, the demystification of the enlightened autocrat and the aridity and waste is due to a corruption at the centre, the sterility of the fisher king, a reduction of the self (a shallowing of the inherent and a transfer of power and meaning) to the external, non-self, non-human, non-essential, objective, mechanical, materialistic and scientific worlds. The self seems so inessential and temporary and mutable that its metamorphosis into non-human categories becomes a probable absurdity. It has been mentioned that the works of Ezekiel never descend into the extremities of such positions, but the pressure of these views, perhaps weigh heavily upon his writings, all the same. He has enough belief in the recuperative, redeeming potential of the human structure. But the fear of contamination, disintegration and loss of essentiality disrupts this belief.

Both the humanist and the anti-humanist views about the self can be seen as ideological constructs, edified by the ideas of certain schools and periods. As it is known, no theory or concept is complete by itself and the tangle of ideas and meanings hide origins and cuts off transcendence. Truth is a commodity which does not sell in this ideological, conceptual and theoretical market. There is no respite from ideas. In the absence of a single, undisputed image, no concept can be considered to be final, real or
total. Perhaps the desire for reality, truth or totality is irrelevant and the significance of concepts lie only in their design, in the combination of existing ideas and concepts, which are themselves the product of other ideas and concepts.

Ezekiel's concept of the self can be seen as a structure of ideas, which have both humanist and anti-humanist affiliations. In his works, aesthetic distance, objectivity and impersonality are observed side by side with a constant commerce between art and life. The search for a wholeness of being or the integration of the self is nothing but a narrative, which presupposes a humanist resolution. Consequently, an inherent tension is built into his poetry.

Given the complexity of modern existence, and the peculiarity of his own position, a wholesale adoption of humanism, in all its conventional, pre-war totality, would not have been appropriate. By the early twentieth century, humanism had ceased to be a dominant discourse in Western thought. Having occupied the Western mind for more than two centuries, it was dying the natural death of all theories. Besides, after the experience of the two World Wars, the conscience of Europe could have hardly tolerated it as a paradigm (by the laws of humanism itself). Also, because of his non-western origins, a re-adjustment according to immediate and local
conditions seemed necessary. It was rather because of his peculiar cultural position that he sought for a human point of reference in his schema of being. India, as a political unit was more or less outside the theatre of war and its experience of the monstrous side of man was of a less immediate kind. The Faustian megalomania of the Third Reich, the gothic horrors of the concentration camps and the post-war despair of Europe were, perhaps, not impressive enough to cause a revulsion against human nature. On the other hand, for one like Ezekiel, the concept of an identity and position undetermined by the differences of caste, colour, creed and clan and based on something as abstract, universal and accommodative as the human fact had its own attraction. His sense of alienation gets expressed in ‘Background Casually’:

I went to a Roman Catholic school,  
A mugging Jew among the wolves.  
They told me I had killed the Christ,  
That year I won the scripture prize.  
A Muslim sportsman boxed my ears.  
I grew in terror of the strong  
But undernourished Hindu lads. (p.179)

Amidst such a network of categories and compartments, a secular humanist superstructure seemed to provide security and space. These various issues added up to an exotic homespun humanism that had its own anti-humanist reservations. While his human subject represents an
etiolated, emaciated progeny of the humanist individual, his urban
cityscape and its existential conditions do not give the picture of a
twentieth century inferno. The mental state of his characters do not
descend into an irredeemable state of despair. The suffering human subject
is no longer reliable as a source of truth and meaning, as his status as a
self-determining, autonomous entity has been devalorized by the anti-
humanist discourse. As a result, the subjectivity of the individual human
subject is replaced by an aesthetic distance and the individual
consciousness becomes an object of study. But inspite of his Modernist
commitments he retained a high value for the human. And even if his
position does not give "the comfort of symmetry and system, there is the
substance of life itself,"18 the possibility of being "Asserted in the common
dance."19 Abandonment into life is of course another illusion caught in the
tangle of ideas and concepts. In the midst of this ideological deluge, it can
be only said that Ezekiel's poetry is an effort in another redefinition,
another reconstruction and another reorganization of the self.
NOTES


6 King, Bruce, *Modern Indian Poetry in English* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987) 92.

7 Paranjape, M. *Indian Poetry in English* (Madras: Macmillan India Limited, 1993) 106.

8 King, Bruce, *Modern Indian Poetry in English* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987) 99.


