CHAPTER - IV

'ENGLISH' PRAYERS AND THE INDIAN CONTEXT
In speaking their own mind and heart, the Indo-English writers have been facing a real problem in handling the alien medium. Even as recent a poet as Parthasarathy complains that his "tongue (is) in English Chains,". In spite of the problem of articulating the native experience in a foreign medium, the Indian poets in English have, in their creative encounter with the medium, achieved poems of striking beauty and power.

The prayer poems by Indo-English writers do mostly fall back on the hoary traditions of the devotional and pietistic literatures of the Indian Vernaculars especially of the literature of the medieval Bhakti cult. In the native traditions of the prayer poetry, we find often the transcendental being clothed in the transitory and the elevated being expressed in terms of the language of the lay. The result seems to be that the mystical and the mythical border on the material and the mundane and the material often merge with the mystical and mythical. As in Metaphysical poets, the meditative structure can be seen here also imposing a pattern albeit in the context of a different cultural milieu, social background and
religious beliefs. With the advent of Western empiricism, the onset of mercenary civilization and the scientific temper, there has taken place a mock-reversion in the simplistic prayers in the Indian poets of recent past especially writing in English. What is more, the agnostic, the sceptic and the materialistic forces and especially the social misery have impinged on the tenor and texture of the Indo-English prayer poems. As a result of the impact of Western literature, irony, sarcasm and parody have come to inform the tone and texture of the prayer poems of modern Indo-English poets, chief among them being Ramanujan, Missim Ezekiel, Kaki Daruwalla and Arvind Mehrotra. They have enlarged the scope of prayer poems by making them deal with the ugliness and misery of the urban and metropolitan life.

Praise of a god certainly is there but it is increas­ingly tempered by ironic intensity. In the prayer poems of some recent Indo-English writers, irony gets the upper hand over the traditional note of eulogy and unquestioning faith. The irony of mockery and sarcasm becomes all the sharper for the traditional beliefs are subjected to a rigorous, harsh, dry, cynical wit charged with a traumatic awareness of the ugly things of contemporary life. Deviation from the convention reflects in right tone and temper the whole series
of cruel realities of modern times.

Ramanujan's 'Prayers to Lord Murugan' strikes us as an apt instance in point. In his seminal essay 'Tradition and Freedom', R. Parthasarathy makes out that 'Prayers to Lord Murugan' can be seen as "being embedded in, and arising from, a specific tradition."¹ He also points out that these 'Prayers ...' are an imitation of the Tirumurukkaruppatai of Nakkirar, a Tamil saint-poet of the sixth century. He singles out these prayer poems for their crucial importance as the first step towards establishing "an indigenous tradition of Indian English verse."²

'Prayers to Lord Murugan' shows to us the modern consciousness plagued by a sense of void in life. This sense of void may have resulted from a number of factors like a hopeless erosion of the vital things, the effeminacy of man, his hypocritical hollowness, his physical and moral enfeeblement and the greyishness of his materialistic existence. The facts and realities of cruel existence very much dry the sap of the glorious traditional values, attributes and festivities associated with the popular deity, Murugan.
It may be noted that the prayer is not so much that of an individual but that of a community seeking to sift something abiding and relevant from a whole range of traditional beliefs. The backdrop is one of traditional continuity with a whole complex of tribal and rural games and pastimes symbolising the festive air ironically enough now present mostly in form and ceremony.

The start is clearly made on a ringing note of vigorous, delightful, lusty and earnest invocation to Lord Murugan. Lord Murugan is apostrophised in strangely antithetical terms. He is said to combine in Himself two mutually opposed traits of love, creation on the one side, war and destruction, on the other. In the beginning of the poem, the brush of criticism or satire or mockery is dipped a little in the colour of the traditional reverential attitude. The first stanza preserves, in tact, all the flavour of a totally recreated tribal life and culture. It evokes, by way of earnest nostalgia a wholly vanishing bygone tribal life of implicit belief in the religious observances, natural myths, rural pastimes. They are looked upon not only as acts of propitiation but also as a means of holidaying in gay abandon. Marked as it is by ardent nostalgia, the dramatic speaker notes in
vivid detail the sheer contrast between the traditional
gusto, gaiety and warmth attached to the festivities in
honour of Lord Murugan and their total absence in the
modern context.

Lord of new arrivals
lovers and rivals:
arrive
at once with cockfight and banner—
dance till on this and the next three
hills
women's hands and the garlands
on the chests of men will turn like
chariotwheels
O where are the cockscombs and where
the beaks glinting with new knives
at crossroads
when will orange banners burn
among blue trumpet flowers and the shade
of trees
waiting for lightnings?

The initial surge of gay rapture soon yields to a
cynical impugning of the traditional excellences and
virtues associated with Lord Murugan, the folk-lore God.
The note of urgent concern for regeneration in nature
is resonant in the lines:
When will orange banners burn
among blue trumpet flowers and the shade
of trees
waiting for lightnings?

Through a streak of scepticism, the war-image is
subtly extended. The poet writes as though the whole
traditional rites clustering round the mythical ethos
of Lord Murugan, are in his bones. The urgent tone of
eager invitation becomes a note of fear of loss and
deprivation. The note of eager and assured expectation
of love and war scenes is juxtaposed with a dismayed cry
of having missed them. This juxtaposition of contrary
feelings lends the poem an elegiac intensity and an
apprehensive ironic awareness of the eroded panorama of
gay, lusty and animal pleasures and pastimes that once
were and now are not. The suggestions of love and war
are put in unsuspected and unexpected contexts to evoke
certain ironic images.

dance till on this and the next three
hills
women's hands and the garlands
on the chests of men will turn like
chariotwheels

(Italics mine)
The circular movement of garlands in a swirl worked by dissy dance is contraposed strangely enough against the image of chariot wheels, evoking the idea of a poised and pitched battle. The village festive games carry with them the air of fierce and warring rivalry. The more vivid the picture of the bustle and animation of vanished glory and pomp, the more acute and sharp the ironic longing for its actual realisation in the present context of the dull and drab modern life.

Section two renders a mythological figuration of the Lord's appearance in terms of jocular sarcasm and undercutting grim mockery. The prayer gains in intensity and seriousness, when the speaker later on requests this Lord of multiple faces and hands and single aim, to restore to the "mirror men" their true and functional identity.

The praise is rendered in all the light tone of simple chat.

Twelve etched arrowheads
for eyes and six unforeseen faces, and you were not embarrassed.

Unlike other gods
You found work for every face,
and made eyes at only one
woman. And your arms
are like faces with proper
names.

From the third section onwards, the poem gains in ironic understatement. There is a significant leap from an attitude of total faith to a disheartening and bleak pest-ridden rural scenery, moth-eaten orchards and the urban industrial beauty sans the redeeming natural touch. The sylvan God, that Murugan has been revered traditionally, is soon jeered at with a seemingly petty petition. Close at the heels of complimentary epithet of customary greatness and in contraposition to it, there is the deflating mockery instinct with insinuating innuendo. In the following lines, we see the poet juxtaposing levity with seriousness.

Lord of green
growing things, give us
a hand
in our fight
with the fruit fly.
Tell us,
will the red flower ever
come to the branches
of the blue print
city?

(italics mine)
The stern simplicity and seeming innocence of the solicitation to a "Lord of green/growing things" to lend a helping hand in warding off the pests borders on a light-hearted jibe. It appears to be a cool deflating puncturing of the Lord's reputation as a god of growth and plenty. Tradition depicts Lord Murugan as a fountainhead of wisdom. Posing the question of prophecy about the advent of "red flower" to the "branches/of the blue print/city" has all the suggestive air of sceptical deflation. The anguish, at its white heat, can assume the form of biting understatement and cynical mockery.

The pretence of reverence disappears and a naked yearning for material prosperity shows forth. The prayer, significantly enough, is phrased in terms of a simple barter of the really vitalising for the luringly better. The prayer to be rid of the rural grey pottery for the more sophisticated metals, iron and copper is only a dig at the much-vaunted advance of the modern civilization. In fact, this is an inverted prayer. It, in a way, lashes out against the very march of human civilization, more a breeder of evils than a promoter of beneficent things. The values are out and out commercial. The fodder, yellow grass and lily seed, is sought to be exchanged for
the rams, the symbols of masculine virility. The sacrificial flesh and the scarlet rice, which betoken an age-old sanctified ritual, are given up for the carnivals on rivers. The request to the virgin mothers, Krithikas, borders on the ghoulish and phantasmagoric.

... O dawn of nightmare virgins
bring us
your white-haired witches who wear
three colours even in sleep.

Though the prayer seems to smack of audacity and irreverence, it shows itself to be emphasising the much-needed and vital things required to lead a life really one's own.

Strikingly enough, in the V section, there is no desire to seek any specific favour of God. It is in a way a wholesale attack on the emasculation of the virile, the real and the spiritual in a scramble for the material comforts and titillating pleasures. It is a sharp and pungent criticism of the shallow and snobbish vulgarity of the really brave and the affected vulgar exhibitionism of the rich. The hunters, who have finished off the big tigresses, humble themselves before the Rajahs, who pose
themselves as the Shikaris of those tigresses in the photograph. The valour of the shikari yields place to the sycophancy of pandering to the pseudo-heroism of the idle rich and the influential. There is perhaps a hint at the inversion of the Darwinian principle of natural selection and the survival of the fittest. Bereft of any originality and genuine thirst for first-hand experience, men hunt for material favours and indulge in a perverted gratification in the shady and substituted greatness. Almost all the material aspirations have resulted in shadowy and unreal, hence uncertain, eminences. Men have only given their potential riches in exchange for the drossy trivia.

hearts are worm cans
turning over continually
for the great shadows
of fish in the open
waters.

... ... ... ...
for muslin: waver ing snakeskins,
a cloud of steam
Ever-rehearsing astronauts,
we purify and return
our urine
to the circling body
and burn our faeces
for fuel to reach the moon
through the sky behind
the navel.

This seems a veiled commentary on Indian history
and its civilisation giving up its stress on the age-old
yogic internalization of energies in the pursuit of new-
fangled benefits of the Western materialistic civilisation.

Every thing of glory in the past has touched the
rock-bottom. The lord is praised as the lord of red
blood stains. Men are in no better condition than what
may be called an aesthetic rigor mortis. They lack the
full-blooded enthusiastic response and seem to have a
ghostly and scratchy tingling in reaction to the so-called
sixty-four rumoured arts. They are for made-up or stimu-
lated response. The lowered vitality and the corrupting
sickness have left them in that devitalized low-key state
similar to that of an amputee.

The mockery is intensified when the "Lord of the
twelve right hands" is asked a seemingly puerile question.
The human laziness and their lack of functional efficiency
are blamed on the God of multiple right hands. Men are
reduced to the position of ineffective replicas of God
in reverse. It is nothing short of blatant mockery to
pray to the God of faces to restore to men the loss of
their identity.

Lord of the twelve right hands
why are we your mirror men
with the two left hands
capable only of casting
reflections? Lord
of faces,
find us the face
we lost early
this morning.

The enfeebling effect extends to weakened eyesight.
To ask of a God to restore the weak sight to its normal
vision, dulled senses to their pristine alertness and to
pray to Him to save human beings from physical dissolu-
tion appear to be light-hearted requests. Yet this very
light-heartedness heightens the earnestness of his petition.

Lord of headlines,
help us read
the small print,
Lord of the sixth sense,
give us back
our five senses.

Lord of solutions,
teach us to dissolve
and not to drown.\(^3\)

The final supplication in Eliot's poem as indicated in foot note is justly praised for it reflects the humility of a penitent soul. While commending the endless humility of *Ash-Wednesday*, M.K.Naik points out that the lines of the eighth section of Ramanujan's *Prayers to Lord Murugan* are clearly those of "the negative voice of the carping ironist."\(^4\) Further, he finds fault with these lines saying that "these are not the hopeful accents of a seeker of faith; and there is no spiritual quest in evidence at all."\(^5\)

But one can make bold to say that this criticism is not well-founded. *Ash-Wednesday* is clearly introspective in character and concerns as such mainly with the inner drama of spiritual failure, crisis and resolution. The tone and tenor of Ramanujan's *Prayers...* are clearly those of communal and hence of an extrovert's. The very fact that Ramanujan echoes the liturgical rhythms of the last line lines of T.S.Eliot's *Ash-Wednesday* does not
impose on him the need to ape the mood and the whole emotional and intellectual background of his model. In fact, one can reasonably feel sure that the ironic anti-climax is perhaps the best fitting close to a prayer poem which has been describing the anatomy of barrenness, dreariness, lowered vitality and a run-down culture and civilization. To return to our original commentary, we note that this desperate and itemised petitioning for the apparently frivolous favours, say, for making good the lowered vitality, lends a cynical and acid tone which lays bare the hollowness of the mythologised aura of greatness and bounty of the Lord.

An equally desperate appeal is sent up to the Omniscient Lord to disabuse them of the false and vague things of the past, and free them from the dead weight of mythical lore. The future is sought to be restored to the essentially significant past. The mocking, dry, cynical and even challenging tone is relented a little whit by an earnest appeal to help men to

... return
the future to what
it was.
The insistent note grows sharper and the prayer is made to restore man to his natural surroundings and thus help him to have a new birth.

Lord of the last-born
give us
birth.

The close of the invocation is clinched with an all too revolutionary prayer yearning for a clinical purgation. In a concluding strain of self-regarding irony, he prays to Lord Murugan thus,

Lord of answers,
cure us at once
of prayers.

(italics mine)

The close of the poem is bold and unorthodox. It partakes of iconoclastic fervour. The poem is a striking instance of a subtle and inverted prayer. Strangely enough, it is composed of a phantasmagoric disarray of the nostalgic yearnings and a painful awareness of the contemporary evils. The dichotomous awareness of the idealistic and the realistic mostly makes up for its strong impact on the reader's mind.
The assertive confidence and the gusto of gay invitation to recreate the pristine tribal culture with its dance, love, games and war soon trickle into an anxious and cold and at last a drastic impulse to be cured of the need for prayers. The travel over the hoary past with its different phases of life is put against the contemporary world of corrosive and weakening problems. The poet seems to have laid his finger on the core of real prayer when he says:

Lord of lost travellers,  
find us. Hunt us down.  
Lord of answers,  
cure us at once of prayers.

The boldness in suggesting to the Lord of answers, a way out to man's problems is the height of derisive irony. The whole poem mimics, the contortions between total belief in tradition and a scathing criticism about its relevance to the modern context through an ironic exposure of the shallowness of the merely mystical, mythical and the folk-lore versions of the Murugan traditions.
Ezekiel is another Indo-English poet of distinction with a few impressive prayer poems to his credit. In an interview, Ezekiel grants that he is a religious poet in "the general sense of religious-philosophical." In a simple prayer, Ezekiel prays fervently:

God grant me certainty
In kinships with the sky,
Air, earth, fire, sea—
And the fresh inward eye.

The prayer is singularly free of any allusions to a given religious doctrine. It affirms not only "the poet's faith in the boon that man's kinship with the elements of nature in their pristine grandeur brings," but also the necessity "to have 'the fresh inward eye' to correct the obliquity of vision caused by the chaotic tumble of experience of living." It is common now to call Ezekiel's poetry a symbolic exploration of the soul's pilgrimage into the heart of existence. His religious poems are chiefly the expression of his keenly-felt tension between his split cultural make-up and his desire to earn a durable vision of truth. His writings are characterised by the rare candour and delicate
sensitiveness of an intellectual. In his essay 'Naipaul's India and Mine', he declares in a forthright manner, "I am not a Hindu and my background makes me a natural outsider: circumstances and decisions relate me to India, " and later on adds with a ring of hammered-out finality, "India is simply my environment." Of course, he does not have either a zealous love for the Hinduism or an exultant awareness of it as a "comprehensive heritage." He hopes that his "critical and sceptical love for India performs an "objective function" which he thinks "may bring in results which have eluded prophets and reformers of India" or may at least suit his "sardonic conceit." 

Alien by birth and upbringing, he is caught up in the cross-currents of his earnest native religious education and the malicious hostility of his fellow-students of different religions. His early life bears all the marks of Crucifixion. He sees himself as a "mugging Jew among the wolves." He is accused as one belonging to the race of Jews who have killed the Christ. He has lived in constant dread of the Hindu lads and his ears are boxed by a Muslim sportsman. He has, thus, lived under
the shadow of persecuting malice. He is driven to a negative and desperate conclusion.

The more I searched, the less I found.

His terse poem 'Background, Casually' is not only a broad and rapid outline of his external life but also a pithy, albeit ironic and light, expression of the spiritual contours of his experiences. He sees himself essentially as a "poet-rascal-clown." His early life is made up of vital shifts from a humiliating harassment, painful and wounded position of being beleaguered by derisions and envies of the fellow-students of different religious persuasions to gropings for a firm decision by a trip abroad, the disillusionment and the return home. In spite of the familiar and notorious hostility, he slowly and surely hammers out a "commitment" to stay in India. Peculiarly enough, after thrashing the chaff of these experiences, he obtains a solid grain of precious truth. He gets the shifting experiences of his life to focus and sharpen into the formulation of his plainer view stated with a stroke of arresting wit.

The wise survive and serve—to play
The fool, to cash in on
The inner and the outer storms.
After braving through his collisions with a number of hostile things in sensitive areas like culture, religion, environment, he examines things in the light of his incurably "sceptical and critical love" for India and her religious ethos.

Emekiel's 'The Egoist's Prayers' is boldly imaginative and original. It subjects some of the cardinal Hindu religious principles and tenets to a bitingly ironic treatment in terms of a light-hearted solo-chat of an egoist with the Lord. It is strongly reminiscent of Donne's "shock tactics", of course, rendered in the twentieth-century colloquial rhythms. It mimics generically the discourse between Lord Krishna, the Divine Preceptor and Arjuna as embodied in the Bhagavad Gita. Krishna, the Divine Preceptor, enunciates certain paths of self-realisation, reconciliation and harmonisation of the worldly claims and spiritual urges and liberation. Emekiel's resourceful sensibility exploits the ironic possibilities of the sanctioned and established spiritual truths. From hardened defiance and cynicism, he melts into weakness by some sort of dialectical somersaults. He establishes the truth of the sanctioned values by
seeming to have openly defied them. This closely parallels Metaphysical wit.

In his mock-serious appeal to God, the egoist spurs the Lord to do His duty to Man. This is simply the height of audacity and egoism. In doing so, Ezekiel seems to have deliberately employed the slow drawl of a sluggard in some sort of Joycean epiphany of a lazy and passive soul. In her 'Indian Writing in English: The Seventies and After,' Dr. Prema Nanda Kumer approvingly quotes William Walsh's strictures on Ezekiel's delivery, diction, metaphor and syntax. The text of the rather damning analysis of William Walsh's dicta runs "Ezekiel's delivery is mild and unemphatic, a matter of cool diction, moderate metaphor, of syntax rather than music." (T.L.S., 3 Feb, 1978). Though one may nod in assent to their propriety say in some poems as 'How the English Lessons Ended,' 'Passion Poems', one can take objection to them in respect of 'The Egoist's Prayers' and 'Hymns in Darkness' for their style has to be necessarily bare, austere and mild. In these latter poems, Ezekiel seems to have deliberately pared down his style to the barest minimum to twang the meaning to its pitch reverberation. The egoist's attitude is
perhaps distilled in his rough, half-brutal, total-cynical, damn-realistic and devil-may-care loutishness of a tamasic soul lusting for material prosperity.

Ezekiel lays siege on the core of the message in the Bhagavad Gita. The highly dramatic context is the philosophical discourse of the Bhagavad Gita. This is exploited to its supplest maximum in its highly inverted form. The irony of the prayer comes home if we remember the background of Lord Krishna putting cheer into the terror-stricken and renouncing Arjuna overwhelmed by the shock of the cruelties he has to inflict on his own near and dear ones for worldly success,

The dramatic speaker is essentially a self-centred lazy bone. He has been incorrigibly impervious to the ways of God. He exhorts Lord to stir him up by dealing a punitive kick to him. His human nature is inveterately obdurate. It is but natural for the lazy soul to expect of the Lord to stir him to action. He resorts to a short-cut, a favourite naturally with the sluggish people. To make him learn God's simple truths, he appeals to Lord to kick him a little bit around. His appeal to Lord is amusingly revealing. There is a tone of desperate finality in his attitude of pretended humility to God.
Kick me around
a bit more, O Lord.
I see at last
there's no other way
for me to learn
Your simplest truths. (italics mine)

The egoist makes no secret of his incorrigibility. He is a frozen statics of his inveterate viciousness and alienness or estrangement to virtues. The haughtiness and arrogance of the egoist are seen in his preaching to Lord His Duty which is his impudent request in disguise. There is, in other words, an odd mingling of desperate cry and a bold prescription of duty to the Lord. The stanza rasp out derisive irony and ends on a ringing imperative prescribed to the Lord.

From this Human Way of Life
Who can rescue Man
If not his Maker?
Do thy duty, Lord.

He gives up his pretence of submitting himself to amendment and dares to prescribe the Lord His duty. Seeming to acquiesce in the Lord's injunction of Nishkema pravitti, he indulges in sly and impish petitions to God to allow him to have a taste of the fruit of his action.
(Your right is to work only, but never to the fruit thereof. Let not the fruit of action be your object, nor let your attachment be to inaction.)

The egoist wrenches, distorts and appropriates inversely the burden of this message to suit his selfishness. He puts the human thirst for sense-satisfaction and the lust for enjoyment of the fruit of action, in quite barefaced terms. The tenor of Lord's exhortation is twisted and reversed. The urge for material enjoyment is deep-rooted and irresistible in the egoist.

No, Lord,
not the fruit of action
is my motive.

This very emphatic and avowed disinterestedness prefaces the expression of his greedy request. The almost epicurean logic advanced in partial self-justification is only a covert expression of the self. In this, he
apes God in His emphasis on detachment only to flout it.

He gives a piece of his selfish mind when he like an impatient child, indulges in the sin of half-humorously gloating over the prospect of enjoying the fruit of his action. The thirst for material satisfaction is not a little bit assuaged by the Lord's cold appeal for detachment (Nishkamapraavritti). It is at once a realistic presentation of the limitations of human nature and a grimly humorous and ironic reversal of the truth contained in Lord's appeal. It smacks of open transgression. In the following lines, we find an effective telescoping of the Indian and the Christian myths. Thus the poem is seen to be operating in inter-textual sphere.

But do you really mind
half a bite of it?
It tastes so sweet,
and I'm so hungry.

Christian religion always lays stress on the human susceptibility to sin. It is Satan who tempts Eve and the corrupt Eve in turn tempts Adam. They fall to eating the Forbidden Fruit and are soon over-
come by immoderate longings. The voluptuous longings and sensual pleasures becloud the reasoning of the fallen Adam and Eve. They gorge their appetite freely and transgress the interdiction of God. The echo of this Original Sin is unmistakably there but in a slightly twisted form. The egoist is his own Satan. Here his mind is infested with material longings.

The egoist makes a brash appeal to God not to choose him as the instrument of His will. He does not shrink away from this job in a fit of wholesome realisation of his own unworthiness. This earnest heterodox appeal carries with it all the savour of stubborn human selfishness. He is very much conscious of his worthiness to carry out God's purpose. Being selfish, he wants to be left out. If the Lord is so particular, he is even ready to do the Will of the Lord. In thus volunteering to do God's will, he flings a mock-request at God for an adventitious and opportunistic coincidence of the Divine purpose with his own. In all superior airs, he concedes to do God's will and poses as though he favours God with his conditional willingness.

O well, if you insist,
I'll do your will.
Please try to make it coincide with mine.
The ease-loving desire is frankly and unashamedly expressed in his prayer to the Lord to enable him to belong to higher income group. The sheer apparent absurdity of the request all the more points out the fact that 'cash nexus' dominates the modern human life. Nay, the modern man is in its vicious grip. He seeks of God to grant him the favour of a blessed condition wherein his material happiness and divine scheme coalesce and harmonise. After careering through a whole gamut of a penitent aspirant for reformation, the incorrigible preaching to the Lord to do His duty, the wilful transgresser of the divine precept of detachment, the selfish opportunist and unabashed materialist, he seems to have stumbled across the right point. After all the turmoil of his good-for-nothing efforts, he arrives at a potentially satisfying and chastened urge to be allowed to be spiritually at home with himself.

Let me find my song
where I belong.

By and large, the poem is a parody of the cardinal teachings of the Bhagavad Gita seen in a topsyturvy
manner through the light-hearted raillery of the egoist. The poem records very strikingly how egoistic hedonism and the blasphemous laziness mature into a pious request to God. The comic reversal of the roles of the preceptor and the pupil, breathes a lively jauntiness and jovial good humour into what otherwise would have hardened into stiff posturing and rigid attitudinisation. The irony in the poem is a built-in defensive strategy adopted by the poet to make himself invulnerable and to render the subject-matter authentic.

In her penetrating comment, Linda Hess observes "He (Eskeiel) is a poet of the city, Bombay; a poet of the body; and an endless explorer of the labyrinths of the mind, the devious delvings and twistings of the ego and the ceaseless attempt of man and poet to define himself, and to find through all 'the myth and maze' a way of honesty and love." This succinct comment lays bare much of the heart of Eskeiel's poetic achievement. But Eskeiel's 'Hymns in Darkness' has met with some hostile criticism.

Before we start making an analytical study of Eskeiel's 'Hymns in Darkness' proper, we may first of
all probe into the possible rationale and validity of its off-beat title with a deceptive air of convention hovering about it. This probe may prove eventually rewarding and fruitful.

Hymns are, generally, laconic poems of praise of God or more often they are the pithy expressions of intuited postulation of certain positive aspects of realised truths in highly symbolic terms. Hence they can be regarded as a variety of prayer poetry. In the hymns, the accent is more on the solidity of perception earned and garnered up with telling force and vigour and not so much on the poetic rendering in the familiar secular sense. The average tone and tenor of a hymn is to assert and heighten positive qualities as contrasted distinguished from the negative ones. For example, light, a symbol of knowledge, is sought after in decided and passionate preference to darkness, a symbol of ignorance. Esakiel entitles his poems as compositions not so much in praise of light but as a series of evocative pictures of darkness. The darkness is not necessarily physical but potentially inner darkness out of which flow spiritual restlessness and crisis and tortures of a haunting sense of incompleteness and void. They are made of realisation
of the failure of the modern man in the urban life.

The 'Hymns in Darkness' is about the clumsy failure of human search for durable truth and the consequent gropings in the darkness of failure. On a close reading, the 'Hymns...' strikes us as a series of gnostic meditations with a unity imposed on them by a dogged impulse to explore into the psychic experiences about the urban life in the light of ancient perceptions and the modern dilemmas. At first sight, they have a deceptive look of being mere dry and detached analyses of modern crisis. They also seem to lack an inherent pattern of an integrated and well-realised poetic recreation of a unified sensibility with a vision earned out of the very disorder of broken efforts and futilities. One reason for this impression may be due to the fact that there is no striking and vivid incident in the 'Hymns in Darkness'. This would have acted as a source for his observations to emanate from and grow organically into a successful creative whole. For example, in his 'Might of the Scorpion', Eskeiel has successfully evoked and dramatically realised the clash between the religious
faith of the simple villagers and the scepticism and rationalism of the narrator's father. It is resolved by the stoic realism of the mother. The whole poem hinges on the very painful incident of the scorpion-sting.

But the 'Hymns ...' obviously do not proceed from any day-to-day concrete incident as such. Also, they do not so much represent a poet's soaring into luminous truth. Nevertheless, they are his delving deep into man's failure in several ways and at several critical junctures. It presents the evolution of a critically introspective spirit from failures to a durable vision of a solid realisation. In them, the key images are journey and discovery taking place in the speaker's mind. The dominating metaphor is one of loneliness in the busy but futile urban existence. The 'Hymns ...' have a taut structure and a rich thought-content.

The 'Hymns ...' bristle with the intense spiritual awareness in its varied aspects. They are informed by an avid curiosity for true knowledge and wisdom faced only with paradoxical perplexities instead of being crowned with any valid and irrefutable discovery. Perhaps, the
only solid grain of insight is the luminous halo of the
dark perception of futilities and failures as the time-
honoured truths seem to have gone awry and grown irre-
levant and ineffective in the modern context. It is a
series of experiences about the complexities of urban
existence. They express in aphoristic terms the collec-
tive wisdom of a whole race at moments of highest reali-
sation. These are out of tune and even out of place in
the modern context. They also include individual attempts
to work out a solution for the peculiar problems trying
his spirit.

In the context of anonymous and amorphous city
life, we find a dramatic speaker with a highly evolved
urban consciousness struggling to sift things of value
useful to himself. Such values of the past are sadly
relative and show themselves to be empty and futile in
real circumstances. The eccentricity of the Hymns...'
consist in making much of darkness. Engulfed in noise
without, he is a victim of the noise within. Lost to
basic virtues like humility, wisdom, self-effacement,
he is proud and vain. The divorce between knowledge
and practice perhaps constitutes the core of modern
spiritual crisis. Full of ego and self-esteem, he has succeeded in laying his finger on the fault of man's self-deception and his essentially limited and self-defeating potentialities. The fate of frustration is built into his very efforts which are flawed at times in their very success. The contrary pulls of selfishness and the higher desire for advancement make the modern man a miasma of unpractised virtues. The high degree of his frankness and accuracy adds force to his self-examination which mimics his gropings in the dark. Built of balance and antithesis, the poetic musing gains piquancy and a forward thrust. Knowing the truths and flouting them as well, he stands out as a monument of disharmony and incongruity. The impingement of the external noise on his spirit is only a mere reduplication.

The noise of the city is matched by the noise in his spirit.

In formulating a basic value, it is customary in Upanishads to define an idea, or concept or truth by forging a unity out of its very contrasts and contrarieties.

अन्यांतःरतिः च आत्मनि तस्मादवृहे प्रचक्षते।
Jai Tārīya Upanishad
That which is eaten by and which eats the beings is called अत्यन्त. This kind of precise definition can only obtain as the end-product of fusion of a subtle and acute understanding and an illumined awareness. Eschiel comes close to this Upanishadic style of composition. In this, he draws on the pool of collective wisdom of shared truths and tests their relevance to the urgencies of city-life. It seems it is forced on him to have recourse to a negative approach for failure will not generally encourage in us a positive attitude towards success but breeds a tendency to hunt down ways and means of avoiding confronting failure.

The "secrets" and "keys" to success simply fail to work. At least one revealed insight proclaims that self-deception is at the core of crisis. But the modern man is hopelessly bewildered in his inability to overcome it. He lives too much in the tempting world of desires and devices. But in the very act of accurately describing the failures and deficiencies, Eschiel has succeeded eminently in identifying the hindrances in the processes of self-explication and self-perfection.
Self-deception is a fact of being. How, then, to be undeceived?

He has found too many secrets that will not work,
too many keys that unlock no locks.

The voice is unmistakably the poet's own and most probably must have come out of the inner recesses of his mind. He has heard the voice clearly. In the exercise of his inner faculties like voice and vision, he clearly and definitely imitates Lord Siva's attributes. However ironic all this may seem, man is cast in the mode of a proxy of divine attributes. In spite of such inner faculties and capabilities, he is allured to live in the colourful world of desires and devices.

For every truth in his possession, he has a falsehood to go with it.
He speaks with his own voice. He listens with the third ear. He sees with the eye in the centre of his forehead.

The elusive and delusive nature of the solutions makes him realise that he is a puny self pitting himself
against the vast universe in a hopeless and self-centred
endeavour to seek individual upliftment and advancement.
In this, he has addressed himself to an impossible thing.
The stark fact of failure gapes at him in brutal clarity.

He's still a puny self
hoping to manipulate the universe and all
its manifest powers for his own advancement.
Again and again, he loses the war of motives,
self-deceived.

The unsteadiness of his search and an innate
inability to be faithful to the signs of his vision are
all traceable to the partial sincerity he brings to bear
on them. He remains a victim of prying curiosity and
is not spurred on by a deep, abiding passion for true
search. As such limitations cramp him, he gains only
a tantalising and perplexing vision of the truth like
the Peeping Tom with all his mistaken, myriad, false
impressions of the Truth.

He looks at the nakedness of truth
in the spirit of a Peeping Tom.

The unavailing futility of man's search is aptly
and funnily expressed in the flat commonplace description
of man as a Peeping Tom. He is, so to say, a being con-
ditioned by the paltriness and pettiness of his inner self. The laconic nature of such a statement may leave one in doubt about the authentic ring of a genuinely felt and realised aspect of Esekiel's poetic integrity. Yet conviction grows on us that profound as the experience is Esekiel can only say things in the manner he did and in the style he has cut out for himself. If T.S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land' is an organisation of literary allusiveness, a profound intellectual apprehension of the all-out sterility, erosion of vitalising values in the modern world, 'Hymns in Darkness' can be seen as an incisive examination of the darkness engulfing the urban consciousness in terms of the ancient insights into the eternal predicament of man's misery despite his redeeming virtues. In 'The Waste Land', the regenerative principles are sought in all the mythological, mythical, historical contexts but in vain. The reversion to the panaceas like Datta, Dayadhvan and Dayyata in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad convinces us that they are the right prescriptive principles to cure the malady afflicting the modern life.

'Hymns in Darkness', so far, has traced the yawning chasm between man's profession and practice,
his aspiration and his realisation, the self-deception and his all too facile mastery over the universe. In his multiple and hypocritical roles as a guru, a disciple, a husband, a father; the modern man emerges as an utterly unsatisfactory, incomplete, incompetent and confused and over-lapping intermixture of the substance and the form. He has played these roles in the manner of an amateur actor overshooting his natural potentialities. Bereft of any faith in himself, he found a faith which has meant some light in total darkness and a little courage at the brink of abyss. He is sunk into a snug reliance on and reconciliation with the old type of relationships. He has come out shaking off the curbing and the delimiting prescriptive directions in order to find an effective way out. He lights on a decisive moment of poetic illumination. He brushes aside this meditative probe and takes an active plunge into action.

A single decision is better than a hundred thoughts. To hell with all directions, old and new.

Tired and disgusted with the anodyne value-hunting, he faces the facts before him as they are. The facts
are neither flattering nor harsh. They mirror, functioning like objective correlative, the road with its familiar sights. Because of this very familiarity, the road is cosy and comforting. If one is to correlate these abrupt, broken and unrelated images into vital links, symbolising the foregone gnomic reflections, they have a surprising significance in relation to the self-made predicament of the modern man. He records with clinical accuracy the repulsive, ugly and yet life-like sights on a tarred road.

The tarred road is dual and plain. (One notices instantly the blackness of its appearance as an intensifying agent of the major informing image i.e., darkness). It is obviously a means to facilitate journey. But the road acquires a subdued brightness in the light of the mild sun after the rain. However wrenched, tailored and segmented this trite image may seem against the background of its elemental significance; it lends a touch of romantic vivification to an otherwise flat, pedestrian sight. The wet, green leaves describe a pattern definitively thus blown by wind and tossed by rain and this distinctly echoes the earlier line.

A life is a symbolic pattern.
The ragged slipper, once made of tanned leather from a dead animal, is soaked in rain and is pecked at only by the black crows. In the manner of an x-ray, the human consciousness registers the sexual symbols like breasts, thighs, buttocks in the movement of humans as a flow into and out of the evolved consciousness of the speaker. For, after all, it is this intimate sense of realism that would perhaps be an effective antidote to the failures of his spirit and mind. The scene is composed of a few apparently strewn disarray of casual images.

The evolution by intellection out of this raw state throws light on his essentially lonely and insecure condition in spite of the readily granted power and strength from the humane Gods. Gods are cast in the image of man's own self-love and vanity. Gods are merely looked upon as an insurance against man's own weaknesses. There is an acid tone of cool pooh-poohing of man's egoistic projection and externalisation of his own deficiencies and weaknesses in the form of Gods. Yet his predicament remains the same, i.e., the nervous sense of loneliness and insecurity and a wilting sense of futility and sterility.
Self-love, vanity throw a sickly light on his gods.
He prays for power and stamina, to make it.
The prayers are answered. The gods are kind.
His house is built on rock.
It shakes in the wind
All around it the land is laid waste.

Thereby, he is forced again to contemplate "the sources of his life." The sexual urge inevitably works out its way to forced fulfilment and lacks the touch of sublime consummation. Eszkiel, later on, describes the archetypal dramatic ritual of sex game. Lust needs very much to be sublimated after a mere tugging of the womanly prudery and the man's frank aggressiveness. The luscious sense of sex-satisfaction has to be transmuted into the aesthetics of enjoyment. In short, the science of desire needs transformation into the aesthetics of love.

If only he could love the bitch!

In the fashion of जैती जैती elucidation of the Brahman by the sage Yagnavalkya, he goes on peeling off into the core of truth about man by shearing off all his external garbs as age, married status, parenthood, pre-
fessional standing, intelligence, wisdom and ugliness. Man stands unveiled in the barest nakedness of his being.

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

The tight-rope walking, so far done in all the breath-taking fashion, is a little bit relaxed. Now he walks easily on the real ground taking note of the corrupting, enervating, sickening factors that constitute his environment in which his life is mostly transacted. God strikes him as the Enemy for all the irreconcilable and mutually exclusive interpretations given of God. He is graphically seen in the roles of the absentee landlord and the tyrannical bureaucrat. From then on, he proceeds to give a pithy rendering of the rigidly circumscribed, viciously stunting and inimically empty ritualised existence.

They rot in families, in castes, in communities, in clubs, in political parties.
They stay stable. They stay still.
Their hands continue to keep down the young.

The admonition not to curse darkness smacks of sincere adherence to proven experience. It is soon
followed by the equally teasing caution not to light a candle. All this boils down to the fact that he steers the midway between timorous acquiescence and moderate prudence. He lights on a seemingly novel and even out of the way revelation. It comes unexpectedly stating an inverse postulation of a universal truth. He comes to a very heterodox and revolutionary conclusion that darkness has its own secrets. Light is said to distort truth.

Don't curse the darkness since you're told not to, but don't be in a hurry to light a candle either. The darkness has its secrets which light does not know. It's a kind of perfection, while every light distorts truth.

This revelation, totally unexpected and shockingly original, is closely akin to the Metaphysical mode in that it is a synthesis arrived at by yoking violently two heterogeneous ideas together. This startling discovery of the perfection of darkness is juxtaposed with a very strange picture of a typically altruistic social
man. He has all the positive qualities like energy, active nature, spiritedness. Self-imprisoned and self-exiled, he has wasted his life. This confin'd, cag'd, and cribb'd—social being presents a picture of a very strange paradox—he can neither help himself nor help others. Enigmatically enough, this ever-failing, self-defeating and self-neglecting altruist is cheerful. He remains a total contradiction to the Inner Ego.

I saw him cheerful
in the universal darkness
as I stood grimly
in my little light.

The social being splutters out the multi-pressures which impinge on him and cumulatively work the pathetic crisis of coercing him to hate his own five senses for the ugly sensations registered on his consciousness. He is inescapably confined to the monotony and insipidity of the bizarre city life of film songs, beggars, strangers and smells. It has made him a helpless and hopeless psychic wreck. He says:

'I'm forced by the five senses
to fear the five senses.'

This is the average experience of any cosmopolitan citizen with social leanings whereby he becomes a psychic
wreck unable to disentangle himself from the unnerving monotony of being tyrannised by a group of set activities. On hearing this horror of the empty routine of urban life from the social altruist, the poet becomes a helpless listener.

I heard him out
in black wordlessness.

The benumbed listener indulges in a hypothetical extension back to the time of Primeval Creation. He states, though not vigorously and confidently, that he would have proceeded differently had he been there at the source of creation. This desirable imaginative plunge back into the past is done in the manner of a cryptic murmur. He has a prospect before him of imminent destruction.

But if the destruction is in our lifetime, the mushroom cloud is as good a way as any I can think of, and more aesthetic.

The stubborn optimistic delight has an eerie touch in the context of certain death. These bare rhythms
born out of the live colloquial style used by Eskeiel remind us of W.B. Yeats who is considered a major poet for the very same reason. Yeats's life is fruitful in a number of personal frustrations. Yet, he has decided to "wither into the truth." Instead of shrinking away from the horrible chaos that his times are and taking refuge in a comfortable aestheticism, he comes to terms with the terrible reverses he has suffered in his personal and national life. He forges his vision out of the very sufferings that trouble his heart and expresses it in crisp and casual terms in a tone of tragic gaiety. Eskeiel, too, in the face of such imminent destruction pictured in the lines quoted, does not lose himself in black despair or continue to build castles in the air. With all the shreds of fragmentary perceptions, he still clings firmly to sense of reality with a glint of courage in the tone and invites destruction in all the fervour of aesthetic delight. He holds himself on to the sheet-anchor of firm sense of reality without caring for death. This tragic gaiety in Eskeiel is like that of Yeats's who both share an unfaltering sense of the desolation of reality.

As a whole, the poem 'Hymns in Darkness' is con-
vincing, cogent and coherent. It progresses through some clear-cut stages to the finale. It propels forward by breaking through a bundle of mysterious contradictions and ends in a rooted sense of reality. The apparently broken pieces are an organisation of the sensitively tremulous reactions of an honest and keen spirit on its introspective Odyssey. It is an instance of a long meditative and sustained monologue. The virile sense of reality contributes much to the rhythmic cadence and the sombre sonority of the 'Hymns in Darkness.'

All you have
is the sense of reality,
Unfathomable
as it yields its secrets
slowly
one
by
one.

No wonder, Ezekiel regards 'Hymns in Darkness' as the most fully projected and realised work. It has a unity of temperament, isn't marked by fragmentation." Then it would be proper to move on to a consideration of the use of the religious idiom in the secular contexts in Indo-English prayer poems. This would be the chief concern of the V Chapter.
REFERENCES


2. Ibid., p. 52.

3. One is likely to be reminded of the echo of T.S. Eliot's 'Ash-Wednesday' especially the following lines:

   Suffer us not to mock ourselves with falsehood
   Teach us to care and not to care
   Teach us to sit still


5. Ibid., p. 23.


9. Ibid., p. 58.


11. Ibid., p. 88.

12. Ibid., p. 89.
Pramo Manda Kumar grudgingly concedes the merit of 'Hymns in Darkness' and poses a fundamental question about their title to be called hymns. "As for the 'Hymns in Darkness', they no doubt evoke darkness in some measure, but are they 'hymns'? This 16-piece sequence has a haunting waywardness of movement and taunting urgency of expression, but the dark is never light enough, and the dark is not darkness either—only the wizardry of words."