The poetry of Nissim Ezekiel reflects the conflicts and struggles of an ordinary human being who is continuously trying to arrive at a balance between an existential involvement with life and an intellectual quest for commitment. Ezekiel uses his poems to delve into his psyche, in a bid to know himself better. These journeys into the depths of his being, however, do not divorce him from the reality of the physical experience. Infact, it is through the physical experience that his search within himself becomes validated. Some of the themes explored in his early poems, and echoed in his later ones, are the Co-existence of terror and peace within the soul and the relationship of reality to art. The essential conflict between the body and the soul, life and religion and dreams and reality lends his poetry with a specific poetic tension. All this helps him to understand the relation between life,
Life becomes an endless journey, a pilgrimage of the human spirit on the path of self-discovery and our poet is the eternal traveller trying to resolve one tension after another.

I

Nissim Ezekiel is on a pilgrimage to the lost city of the spirit, in search of primal roots. The journey manifests life in its fullness. His quest is an intensely personal one, enabling him to poignantly explore the conflict between tradition and modernity, leading to self-discovery. The quest becomes existential as on a different level it takes up the matter of conflict between the body and the soul and the city and the village: "The noise in the city is matched by the noise in his mind".  

Nissim Ezekiel, like all sensitive, modern poets, is seriously committed to his poetry which enables him to record his agonised spiritual yearnings besides giving an expression to his search for a satisfactory way of living in this modern secular world. For him poetry is a serious matter, not a mere episode but a complete way of life and living. It is a continuous flow, an inseparable part of his existence. Critics have often pointed out, as Michael Carmen does, "The inextricable fusion between Ezekiel's poetry and his life, and that his purpose is to make a
harmony out of a surely biological fact, i.e., existence. The harmony finally achieved may be partial and erratic but the quest or the pilgrimage is there and this in itself is important enough". ²

Life is a journey and poetry helps Ezakiel to organise it by coming to terms with his own primal self. His poetry is a record of the evolving of Nissim Ezekiel both as a human being and a poet; built on little incidents personally experienced or even read; episodes described by friends, friendships, relationships - of man with God, man with man, man with nature; making a hero of a very unheroic human being. In the process, the poet strips his soul bare and we come to know the person behind those poems. His poetry goes on recording the peculiar ebb and flow of life. It reflects the tormented struggle and the conflict of the spirit which the poet seems to have lost in the corrupting influence of the city:

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I've never been a refugee
Except of the spirit.
A loved and troubled country
which is my home and enemy.
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The city becomes a symbol of urban influence and the world of today. The city is even looked upon as a place full of distractions and a wasteful influence, corroding the spirit. The protagonist of Ezekiel's poetry is city bred and very much a part of that:
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 childlike masses, many tongued,
Whose wages are in words and crumbs.

The tone of the poem itself is suggestive of the frantic and feverish pace besides picturing the ugliness and the drabness of the modern life. Although the poet grieves the loss of innocence, yet this is the milieu of which he is very much a part; hence, his helplessness:

I can not leave the Island, 5
I was born here and belong.

In the city even the morning breeze does not exude freshness and fails to waft in new ideas. Nothing grows except the individual egos, growing tall like trees, obliterating light and the vision. The lines have a Eliot-like flavour, bringing in a sense of helpless despair. Again and again the poet seems to pause and look within to question:

Is he among the men of straw
Who think they go which way they please? 6

The poet also realises that to put up a fight or trying to escape will be quite futile because everything is going to remain the same. Caught in the web of his own making the protagonist does not really possess the necessary will and
determination to escape it all. He himself is the part of the scene:

Where fame is cheap,
And he belongs, an active fool. 7

The protagonist of Ezekiel's poetry is an ordinary human being, embodying the aspirations and disappointments of a common man and facing success and defeat and taking rejection like all of us. Besides, like Eliot's Prufrock he is acutely aware of his failings and limitations.

I am no prophet - and here's no great matter;
I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,
And I have seen the eternal footman hold my coat, and snicker,
And in short, I was afraid. 8

So, he is "An unheroic hero, if you will, he is the one we encounter daily on the roads, rushing to work, trying to meet deadlines, facing failures, defeat and rejection. In short, he is very much like us, that part of ourselves which we try to conceal from public gaze, and which we have to reckon with in our quiet moments of soul searching". 9

What the poet would like to arrive at is a logical balance between the life of the spirit and the life of the senses. His poetry pictures it all. It makes it possible for him to arrive at a catharsis, leading to a possible redemption and even the rebirth of spirit. It helps him to
analyse himself and his actions to add up to his vision. Poetry even enables him occasionally to rise above the conflict and accept it in a good-natured manner. "Scores of my poems", he says, "are obviously written for personal, therapeutic purposes".  

Ezekiel's poetry serves a purpose, when it enables him to accept himself and also to be at peace with the world around him. "Life is seen as a quest for wholeness for intellectual and spiritual satisfaction for maturity. While the aim is the 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". 

His persona is like any other human being living in the modern world with all its demands on human psyche, pulls and pressures; obsessed with the concept of God, religion, sex and sin. It shows a mind fragmented with the tortured awareness of false values and false Gods, weary of his own continuing restlessness when all he wishes for in life is peace, purpose and order.

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.
"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."\textsuperscript{13}

The poetry helps the protagonist to redeem the soul which the poet thought he was in danger of losing. "One finds in the poems the imprint of a keen, analytical mind trying to explore and communicate on a personal level feelings of loss and deprivation."\textsuperscript{14} So, the poetry assumes moralistic tones and many times is put forth like a prayer, an appeal to God to save and sustain him:

\begin{verbatim}
Let every man, woman and child sleep and awaken, Sustained by thee.\textsuperscript{15}
And -

Restore my waking time To vital present tense, And dreams of love or crime To primal quiescence.
\end{verbatim}

Who is the god Ezekiel turns to? Time and again, we have Ezekiel turning to or talking about God in his poetry:

\begin{verbatim}
How excellent is thy name, and thy Glory above the heavens.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{verbatim}

Religion was always there, present in his life, ingrained in him through childhood. He even learnt 'Scriptures' during school days. Otherwise too, in one way
or the other, no one can escape religion in India. You simply inherit it or go on imbibing it quietly in your being throughout life. The presence of religion in Ezekiel's poetry speaks of a definite religious background. Born of Jewish parents 'A mugging Jew' as he describes himself, he has inherited a Jewish consciousness:

The images are beautiful birds
And colourful fish: They fly,
They swim in my Jewish consciousness.\(^{18}\)

Being brought up in an Indian environment, there is a definite influence of Indian ethos and philosophy upon him. Some time later, he developed interest in Buddhism. He learnt to work within various religious traditions.

I heard of Yoga and of Zen.
Could I, perhaps be Rabbi Saint?
The more I searched the less I found.\(^{19}\)

In a way religion disappointed him. When he left school, he turned away from religion consciously and became an atheist. He himself states, "... at the age of 18 or 19 I had moved away not only from Judaism, but from all religion. I had become atheistic and anti-religious and it was a fairly long spell".\(^{20}\) It is possible that at that young sensitive age, he must have suffered because of an over-dose of religion; moving away was a kind of rebellion against the excessive emphasis on the religiosity of all things. Even at that tender age he could not have failed to
notice the hypocrisy of it all. It must have been a revolt against the ritual based religion. Still we do have a lot of God in his poems, to whom the protagonist invariably turns to, to seek and gain sustenance:

So much light in total darkness!
So much courage given, beside the abyss!
Why was he forgiven, helped, comforted?
Whose the voice of truth that spoke through.

The imperfect words?
He has lost faith in himself
And found faith at last.

When the going gets tough and the protagonist is confused, lost and losing faith in everything, he once again turns to God. In fact, a variety of gods or ways to quell and curb his sinful thoughts and ways. Yoga teaches him how to control his natural impulses and Zen shows how best to curb them by shunning desire; Judaism teaches one to be righteous. Basically, all religions demand sexual sublimation from their devoted followers to preserve superior extra energy. Religion in all forms, remains a definite controlling factor warning him to mend his sinful ways. Obviously the poet has a God. Bruce King maintains that "the outlook is Judaic, not Christian. His concerns are manhood, loving family and proper conduct which redeems:
The private country of the mind, where the worser part, as Socrates would say
Presides".22
The general Jewish prophetic teaching is that God demands of his people that they practise justice, righteousness and charity, and show compassion. Judaism affirms that God, the creator of the world and all that is in it, has chosen the Jewish people to live according to His will as revealed through the 'Torah' and eventually to lead all humankind to his service. The prophets warned, as Moses had, that if the people were faithless to God, they would suffer exile from the land. Thus, the nagging guilt in Ezekiel makes him feel like an emotional exile. "Ezekiel in London could be the Jews in Babylon corrupted by unlawful desires, strange Gods and defiled by foreign practices:

We who leave the house in April Lord, How shall we return?"

For the repentant pilgrim, returning home becomes the prime concern. Although Judaism lays stress on correct behaviour, on action, to the extent of encouraging a good deed even if the motive for performing that deed is self seeking, the ideal is inwardness, both in the sense that the motive should be pure and there should be awareness of what is being done. A favourite prayer aims at the purification of hearts to serve God in truth. In this very spirit Nissim Ezekiel deigns to pray to the God:

Is the Lord my shepherd?
Shall I not want?
I lie down in green pastures, beside
the still waters. Lead me
Away from these into thy
work.
When my soul is restored,
I walk the path of self-
righteousness.

For most Jews, their Jewishness is an inalienable
status conferred upon them by birth. The Jewish legacy
weighs heavily on the poet and makes him cry out in his
'Latter Day Psalms'.

How long are we to rely
On those marvellous things
in ancient Egypt? Tell me of the
Marvellous things in Nazi Germany.

These lines show the poet's interest in his having been
born as a Jew and his Jewish heritage. On the other hand,
they also express his increasing impatience. Gieve Patel
comments on the religion of the poet:

... Judaic presence is strong in the
tone of lament in many of the poems, and
also of course in 'Latter Day Psalms'.
Actually, 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 God, an
urban contemporary without hang-ups
about origin, He may be addressed with a
reasonable familiarity:

Kick me around
A bit more, O Lord.
I see at last
There's no other way
for me to learn
your simplest truths
or
The vices I have 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.

On the other hand, it is not all hunky dory as far as the poet's relationship with God is concerned. He is, at times, quite impatient, bringing out clearly his ambivalence as he would rather do without,

All that fuss about faith.  

because under too much pressure the protagonist squirms uncomfortably-

The enemy is God
And the Gods in all forms.
The absentee landlord
The official of all officials.

The light, deriding tone shows clearly the resentment against authority. "Ezekiel addresses his God in a varying range of tones, from translucent praise, to supplication, to angry baffled accusation. What's more, He's even corrected". With time, Ezekiel seems to have developed an easier, friendlier relation with his God, where he can even cheekily tell Him off, which goes with Ezekiel's modern, urban, informal outlook.

You have plenty of volunteers to choose from, Lord.
Why pick on me, the selfish one.
O well, if you insist,
I'll do your will.
Please try to make it coincide with mine.

Keeping with the best of Judaic tradition Nissim Ezekiel is quite tolerant of other religions, having imbibed in himself and his poetry, the best of all. He is secular in his approach and practises only the religion of humanity which unites one human being with another. This religion has a universal appeal and besides,

Every one understands
Mother Teresa,...

A great deal of Ezekiel's poetry is given to religious philosophy but that does not make him a consciously religious poet. In times of need all human beings turn to God and pray and so does Ezekiel. He seems to have established a very robust and healthy relationship with God, where he clearly maintains the right to question – how and why? Infact, Ezekiel needs religion and God to resolve the tension within himself, between his higher and lower impulses. He aims at striking a balance between the two as an ordinary man to be able to live in peace with himself. There is never a wish to renounce the world. It also shows the confusion of an ordinary man, concerning himself, life and God. At times, the questioning turns quite petulant and defiant in tone. The insistent note is reminiscent of Nachiketa's line of questioning in 'Upanishadas', proving that it is important for the protagonist to know his own
identity.

What, in fact, Ezekiel aims at is personal redemption through religion and a parallel movement of search for identity. It is to be sought not through renunciation but through an active involvement in life, and finally to a possible synthesis. He is generally unable to achieve this, he turns away from contemplation and tries to find involvement and commitment in the human world.

II

The religious in Nissim Ezekiel is pre-occupied with the concept of sin. All religions including christianity, Judaism and Hinduism lay a stress on physical temperance. Too much indulgence in the pleasures of flesh is bound to raise questions and doubts. In Nissim Ezekiel, sexual passion compulsively holds sway, "He was painfully and poignantly aware of the flesh, its insistent urges, its stark ecstasies, its disturbing filiations with the mind".32

Sin is to him just another name for love, embodying the 'passions of blood'. He also associates sin with woman. The lover of his poetry is not hypocritical. He is a down to earth, warm-blooded man, who is very clear about his needs and knows what he wants. "The crux of the matter is the sexual dreams".33 Love in its ideal form or the platonic love is an illusion because "The closer you come
the further you move". 34

The lover in Ezekiel's poetry minces no words, when it comes to his sexual needs and he does it without wrapping it all in divinity or having a very elevating concept of love. Physical love is the only reality and it is only while making love that 'love' assumes a truth, certain honesty. Otherwise, it is only falsehood-

Her falsehood became infused
    with truest love.35
Only in making love.

For Nissim Ezekiel, love is a need to be fulfilled, a hunger to be satisfied, making him fall in the abyss of breasts, buttocks and thighs from which he derives erotic pleasure. Female form obsesses him, luring him always:

And breasts, thighs, buttocks
Swinging
Now towards
Now away from him.36

Image of woman as a sexual beast occurs again and again in his poetry:

To love her was impossible
To abandon her unthinkable
He had to make love to her,
a charade of love and possession
in which some truth was found in her.37

In her very perceptive study of Indian English Poetry, Linda Hess characterises Ezekiel as "a poet 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, to find through all the 'myth and maze' a way to honesty and love".38

The protagonist is a simple human being in whom the lower and the higher in the psyche, always seem to be at loggerheads but alas, he is too acutely aware of the fibres of flesh and desire. The poet has a penchant and a strong poetic talent for representing the woman's features in a number of ways. The pictures are sometimes extremely sensual. Sensuality itself becomes deeply pungent and almost concrete when handled by him:

SENSUALITY -
A word that stands by itself, or
Rather lies down and stretched out.
You touch it, smell it, give yourself
to every moment, every stressed
And unstressed syllable that sounds,
Resounds in this nude body mood.
You listen to its melody.39

To Ezekiel, love, 'this hunger-making paradise' is the prime inspiration and supreme joy of life. He is a poet of pure passion, talking about it with a remarkable frankness. His unconscious religious training warns him against too much indulgence and he tries too, but to his great chagrin realises that love needs can not be suppressed, so defiantly goes on singing about love:
Breathe
my breath
And let me breathe yours...

The 'Poster Poems' and 'Nudes 1978', exhibit the great obsession. His pure indulgence leads to a state of ecstatic blessedness yet both the partners have to be honest and clear. Infact, his protagonist and the woman persona, are a product of this world, conscious of a compulsive, passing need, given to the pleasure of the moment, seeking pure physical pleasure selfishly and wishing to move on as soon as they can. For them love is a passion, a hunger and there is no room for bitterness or the unanswered ultimate questions do not remain a problem.

Did you enjoy it ? No ? You have
to love the other person, then you do.
Never mind, you love my breasts, thighs,
buttocks, don't you ? Of course you do.
It's O.K. You know, and I love
your body too, though you are hardly
My cup of tea.

Female body absorbs the poet as a form, an art. His point of view is of an artist's :

It is not the subject of my love
but a form, an art
In which I am absorbed.

Although Nissim Ezekiel has come to consider ideal love a mirage, an illusion and is assiduously given to the pursuit of the pleasures of the senses yet this does not stop him from pursuing ideal love or trying to analyse the emotion
of love from different angles, with great intensity. Sometimes he even experiences the vision:

For a moment only
It seemed an illusion-
Not the sexual bit
Absorbed in itself,
But everything,
life on earth, the cosmos,
Even the spirit of God
In the void, and the void.

Yet it proves to be only an illusion and the poet woefully reaches a conclusion that true love can only be had either from the arms of the whores or harlots. Gieve Patel writes: "Many of the encounters described were clearly brief. The poems admit these were mutually exploitative and there is some self condemnation expressed for this. But by far the largest number move out of the area of guilt into wonder and redemption. Compulsive sexuality, quietly given in to, discovers its true face the magical life of the body, gratitude and concern for it, from the gentle 'Poet, Lover, Bird watcher', to the supremely audacious "Nudes 1978". There are critics who maintain that Ezekiel's excessive interest in sex is part of his quest to know and understand himself better. For him it is a process to reach and establish his identity. Bruce King maintains,

Often varied themes appear in the same poem as they are part of the quest. 'To a certain Lady' proclaims that while change is permanent and real' 'The, dancing moments, of a kiss/Are real
Life requires 'contact with the unknown and the strange/a feeling for the mystery': Love sharpens our responses to the colours of creation.

This is the poetry of the moral intelligence attempting to find balance between various needs and desires; the poems are concerned with how to live sanely, fully and normally in the secular world.

Anisur Rehman, too, defends the poet, "It is significant to note that nowhere is there any indication of the poet falling a prey to the putrid love. On the contrary, he tries, invariably, to understand the nature of real love and passion through his own indulgence in the act". Chetan Kernani, considers Ezekiel as a "psychologist of sorts". Sex, not only makes the poet know of the 'sacramental pattern' but also, it is the basis of retaining 'Identity' and resolving tension or at least by communicating the experience he tries to identify the areas of tension which remain unresolved. It is Northrop Frye, who in his essay 'Critical Path' comments on this, "Poetry is, after all, technique of communication. It engages the conscious part of the mind as well as the murkier areas, and what a poet succeeds in communicating to other is at least as important as what he fails to resolve for himself".

Judaism lays a great stress on family life and marriage. So we have Ezekiel talking about marriage and married love at great length. Although he would like to
maintain the sanctity, yet he clearly shows his disillusionment and describes marriage as a 'living hell'. In 'Case-Study', he admits "His marriage was the worst mistake of all." He had hoped to attain married bliss yet he faces boredom and monotony and his own unrepressible desires to experience love and sex outside marriage create another impasse. Bruce King writes:

... Ezekiel's verse reveals a moral intelligence confused by the experience of marriage; while he is critical of his self-deceptions and lack of control over emotions, disillusion is recognised as something that was previously known about and that was expected. Despite this, he had hoped love in marriage would bring the unity of self he wanted. A desire to flee is opposed by awareness that outside marriage he would still be himself carrying the same inner baggage of unsatisfied lust, fantasies, hopes and dissatisfactions.

The failure of marital love saddens the poet, yet there is always an attempt at reconciliation. The poet keeps feeling cheated; he feels impinged upon emotionally, intellectually and physically by the woman persona but he can not bring himself to break the relationship. He does not do it because of his religious background and he is also not certain of the fact that he will be better off outside the relationship. Staying married, at least, grants him religious and social sanction. His attitude to marriage is very much in keeping with the spirit of the times. The so-
called modern, avant garde section of the society likes to retain individual identity and seek freedom from all shackles. Bond of marriage can be suffocating because it makes straying difficult. So his marriage poetry becomes replete with a great deal of irony.

A man is damned
in that domestic game. 51

In marriage even sex becomes monotonous:

However many times we came
Apart, we came together, the same
Thing over and over again. 52

There is a pun on the words 'However many times we came / apart we came together'. Still the poet assumes a happy role before the world. He is a frequent wedding guest, so he feels that he should remain content with his own life in marriage:

Why should I ruin the mystery
By harping on the suffering rest,
Myself a frequent wedding guest.

This does not stop the poet from mocking his wife or all wives of the world, at that:

Shout at me, woman!
Pull me up at this and that.
You are right and I am wrong.
This is not an excuse,
It's only a song.
It's good for my soul
To be shouted at.
Shout at me woman!
What else are wives for? 53

54
The poet realises that he is doomed to wander and stay dissatisfied. That does not stop him from looking at love and woman, the object of love, from different angles. His fascination with love and woman continues. One of his remarkable poems is 'Virginal' which expresses the agony of uninvolved in love, the torture of one who remains unfulfilled, without receiving or imparting love to anybody. To appear happy is a mere pretence. The poem is a poignant commentary on many women of today who decide to stay unmarried or fail to get married because of circumstances. The poet finds this unnatural. In this poem the poet affirms the need of love and its quest even if it ends in failure:

The universe is much too small to hold
Your longing for a lover and child.

Ezekiel's 'Poem of Separation' presents another variation on the theme of love. A mood of sadness permeates the poem which the poet must have experienced at the loss of this love which had blossomed, even in the midst of violence. Even years after, the poet experiences the same intensity of longing and there is an unmistakable note of numbness, pathos and regret:

But you ask to break it up.
Your latest letter says:
I am enclosing
Ramanujan's translation
Of a Kannada religious poem:
"The Lord is playing
with streamers of fire"
I want to play with fire.
Let me get burnt.  

In his early poetry Ezekiel associated woman with sin, but changed as his vision matured. The lover of Ezekiel's poetry goes on to enjoy life and love with an unusual abandon, which will strip off all layers of pretence of false hypocrisy and make him come across the 'real' in him; "Body naked, soul naked". It becomes a part of his quest, making him one with the cosmos, and the spirit of God.

... Surviving all the loss,
This most unreal flesh
Obstinately fills the soul.

His sexual experience fails to fill his soul or absorb him totally and as a result his poetry develops a distinct prufrockian overtone:

This is not what I meant at all.
That is not it, at all.

The sexual experience does not bring in a sense of fulfillment and intimacy; instead it arouses dissatisfaction leading to a feeling of separateness and monotony. Anisur Rehman comments: "The protagonist is not allowed a free play of passion owing to his desire to remain pure and chaste. Like Prufrock, he fails to affirm to anything. In the poetic apprehension of Nissim Ezekiel, we mark three obvious stages of observance, indulgence and
experience which also explains his pattern of life. Sin is a nagging threat and the woman is associated with it quite naturally".60

In any case, there is a definite relationship between the poet's search for love and his creative process i.e. poetry. It is as D.H. Lawrence says that when we negate primal passion, "It is the death of all spontaneous, creative life,..."61 In his poem, 'Poet, Lover, Bird watcher', his search for love and the word is presented in the person of a bird watcher. "Both love and words visit the poet without his knowledge. There is no pursuit, only waiting. In fact, the waiting itself becomes a form of pursuit, a strategy. It is only then that the revelation occurs".62 There is always the nagging feeling of having swerved from the path of the truth. There is even a conscious effort to come back to the right path but alas, the pull proves to be too strong for him. "In the grip of his own sexual drives, these good intentions collapse. Temperance recedes, giving up the ghost. He is incapable now of inserting the cautious, modifying clauses. He submits and unearths riches".63

The poet comes out as a virile man, given to enjoying the pleasures of flesh. He is insatiable. His guilty conscience may at times make him cloak it all in a religious or spiritual garb, yet the disguise comes off soon enough
and he stands before us, a man naked to the soul, happily admitting his weaknesses. Then there is this modern trend of writing freely about our 'primal impulses'. "The sex of which Adam and Eve became conscious derived from the very God who bade them be not conscious of it...." It makes the modern artists, writers feel freer and become one with the spirit of the times. A similar trend can easily be discerned in the contemporary Hindi and the Indian regional literature, where the writer even invents situations for such interludes. Most of these writers belong to small towns and have inherited middle class sensibilities and yet they manage to rise above their narrow, cultural legacies. It makes them feel at par with writers from metropolitans, especially when they adopt this attitude consciously to make it a way of their life. The Indian writer writing in English can also not escape the similar tendency because of his having been open to much wider influences. The new generation of artists is impatient of all masks and would like to enjoy flesh as flesh. But Nissim Ezekiel is not writing like this because everybody else is writing like that. He is really torn between the two impulses. Poetry for him, is only an attempt to resolve the tension and to bring about a balance. His rather explicit and vivid love poetry almost brings to mind the 'Khajuraho' sculpture and Vatsyayana's Kama Sutra. No wonder Ezekiel looks up to Sanskrit poets for inspiration to remove his inhibitions.
The Sanskrit poets
How freely they mention
breasts and buttocks.
They are my poetic ancestors.
Why am I so inhibited?

III

The poet Nissim Ezekiel gives up the struggle and goes back to being an ordinary man, with all his shortcomings and insecurities. Although he is aware of his sinful self, he is too human to do anything about it. According to Anisur Rehman, "Even this failure is significant as the poet sometimes, as in 'Nocturne', takes to an outward journey not so much to fulfill the vessel of his desire but to realize the nature of evil at the least. Even though the immediate result leads nowhere, the journey continues:

And all to win
The sour taste of sin?
Even so
Let it go, let it go".66

The poet realizes that the redemption is to be sought not outside life but in it. Even with his acute awareness of sin he does not take an escapist's stance, and he returns:

To save myself,
from what the city had made of me, I returned,
As intended, to the city I had known.67

The city he returns to is not, Biblical. The poet makes a compromise for the sake of life and actual living. He has
come to realise the difference between dreams and reality.
In the poem 'Urban' the poet writes:

The hills are always faraway.  

And the reality,

The river which he claims he loves
Is dry, and all the winds be dead.

According to Chetan Kernani, "In terms of gestalt psychology, he explores the wide chasm between his geographical and perceptual environment". It is as if there is a confrontation between two sets of values; the chaos in the urban mind and the imagined quietude. The dream-like, opalescent images of nature lie deep in the consciousness of the poet, whereas the other world is close at hand and also 'the city' like a living passion keeps burning and beckoning, keeping the tension in the mind of the poet alive and unresolved. If he spurns the city, he is also half in love with it.

The city and the woman, both contaminate the poet's existence and the purity of his being. It is this element that makes Anisur Rehman comment, "The moral self, the pagan woman and the putrid city are the central metaphors in the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel. Working synergically, they lead towards a realisation of the ultimate vision". Ezekiel does not wear a mask and accepts himself as a defeated and
Returning to his dream, he knew
That everything would be the same.
Constricting as his formal dress.
The pair of his fragmented view.

The poet goes on to explore the difference between

dream and reality, and the wide gulf between what he wants
to be and what he actually is! The artificial life of the
city leaves a certain inexplicable spell on one who cannot
get away from it. Hence, the stilted atmosphere creates
confusion in the mind of the poet. He accepts the reality.
The city no longer dettracts but becomes a major factor of
his absolute commitment to a new way of living. He learns
to face the actuality. Life is not turning away but a
complete participation; quite in the spirit of what we learn
in Gita. So the city becomes his 'Kurukshetra'. In the
poem 'Enterprise', the poet refers to his spiritual journeys
allegorically. In the beginning:

It started as a pilgrimage,
Exalted minds making all
The burdens light.

And in the end:

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,
Home is where we gather grace.
Thus, home, for Nissim Ezekiel, becomes the place to gather grace. And once the poet accepts the fact, it becomes easy for him to make his commitment and he avers: "I have made my commitments now". As a human being, one great need of Ezekiel is to belong and as a poet he derives sustenance from his immediate environment. He realised that one could not do much for oneself or the environment by dissociating from it, so he consciously chose to associate himself with India. Critics affirm that Indianness is a vital element in Ezekiel's poetry. "There is no doubt that Ezekiel loves his country with all its shortcomings, and finds a comforting, homely beauty even in its ugly spots".

The Indian landscape sears my eyes
I have become a part of it...

His Jewish background made him a natural outsider and his poetry expresses, the conscious attempts he made to overcome his alienation. "How to feel it home was the point". He confesses, "I am not a Hindu, and my background makes me a natural outsider: circumstances and decisions relate me to India".

The Indianness of his poetry stems from the poet's search and the need to belong. The specific Indian poetry is both inward and detached. The poet being Jewish in a Hindu culture, is removed from that culture i.e., he is not a
William Walsh comments on the double impulse in Ezekiel which, "On the one hand keeps him at a distance from his environment as he clutches his private history and aspiration and which on the other, by means of free and painful act of will, reconciles him to his environment".  

His peculiar position helps him with his poetry too, "Being a Jew and raised as a secular rationalist by his scientist father made him an outsider to Hindu-Muslim culture: it is his very outsidersness, his marginality, which makes him a representative voice of the urbanised, western-educated India". Another critic, Davinder Mohan comments, "Nissim Ezekiel with his Jewish background in the Indian environment, with the European sensibility of language ends up as a differential observer of Indian scene". 

Despite his Jewishness the poet considers himself an Indian, first and foremost. He has established a definite affinity with Indian culture and philosophy. It is not just for his erotic poetry, that he turns to his Indian ancestors for inspiration but it is as Bruce King maintains, "The sceptical, ironic attitude towards the divine, finds expression in 'Hymns In Darkness' (1974) poems partly derived from the elliptical profundities of the vedic hymns and, formally, from the stanzaic shapes of their English translations. That Ezekiel's Hymn's are in 'darkness'.
suggests their destructive relationship to the Sanskrit Classics".  

Ezekiel could have easily migrated abroad but he felt that he would be an odd man out anywhere else. In contrast stands V.S. Naipaul's, 'An Area of Darkness', (1965). For Naipaul, his fairy tale love for India ended in a nightmare of death, destruction and degradation. In fact, he found nothing redeeming in the Indian scene, an area encompassed in total and absolute darkness. Ezekiel wrote an essay, replying to Naipaul, point by point in 'Naipaul's India And Mine', in which he said: "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 his escape. The 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..." Ezekiel chose not to withdraw from India but to be one with it. His choice of identifying with India seems to have been the right one as it helped to sustain him both as a writer and a human being. Gieve Patel writes, "that his own personal backwardness as a man, and the ostensible backwardness of the country, are one and the same thing. To rescue both now becomes a unitary, twin venture. He writes: "My backward place is where I am"."
Ezekiel's backward place happens to be Bombay. It is a living inferno and life is unbearable yet the poet cannot do without it. He admitted it, in an Interview with Salim Peeradina,

... I don't want to leave even Bombay, for that matter. All my writing comes out of staying here. I am happy to be unhappy here rather than somewhere else. If I stay anywhere else, I will only be unhappy. Here, at least the unhappiness leads to critical perceptions. One can take a positive approach to frustration or a negative one. I certainly take the positive approach. It is more creative.

So, Bombay, an Indian city, is the place where the wandering protagonist of Ezekiel's poetry returns. It is a city which repels the poet, yet he loves it, too, and cannot reject it as he himself belongs to it with mixed reactions of love and hate. He commits himself to Bombay and this helps Ezekiel to overcome his alienation, also it gives him a relief from loneliness as he learns to identify with and even glorify the ordinary man or the man in the street. But he does it at an enormous cost. Gieve Patel writes:

... it compels him to open his eyes outwards, to see heartlessness, brutality, the destruction of human potential. There are now things to lament about that have little to do with
the soul. The lament then becomes an irritating whine as the pressures of post-independence India begin to bludgeon a sensibility that has decided to be open to them. A section of the poetry is irrevocably affected by querulousness against a harsh, unlovable environment.

Ezekiel shows his typical commitment to Bombay from poem to poem and matures in his vision of life in the process. The poet gives a vivid description of an Indian city:

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...

Ezekiel describes for us many a myriad variety of persons, incidents, situations and happenings - thus always throwing light on Indian people, society and culture. Even the very mundane, inane and also the fantastic, fatalistic indifference and resignation is minutely recorded and sharply brought into focus. In 'The Truth About the Floods', which is a found poem, the poet makes a comment on the corruption which has seeped into the Indian social and political system. It also clearly reflects the apathy and the indifference of the people in authority where nobody minds cashing in on the suffering of the poor, helpless
people. There is suspicion and distrust among the people. The poem is full of poignancy and grim irony:

...But the villagers wouldn't talk to me
till I told them I wasn't a government Official.

Ezekiel knows how to relate with the environment and thus succeeds in giving a very authentic picture of the flood hit area. Nagarajan comments that "Poems like these constitute Ezekiel's great success rather than the poems of greater depth of reflection and personal feeling. In the latter the expression tends to become out of step with the essential simplicity of what the poet has to say whereas in the former, the expression entirely fits the content and both interact with each other, as they together fuse into the poem". In 'Entertainment', the poet depicts another aspect of Indian life, bringing alive the gentle pathos of the life of the poor people, putting up a 'Monkey Show' and thus earning their livelihood. It provides them with a very meagre way of living. Everybody seems to be enjoying the show, which is a great fun,

Only the monkeys are sad,
And suddenly the baby begins to cry.

One has to be one with the environment to feel so minutely. In 'Rural Suit', the poet describes his visit to
a village, painting vividly the inhabitants and the landscape. It describes the people who are quite well off, yet do not mind begging, to add to their coffers. They seem to have lost self-respect. It also shows the superstitious nature of the Indian people.

It is a shameless exploitation
Of the people's ignorance.
It is not even as if they need the food:
Most of them are wealthy farmers
From the neighbouring villages
With a taste for hoarding gold.

Still the poet loves his India. Life goes on to flow with its inevitability, with the certainty that -

Nothing changes here: Not even
The cliche that nothing changes here.

Infact, it is the marginality of the poet's situation in the Indian environment which makes him describe life in an almost detached manner. By distancing himself from the persona in the poem, he lends certain intellectual objectivity to his highly evocative descriptions. The poem 'Night of the Scorpion' is a beautiful example of this. It contrasts the sceptic and the rational with the believer and the superstitious clearly. The poet never intrudes and just describes the scene authentically and vividly. He does not make even a single comment yet manages to convey so much about the Indian scene, philosophy, religion, culture and the infinite faith in the destiny, making people surrender
to suffering so resignedly. This acceptance is perhaps the secret of "the peace of understanding on each face". According to Bruce King, "The poem is a new direction, a vision of ordinary reality especially of Indian life, unmediated by cold intellect".

The poet is also critical of Indian hypocrisy which represses unnaturally, the natural impulses, resulting in unnatural expression of those impulses and desires as described by him in 'How The English Lessons Ended'. The poet focusses on the ordinary events of Indian life with different communal groups who regardless of their behaviour (bullied, stole, bragged, broke) "never missed their prayers". The poem 'In India' makes a scathing comment on Indian male hypocrisy and chuvanism:

The wives of India sit apart,
They do not drink,
Of course, they do not kiss.
The men are quite at home
Among the foreign styles
(What fun the flirting is!)  
I myself, decorously,
press a thigh or two in sly innocence.

The poet describes the western influence on Indian culture. The poem nicely brings out the special relationship between the environment and literature and even comments on the secular culture of India. In the poem 'Visitor' once again he takes up the superstitious nature of the Indians besides criticising their habit of wasting time:
His hands were empty, his need:
Only to kill a little time.
Between his good intentions
And my sympathy the cigarette smoking
was more substantial than our talk.

Through his 'Very Indian Poems In Indian English', Ezekiel tried to describe Indian culture and also the Indian attitudes in 'Swadeshi Angrezi'. These poems succeed in creating the characteristic Indian environment. Bruce King writes, "The poems in Indian English (1967-72) are part of his commitment to 'stay where I am' and treat of ordinary life". The poet has not written these poems to make fun of or to satirise a person, society or culture. It is in fact the poet's attempt to reveal the speaker's mind and social context to bring out hypocrisy, pretence, limited opportunities and confusion which prevails the modern Indian mind. It even points out the inability of the people to get out of the rut or look at things with new eyes. This stagnancy remains one big cause of the continuing poverty and backwardness of India. Bruce King writes, "The poems in Indian English can be seen as part of an awareness that confused thought and speech, slogans, and talk of traditions contribute to the unchanging poverty of the masses and their exploitation".

Friendliness and good naturedness too, redeems these poems from becoming cruel caricatures of people who do not really possess the mastery of the language. Ezekiel's
interest in India is as much sensuous as spiritual. The former aspect is easily discernable in his poem, 'On Bellasis Road',

I see her first
As colour only,
Poised against the faded
red of a post-box:
Purple sari, yellow blouse,
green bangles, orange flowers in her hair.

VI

Ezekiel’s world is permeated by friendliness:

I stay with you, close to you
So perhaps the friendly motive absorbs the other two.

Ezekiel never adopts that ‘holier than thou’ attitude, his interest is always friendly, humane, and full of warmth. In the beginning, Ezekiel had aimed at an integration of various parts in his life and personality but he does not succeed as his spiritual concerns do not harmonise well with what is real, actual or practical. He is neither a saint negating sexual pleasure nor a Yogi who is after great truths. He is just an ordinary human being, like you and me, always participating and belonging. A friendly man relating with the humanity at large. Even when he is relating sexually, his motives remain friendly. But when he pays attention to the practical and physical, then too he
fails to derive absolute satisfaction because physical is not enough to feed the mental and the spiritual in the poet. The poet fails to achieve wholeness. Ezekiel is a modern, urban educated poet, who is so full of questions concerning life, asking them with a deep urgency:

The secret locked within the seed becomes my need...

He manages to reach very near the truth yet it eludes him and only remains:

a touch of truth
a ferment in the darkness,
finally a teasing light.

And that is quite enough for the poet. As a human being, the poet seeks freedom. This is what that matters most to him:

That I am free
To be the self in me,
Which is not somebody
Not, at any rate,
The mortal me,
But the eye of the eye
That is trying to see.

He learns to take tensions in his stride and readily adopts reconciliations. His journey of life has taught him the value of compromise and adjustment. He shows his disdain of a man:

Who had wasted half his life, partly in exile from himself
Life has taught him much. It has also taught him that one can not exist in an ivory tower of one's imagination. One has to exist in the midst of the heat and dust and the noise of the modern world. One has to live and make it work, midst the confusion of the mind, limited capabilities, lost opportunities and even the poverty, both of the mind and the soul. And anybody who is able to exist sanely in such a world, has a glory all his own, irrespective of the ordinariness of his life. Ezekiel's poetry gives a message of hope as it exhorts one to dream beyond one's self, showing that Ezekiel is an incorrigible dreamer. In his 'Advice To A Painter', he advises his young student, to go out in the world and grab everything, within reach, success as well as happiness, and never to stop dreaming:

Do not be satisfied with the world
That God created. Create your own.
Be voracious with your eyes and appetites:
The will to see, the passion in the act of love
Or learning lead to brighter prospects
in landscape, still life, nude, abstract,
And also higher prices.

We can safely call Nissim Ezekiel a 'poet of the masses' who has amassed the common wisdom, during the journey of his life which had started as a pilgrimage and even now remains very much a pilgrimage. Life becomes sacred and lovable as the poet comes to accept it himself,
celebrating the routine and the familiar as a poet:

I celebrate the familiar
The routine,
And the unexpected.
Within my peace and poetry,
The world of suffering
Is not explained away,
Though some of it
Has its own validity.
I want my hands
To learn how to heal
Myself and others,
Before I hear my last song.
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