Chapter-VIII:

A.K.Ramanujan and Nissim Ezekiel: A Poetic Comparison

The poetic worlds of A.K.Ramanujan and Nissim Ezekiel are altogether different: While Ramanujan writes about the development of poetic self from the perspectives of an intellectual; Nissim Ezekiel adopts the worldview of a common man. If Ezekiel’s recurrent themes are “love, self search, urban experience, social reality, philosophical meditations, and, indeed, a considerably wide variety of content, Ramanujan’s recurrent themes are only a few but well marked. Among them is his constant effort to come to grips with the problem of belonging or rootedness and its consequent nostalgia, recourse to personal familial past, and a conspicuously strong response to certain Indian situations.”


While the latter treats India from the perspectives of his memories, the former looks at India with a more focus on its contemporary social and political life. Gajendra Kumar notes that, “In the poetic universe of Ramanujan the metaphoric use of experience, inner world of memories and the continuities and the discontinuities with the past continue the crust of his philosophy. Their efforts are not meant for philosophizing and moralizing the things like Ezekiel’s early work, they do not have Daruwalla’s keen insight of virulent world in which fulfillment is destined to tragic failure, they do not have Mahapatra’s metaphysical
meditations on the relationship between the world of creativity and the
world of realizing the self.”
(Kumar, Gajendra. ‘The Poetic Cosmos of A.K.Ramanujan’, Indian
English Literature: A New Perspective. New Delhi: Sarup and Sons,
2001, p. 148)

Both the poets were in touch with each other and enjoyed their poetry.
Ezekiel met Ramanujan in 1956, when he was planning to bring out a
special Tamil-language issue of Quest. Though the issue was never
published Ramanujan visited Bombay and met Ezekiel to discuss the
issue. Molly Daniels, Ramanujan’s wife, had already met Ezekiel on an
earlier visit. Ezekiel published some of Ramanujan’s work in Quest when
he was editor. Ezekiel always cherished his relationship with Ramanujan.
Later he visited Ramanujan at the University of Chicago. Writing about
the poetry of Ramanujan, Ezekiel and Moraes, Bruce King remarks that,
“There are large differences in manner, style, perspective, and opinion
between the three poets. Ezekiel raised a secular Jew, was a product of
the modern world and Bombay. Moraes, raised as a skeptical roman
catholic, was influenced by many years of living in England and other
countries. It is easy to forget he was Indian. A.K. Ramanujan, who was
raised in a family that was both modern and traditional south Indian
Brahmin, carried memories of an older India to America where he lived
for many years.” (King, Bruce. Three Indian Poets. New Delhi: OUP,
2005, p. 10)

In the poetry of Ramanujan, there is a controlled display of emotions. He
doesn’t wish to be an autobiographical poet. The subjective mode in his
poetry is less autobiographical and more as a representative of a people.
M.K. Naik feels that, “It is not ‘emotion recollected in tranquility’, but recollection emotionalized in un-tranquil moments that appears to be driving force behind much of Ramanujan’s poetry.” (Naik, M.K. ‘A.K.Ramanujan and the Search for Roots’, *Dimensions of Indian English Literature*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Limited, 1984. p. 15) But in the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel there is an obvious display of his emotional status. The poetry is more autobiographical and the persona of the poems seems to represent the writer of the poems. Ezekiel is more involved in the social life of India than is Ramanujan. So Ezekiel’s portrayal of India and Indian ethos seem more contemporary and relevant.

Ezekiel’s poetry has fewer references to history of India. He is a poet of contemporary times. Ramanujan’s poetry is full of references and allusions. These references and allusions are cut across Indian history, mythology and folk-lore. There is a high level of inter-textuality in the poetry of Ramanujan. So many times Ramanujan may appear a difficult poet. Bruce King also accepts that Ramanujan is a difficult poet. This may be due to the fact that, “He was also a literary, art, and political critic, someone who was continually engaged in the intellectual and cultural life of the nation. Although Ramanujan’s verse was early recognized by fellow poets as excellent, it has taken time before critical and academic studies could come to terms with his complexities. He is often said to be the best of the Indian English language poets, a great translator from southern Indian languages to English, and an excellent scholar in such fields as linguistics and folklore.” (King, Bruce. *Three Indian Poets*. New Delhi: OUP, 2005, p. x) In the words of Shirish Chindhade, “Their (Ezekiel’s and Ramanujan’s) common Indian
background seems to bind them together as creative minds working contemporarily in the same national traditions, and helping to build up a new, independent poetic tradition in Indo-Anglican literature. The native experience in their poetry is obviously due to these shared conditions and the milieu, despite the clear differences between their religious, linguistic, geographical and familial situations.” (Chindhade, Shirish. *Five Indian English Poets*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2001, p. 62)

Reading the poetry of Ramanujan can be aesthetic pleasure only after multiple readings. He is more an academic poet. On the other hand, Ezekiel is more a popular poet. Ezekiel’s persona appears to “succumb to the pressures of ordinary human compulsions. His urges though qualified by such chosen adjectives as “mad”, “voracious” and “passionate”, appear rather calculated ones for they never touch the revolutionary crescendo. The urges of Ramanujan’s protagonist, it so seems, are so tamed by undefined fears and apprehensions that he hardly ventures to state them in a positive and affirmative manner. His poetry is basically a poetry influenced and informed by post modern aesthetics of subversion. If Ezekiel’s unfinished ego insists on recreating a convenient personal world, Ramanujan’s ego insists on decreating the world.” (Kumar, Akshaya. ‘Human Urges, Existential fears and Evasive Silences: A (Comparative) study of the Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel, A.K.Ramanujan and Jayant Mahapatra’, *Indian Writing in English Volume VI*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 1999. p.59)

Perhaps that is the reason why Srinivasa Iyengar complains that the poets like Ramanujan “settle for ‘small-scale’, the satiric, the ironic, the anti-
romantic, the anti-spiritual, or opt for the Freudian fascination for the libido, the diseased preoccupation with the putrid gutter of the dark unconscious, the fatefully irresistible impulse to foul one’s nest be it one’s country, one’s village with its temples, tanks and river, or one’s home and family and household gods, or the irrational urge to tarnish, diminish, destroy, rather than to heighten, greaten and create.” (Iyengar, Srinivasa K.R. “Indian Poetry in English: Yesterday-Today-Tomorrow”. The Literary Criterion. XVII, 3, 1983, p. 16)

There is an obvious difference in the attitudes of the personas of the poetry of these two poets. Gajendra Kumar feels that the persona in the poetry of Ramanujan is passive, while that of Ezekiel is more active. That is because “Ramanujan is more a poet of fears than a poet of ambitions and urges. The poet-persona is so haunted by countless indefinite fears and apprehensions that invariably he retracts from active social life. By way of comparison the protagonist of Ezekiel’s poetry is far more positive and assertive about his human identity than him. At least Ezekiel’s protagonist has the smug satisfaction of being safe and secure in his own private world.” (Kumar, Akshaya. ‘Human Urges, Existential fears and Evasive Silences: A (Comparative) study of the Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel, A.K.Ramanujan and Jayant Mahapatra’, Indian Writing in English Volume VI. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 1999. p.61)

Ramanujan’s attack on contemporary Indian social-religious life is less severe than that of Ezekiel. Ezekiel in the poem ‘Guru’ is full of anger against the lavishness of so-called gurus:
The saint is still a faithless friend,
Obstinate in argument,
Ungrateful for favors done,
Hard with servants and the poor,
Discourteous to disciples, especially men,
Condensing, even rude
To visitors (except the foreigners)
And over scrupulous in checking
The accounts of the *ashram*.
He is also rather fat.

Witnessing the spectacle
We no longer smile.
If saints are like this,
What hope is there then for us? (*CP*, p. 192)

Compare the satire of Ramanujan in the poem ‘The Guru’:

Forgive the weasel his tooth
Forgive the tiger his claw

But do not forgive the woman
Her malice or the man his envy

Said the guru

Give the dog his bone, the parrot
His seed, the pet snake his mouse
But do not give woman her freedom
Nor man his midday meal till he begs

Said the guru (CP, p.251)

Bhagat Nayak also observes that, “In his poem ‘Guru’ he (Ramanujan) does not sharpen the edges of his irony like Ezekiel to criticize a guru. Rather he ideologies a guru in the Indian classical sense. As such he is supposed to be a wise man a guide for others and a general lover of all without any discrimination of gender or race, richness or poor.” (Nayak, Bhagat. ‘The Axis of Hindu Consciousness in A.K.Ramanujan’s Poetry’, *Indian English Literature Volume IV*. ed. Basavaraj Naikar. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2003, p. 17)

Both the poets are constantly referring to the self in their poetry. In the poem ‘Subconscious’ Ezekiel talks about his divided self:

Consciously, I ask my sub-conscious
To supply me with a poem.
It sends up this harsh message:
You have not turned to me so long,
I shall not speak now. (CP, p. 271)

Ramanujan’s persona is also worried at the fact that in this modern world it is easy to resemble everybody but oneself:

I resemble everyone
But myself, and sometimes see
In shop-windows,
    Despite the well known laws
Of optics,
The portrait of a stranger,
Date unknown,
Often signed in a corner
By my father. (CP, p.23)

Sivaramakrishna very aptly brings out the varying sources of inspiration in these poets when he stated in his article in The Times of India: “Ezekiel is essentially the post of the community deriving his strength from the myriad social contexts in which one is placed, with an implicit recognition of the corresponding masks one has to assume. This accounts not only for his amazing thematic variety...but also for his constant preference of the concretion of an object for the abstraction of an idea.... if Ezekiel is the artist as citizen, Ramanujan’s mode stems from history, myth and symbol”. (As quoted by Bharvani, Shakuntala. Nissim Ezekiel. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, p. 24)

In the poetry of Ezekiel, the sickness of modern times is pervading. The hollowness of existence can be seen:

    Should we take to meditation,
    Transcendental, any other?
    Should we take to Zen?
    We cannot find our roots here,
    Don’t know where to go, sir,
Don’t know what to do, sir,
Need a Guru, need a God.
All of us are sick, sir. (CP, p. 243)

The persona of Ramanujan’s poetry is also ‘looking for the centre’ of his existence:

Looking for the centre these days
Is like looking for the centre
For Missing Children

Which used to be here, but, now has moved
Downtown to a new building, southwest
Of the Loop, (CP, p. 184)

Nissim Ezekiel is obsessed with solutions to his problems. So there are explicit statements:

All I want now
Is the recognition
Of dilemma
And the quickest means
Of resolving it
Within my limits. (CP, p. 150)

Whereas in the poetry of Ramanujan there seems a patience of a poet:

Which usually
Changes slowly,
Changes sometimes
During a single conversation: (CP, p.107)

That’s why “If Ezekiel’s persona chooses the practical path of material humanism, Ramanujan’s persona adopts the strategy of reverse romanticism to cope up with the pressures of living.” (Kumar, Akshaya. ‘Human Urges, Existential fears and Evasive Silences: A (Comparative) study of the Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel, A.K.Ramanujan and Jayant Mahapatra’, Indian Writing in English Volume VI. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 1999. p.65)

In the poetry of Ezekiel, the city life is described with full attention. The callousness of Bombay people is found in the poetry of Ezekiel:

The city pressed upon me; shops, cinemas and Business houses Spoke in unambiguous accents. Only the people said Nothing. They bought the evening papers, hurried to a tube Station, Ceasing to exist. (CP, p. 35)

The persona in the poetry of Ramanujan also roams around in the city

Not knowing who I am or what I want I roam the city walk into movies Hurtle down a roller coaster
Till mirrors in a mirror shop
Break me up into how many I was
Show me in profile and fragment

Whose head I have whose nose
How tall how old my hair
How black my shoes how red

Like clocks in the clock shop
Quartz digital grandfather and Mickey Mouse each showing a different

Time all at once. (CP, p.216)

There is a grim acceptance of the cause and effect factors in the world view of Ezekiel’s poetry:

Corrupted by the world I must infect the world
With my corruption. This double horror holds me
Like a nightmare from which I cannot wake, denounced
Only by myself, to others harmless, hero,
Sage, poet, conversationalist, connoisseur
Of coffee, guide to modern Indian Art
Or Greek antiquities. (CP, p. 8)

Whereas in the poetry of Ramanujan there is a memory recoiling memory:
The large tooth in my of the large tooth left jaw
Aches: it’s mother again
Complaining of the large tooth
In her left jaw
The week before she died (CP, p.259)

The persona of Ezekiel’s poetry is craving for human touch in the life:

Give me touch of men and give me smell of
Fornication, pregnancy and spices.
But spare me words as cold as print, insidious
Words, dressed in evening clothes for drawing rooms. (CP, p. 9)

And again,

Come, religion, comfort me.
Your lifeless moralists prescribe your laws,
And make me see
My secret flaws. (CP, p.103)

Ramanujan also expresses this lust for human touch but in a more refined way in the poem ‘Looking for a Cousin on a Swing’:

Now she looks for the swing
In cities with fifteen suburbs
And tries to be innocent
About it. (CP, p.19)

And again,

But only the passing touch
Of people whom I once touched
In passing when they let me
Pass. Perhaps it will not pass,
For in that touch I think I stumbled
On a pulse, (CP, p.18)

The Ezekiel persona is aware of the flaws deep inside the self. The persona is frightened of examining the real self:

Myself examined frightens me.
It is no accident I am what I am.
I saw the image being formed,
I saw it carnal in the arms of love…
I have long watched myself
Remotely doing what I had to do,
At times ashamed but always
Rationalizing all I do.
I have heard the endless silent dialogue
Between the self – protective self
And the self naked. (CP, p.106)

The persona in the poetry of Ramanujan is also examining the self with acute awareness and cries that
I will pass from his mind
As image from a mirror.

Then why was I so clever? (CP, p.44)

Similar tone can be found in the following Ezekiel lines:

That I must wait and train myself
To recognize the real thing
And in the verse and friends I make
To have no truck with what is false. (CP, p.59)

Ezekiel can describe the repetitious nature of our life in a jocular way.
The tongue in cheek style of Ezekiel makes the gravest of themes lighter:

When the politician boasted
How he had made two hundred speeches,
‘No, Tom,’ his wife declared,
‘You made the same speech two hundred times.’
So are we all
Making the same speech over and over again.
And now I hear the first birds
Spasmodic and repetitive-
I know I shall repeat myself. (CP, p. 89)

Ramanujan deals with the similar themes in a more serious style:
Or was it me
Moulting, shedding
Vestiges,
Old investments,
Rushing forever
Towards a perfect
Coupling
With naked nothing
In a world
Without places? (CP, p.166)

Ezekiel is a secular poet in the true sense of the word. He wants the fruits of his actions tasted here and now only:

No, lord,
Not the fruit of action
Is my motive.
But do you really mind
Half a bite or it? (CP, p. 212)

The persona of the poetry of Ramanujan is slightly tilted towards finding the balance of mind:

I’ve learned to watch lovers without envy
As I’d watch in a bazaar lens
Houseflies rub legs or kiss. I look at wounds calmly.
(CP, p.79)
Although there are cases of dissatisfaction with Indian way of life the persona in the poetry of Ezekiel says that

I have made my commitments now.
This is one: to stay where I am,
As others choose to give themselves
In some remote and backward place.
My background place is where I am. (CP, p.181)

There is no such obvious and explicit ambition on the part of Ramanujan to be one with Indian scene as in the poetry of Ezekiel:

Confiscate my passport, Lord,
I don’t want to go abroad;
Let me find my song
Where I belong. (CP, p. 213)

Ezekiel uses an ironic mode through which he depicts the process of change and victimization in a comic mode in a poem such as ‘The Professor’:

How many issues you have? Three?
That is good. These are days of family planning.
I am not against. We have to change with times.
Whole world is changing. In India also
We are keeping up. Our progress is progressing.
Old values are going, new values are coming.
Everything is happening with leaps and bounds.
I am going out rarely, now and then
Only, this is price of old age
But my health is O.K. Usual aches and pains.
No diabetes, no blood pressure, no heart attack.
This is because of sound habits in youth.
How is your health keeping?
Nicely? I am happy for that.
This year I am sixty-nine
And hope to score century.
You were so thin, like stick,
Now you are man of weight and consequence.
That is good joke.
If you are coming again this side by chance,
Visit please my humble residence also.
I am living just on opposite house’s backside.

(\textit{CP}, p.238-9)

On the other hand, there is a serious tone prevalent in the poetry of Ramanujan:

\begin{quote}
Animals bring us tranquility. Cats
Sleep through a war. Dogs ignore your sister’s
Cancer, forgive betrays and rations,
While all morning a man cannot bear his own
Betrayal after sleeping with two women. (\textit{CP}, p.217)
\end{quote}

The Ezekiel persona is more tilted towards finding the balance in the life in a human way:
I do not want the yogi’s concentration,
I do not want the perfect charity
Of saints nor the tyrant’s endless power.
I want a human balance humanly
Acquired, fruitful in the common hour. (CP, p.40)

Living in the modern secular world, Ramanujan is tired even of praying:

Lord of answers,
Cure us at once
Of prayers. (CP, p.117)

Bruce King observes that, “The final prayer is cure us at once/of prayers. Prayers to lord Murugan are like Ezekiel’s Hymns in Darkness, prayers of a modern, secular Indian who can only petition for the calmness of mind, not ask for anything. Both know such peace is impossible, but it remains an ideal, which for Ramanujan can only be found in particular experiences when the mind no longer questions reality or seeks larger answers.” (King, Bruce. Three Indian Poets. New Delhi: OUP, 2005, p. 91) A reading of the “prayer poems of Ramanujan and Ezekiel makes it evident that through the specificities of the prayer-motifs representations of cultural identities get validated and authenticated.” (Mohanty, Niranjan. ‘Poetics of Prayer: A Study in the Poetry of A.K.Ramanujan and Nissim Ezekiel’, Indian English Literature Volume IV. Ed. Basavaraj Naikar. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2003. p. 36) Ezekiel “mixes comedy with high seriousness- as does Ramanujan in “Prayers to Lord Murugan”. One is tempted to argue that when the poet

Only a secular poet like Ezekiel could advice:

Do not be satisfied with the world
That God created. Create your own. (*CP*, p.205)

The regeneration is found in the poetry of Ramanujan in a different tone:

Like my grandson
I look up

Unborn
At myself (*CP*, p.170)

The persona of Ezekiel could declare that

Only Shiva, meditating,
Could be immovable
In her moving presence.
As for me, I hardly meditate at all. (*CP*, p.216)

The same urge and nakedness is found in the poetry of Ramanujan in a more controlled and implicit way:
Everything seems naked these days.
Trees, the women who seem to come right through
Nylon sarees,
Redbrick buildings with only collars of cement,
Paperback books sold without jackets:
Even qualities
Walk nude like dogs and cows. (CP, p.42)

Akshaya Kumar observes that, “If Ezekiel’s persona seeks a balance between the immediate and the remote, Ramanujan’s persona relinquishes the remote almost totally in favor of the immediate.”

‘India’ remains for both the poet a close subject of fascination. Ezekiel is more explicit about his Indianness in his poetry:

This is the place
Where I was born. I
Know it
Well. It is home,
Which I recognize at last
As a kind of hell
To be made of tolerable.
Let the fevers come,
The patterns break
And form again
For me and for the place.
I say to it and to myself:
Not to be dead or dying
Is a cause for celebration. (*CP*, p.155)

Whereas Ramanujan is more inclined to look at India as the foreigners are habituated to looking at it, albeit critically:

As we enter the dark,
Someone says from behind,

‘You are Hindoo, aren’t you?
You must have second sight’. (*CP*, p.191)

Both Ramanujan and Ezekiel describe the routine domestic life of the married couples in their poetry. Ezekiel writes

Then, absences and quarrels, indifference
Sucking like a leech upon the flesh,
Crude acceptance of the need for one another,
Tasteless encounters in the dark, daily
Companionship with neither love nor hate
(*CP*, p.29)

And again,
Shout at me, woman!
Pull me up for this and that.
You’re right and I’m 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? (CP, p.242)

Ramanujan expresses at the sadness of married life examining it from a
broader point of view:

Really what keeps us apart
At the end of years is unshared
Childhood. (CP, p.65)

Ezekiel portrays the mentality and attitudes of Indian people very
beautifully in his poetry. In this sense he is more Indian poet than
Ramanujan:

Now small crowd is collecting
And shopman is much bigger than me,
And I am not caring too much
For small defect in well-known brand soap.
So I’m saying
Alright OK Alright OK
This time I will take
But not next time. (*CP*, p.269)

And see the following description of a husband to his wife:

> Said the Son  
> To his angry bride,  
> ‘if you quarrel with my Mother,  
> You quarrel with me.’ (*CP*, p.292)

Ezekiel even portrays the Indian belief system in his poetry:

> All day I waited, as befits  
> The folk belief that following  
> The crow a visitor would come, (*CP*, p.133)

On the other hand, Ramanujan doesn’t describe the day to day Indian scenes. He rather describes Chicago:

> In Chicago it blows  
> Hot and cold. Trees  
> Play fast and loose.  
> Invisible crabs  
> Scuttle in the air.  
> Small flies sit  
> On aspirin and booze.  
> Enemies have guns.  
> Friends have doubts
Wives have lawyers. (*CP*, p.103)

Ramanujan talks of average Indian conscience in the following lines:

Having no clear conscience,
He looks for one in the morning news.

Assam then, Punjab now, finds him guilty
Of an early breakfast of two whole
Poached eggs. (*CP*, p.179)

Mr. Lall rightly comments that, “Moraes, Ramanujan, and Ezekiel provide evidence for the argument that indo-Anglican poetry is “Indian in sensibility and content, and English in language.” Ramanujan’s “the Hindoo: he doesn’t hurt a fly or a spider either” in its content and form further explains the coming together of two traditions in the indo-Anglican poet.” (Lall, Emmanuel Narendra. *The Poetry of Encounter*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Limited, 1983, p. 97)

Average Indian male mentality is beautifully portrayed by Ezekiel in the following lines:

Our motives were concealed but clear,
Not coffee but the Cuban dancer took us there,
The naked Cuban dancer.
On the dot she came and shook her breasts
All over us and dropped
The thin transparent skirt she wore.
Was it not this for which we came?
The noise, the smoke, the smell of flesh we relished
Secretly and wanted more,
We drank our coffee swiftly
When the Cuban dancer left the floor,
The naked Cuban dancer. (CP, p.112)

A good comparison can be found in ‘Ecology’ by Ramanujan and ‘Night of a Scorpion’ by Ezekiel. Both the poems display the sacrificing nature of Indian mother. In ‘Ecology’, the mother suffers the migraines for the sake of mother nature:

But mother…
Would not let us cut down
A flowering tree

Almost as old as her, seeded,
She said, by a passing bird’s
Providential droppings
To give her gods and her daughters
And daughters’ daughters basketfuls
Of annual flower

And for one line of cousins
A dower of migraines in season. (CP, p.125)

In ‘Night of a Scorpion’, the mother feels happy that:
My mother only said

Thank God the scorpion picked on me
And spared my children. (CP, p.130)

In the words of Shirish Chindhade, “in “Ecology” the same old mother “Of Mothers, among other Things” is still remembered as a suffering figure. The red champaks near the house used to give her blinding migraines and yet she would not let anyone cut the trees for they gave flowers for her gods, daughters and grand daughters too. The blinding migraine did not embitter her but enlarged her sympathies and affections. Like the mother in Ezekiel’s “Night of the Scorpion” she, too, suffered patiently and wished others happiness.” (Chindhade, Shirish. *Five Indian English Poets*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2001, p. 81-2)