

Influences and Individualities: Exploring Nissim Ezekiel's Poetic World

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Abstract

Nissim Ezekiel, recognized as the pioneering figure of Indian poetry in English, was influenced by a great many poets of the western literary tradition, subsequently influencing numerous poets of his succeeding generations. Having brought modernity into the literary scene of the Indian subcontinent, he made an immense contribution to English writing, initiating a new poetic trend in this region. Before him, Indian poetry had been charged with high romantic and mystic ideals, but he first began to present everyday life in poetry, abandoning the past trend. Well informed of the western tradition of the twentieth-century poetry, Ezekiel brought something new to Indian poetry in English. In his formative years, several poetic voices of the west and their works made an impact on his work, but like great poets of the world, he was able to set a new trend, create an individual style, and become influential to later generations of poets in India and beyond. This paper, therefore, explores how western tradition of modern and romantic poetry contributed to the shaping of Ezekiel's poetic world. The paper also argues that Ezekiel's arrival in the realm of Indian poetry in English gives birth to a new era of poetic tradition in India in particular and the whole subcontinent in general.

Keywords: Nissim Ezekiel, Modernity, Indian Poetry in English, Influence, Individuality

Nissim Ezekiel's poetic journey that covered more than five decades was enriched with various kinds of experiences. To put it slightly differently, the poet achieved poetic signifiers through a continuous struggle during his whole life. On the way to becoming a poet of distinctive stature, Ezekiel received inspiration from many of his predecessors. Influence is an integral part in every writer and poet's life, since no writer or poet is identified as an isolated being detached from their previous generations or trends of literature. In the same way, later generations of writers and poets are influenced by their ancestors. In his prominent work titled *The Anxiety of Influence*, Harold Bloom argues, "Without Keats's reading of Shakespeare, Milton, and Wordsworth, we could not have Keats's odes and sonnets and his two *Hyperions*. Without Tennyson's reading of Keats, we would have almost no Tennyson" (xxiii). It is a well-articulated argument in favor of influence and inspiration – the critic refers to some great poets of English literature who, he believes, influenced one another. Great authors obviously influence the later generations of writers who



in turn influence the following generations. It is an undeniable truth that literary influence generates anxiety among writers, but great figures of literature never stop influencing others.

Ezekiel, himself a great figure in the history of Indian poetry in English, influenced his later generations of poets. He was influenced by the Western master poets, and he, likewise, influenced other younger generations of poets. Among the poets was Gieve Patel whom Ezekiel inspired and helped with the publication of individual poems or collections of poems. At first, Ezekiel had hostile comments about Patel's poems, but as he continued his efforts to improve, about a year later, "it was Nissim who published Gieve's first collection of poems" (Rao, *The Authorized Biography* 165). Many emerging poets of the time went to him, gave him their poems, sought comments and suggestions for improvement, but he did not discourage them outright; rather, he showed them how they could improve their work, how they could practice the craft, and how seriously and deeply they should take art. He was, no doubt, a great mentor of the young and emerging poets who had serious and sincere efforts to continue writing.

Ezekiel, the most important modern Indian poet, accepted literature produced through inspiration and influence. And though influence does not downgrade literature, imitation does. Ezekiel states in an interview with Saleem Peeradina, "A good poet allows himself to be influenced, assimilates the influence, resists the influence. For a good poet, influence does not mean imitation, it can even mean going in the opposite direction" ("with Saleem Peeradina" 59). Ezekiel not only considers influence to be part of the literary practice but also thinks that it casts a positive impact on literature. Influenced by other authors, many poets sometimes produce wonderful literary pieces, but it is important to note how they resonate with or resist the influence. The poet emphasizes on abandoning imitation – here lies the significance of resistance to influence. In one of his notable poems titled "The Great," Ezekiel reveals how great people, writers or poets, influence others:

The great can never know how much I love them.
Every day they live and die in me but still
They cannot make me great. I am alone.

The great are greater in me as I love
With their words and do the things they say
Ought to be done for love, but still I am
Exposed to life and know it quite alone.

The great are strong upon the printed page (lines 1-8)

The great in the poem refers to the people who pave the way for later generations of poets and writers. In Ezekiel's poetic career, many great people, including writers, poets, and artists of various countries and cultures, were inspirational – they had made him, as the poet believes, what he later became. The poet has a deep respect,

as the lines suggest, for the great figures of the literary world, but he is humble in saying that he cannot be great in the same way as them.

Ezekiel believed that the great literary figures had been highly influential in his poetic career. In the poem "Confession," he writes, "The great provide a pattern for our lives" (23). It is obvious how respectful Ezekiel was to his previous generations of poets who had enriched the literary world through their outstanding works. The great people create some patterns that pave the way for the writes of the later generations who continue developing the patterns. Ezekiel, himself a great poet, created patterns for his contemporary poets as well as the poets from later generations in India. Graziano Kratli asserts how Ezekiel was influential on another Indian well-known poet, Dom Moraes:

Among Indian writers, the one who was most influential on Moraes's early development as a poet was Nissim Ezekiel. ... In his autobiography, Moraes recalls how their meetings "always followed an identical pattern: we had coffee in a seafront café, when I showed him my new work, and then walked along the front, and he would discuss it." Ezekiel also expanded Moraes's literary horizons by recommending poets such as Rimbaud, and critical essays by Eliot, Pound and Leavis, and by warning him against Indian critics and Indian praise, the latter a consequence of the "appalling standards" represented by the former. More significantly, perhaps, he instilled in his mentee the idea of poetry as a craft rather than a gift, and (quoting Yeats) of beauty as the result of labor. (179)

Moraes owes a debt of poetic craft to Ezekiel as he refers to his inspiration and direct learning from the great poet in his autobiography. Moraes met Ezekiel frequently, sat with him for hours and days, discussed poetry, and learned the craft – he indeed spent years under Ezekiel's tutelage and learned invaluable lessons on poetry from him. Ezekiel recommended Moraes to read other great poets from Europe who were also influential on Ezekiel himself.

Although Ezekiel was influenced by European and American poets and culture, he did not detract from his own culture and society, because his motherland remained a major influence on his long and illustrious poetic career. Generally, Indian poets writing in English are influenced by the West, but Indian poetry in English never "lost its native colour, taste, opinions, morals and intellect. Thus Indian sensibility in Indian English poetry completes a full round" (Srivastava). The same is true about Ezekiel as his poetry never circumvents Indian reality. Modelling himself on the Western tradition, he set a new tradition of Indian poetry in English, picking up elements scattered here and there in a large country like India. Gillian Tindall rightly observes:

So his work and his life were informed by several sets of tensions, not just between East and West, but between the sense of separation from India and

the sense of belonging, between Judaism and unbelief, between thinking of himself as a Westernised Indian intellectual (a distinct category in his generation) and knowing himself to be someone at once more exotic, more isolated and still more obscure. (22-23)

Ezekiel's life, to a great extent, was full of tension, as his large body of work shows ambivalence about background, belonging, belief, and so forth. Among the people of the subcontinent, there exists a complex trend of acceptance or rejection of the Western culture. Ezekiel, who had a close affinity with Eastern and Western cultures and literatures, attempted to assimilate both in his work. But a strong sense of ambivalence on his relationship or adherence – such as East and West or belonging to India and somewhere else – impacted his poetry. After a sojourn in a metropolis of the West, he returned to India and began to form complex ties with the city to which he belonged and in which he was born, felt an ambivalent relationship with work, environment, neighborhood, culture, and so forth, and also thought that he was, to some degree, an outsider. His poems exhibit his deep commitment to and involvement in the busy metropolis that he considered his own.

Ezekiel, no doubt, is a poet of the city, because city life and city reality pervade a substantial measure of his work, and city life is one of the most powerful influences on the poet. Out of a vast experience about city and city people, he portrayed a variety of images of city life in his poetry. Mohammad Shafiqul Islam observes, "Many of Ezekiel's poems on city refer to Mumbai which is most of the time compared to Baudelaire's Paris and Eliot's London. He often presents Mumbai with its beauty and ugliness, sonority and cacophony in his poetry" (45). Like Eliot and Baudelaire, Ezekiel wrote on city life, particularly on his own city Bombay. In one of his defining poems entitled "A Morning Walk," he depicts the squalid pictures of city life, as the following lines reflect:

Barbaric city sick with slums,
Deprived of seasons, blessed with rains,
Its hawkers, beggars, iron-lunged,
Processions led by frantic drums,
A million purgatorial lanes,
And child-like masses, many-tongued,
Whose wages are in words and crumbs. (15-21)

It is the real picture of the city, Bombay, where the poet grew up and lived a major part of his life. Many modern cities of the world have almost the same picture, and Bombay reality inspired the poet to write a number of poems on city reality. The streets he walked along, the parks he visited, the marketplaces he went to as well as the people he met are important elements of his poetry. In "A Morning Walk," he shows that the city is filled with slums, garbage, and lower class people including beggars, hawkers, and criminals, which is why he calls the city "barbaric." Nature

no more synchronizes with the seasons to which people have been accustomed to for a long time.

At the end of the poem “A Morning Walk,” the poet writes, “The city wakes, where fame is cheap, / And he belongs, an active fool” (41-42). A certain group of people live in luxury whereas a majority of the city-dwellers struggle hard to live hand to mouth. But the city remains a place of attraction where people hailing from various corners come in search of fortune and fame, which is, however, cheap. R. Raj Rao observes that “Nissim’s continuing interest in Bombay, and his poetic evocations of it in the manner of Yeats and Eliot, eventually gave rise to a school of poetry that is sometimes referred to as the Bombay school. It is made up of poets who, like him, were born or bred in the city, and regard it as home, and who, of course, write only or mainly in English” (*The Authorized Biography* 37). Like Yeats and Eliot, Ezekiel also wrote poetry describing the city and commenting on city life. For Ezekiel, it is Bombay that he always kept in mind – life in the city is presented as authentically as he observed. The city of Bombay is more known to the world because of many amazing poets, besides Ezekiel, born and brought up here, who are part of the Bombay school of poetry.

During childhood, adolescence, and even youth, Ezekiel was highly inspired by his mother, the person who played a part in the formation of his literary career. Born to a family having a decent cultural and literary background, he read a wide range of books and developed a literary mindset. His parents, especially his mother, inculcated in him the pleasure of reading books, and it grew in him as a habit from childhood. He does not forget how he learnt from his mother as he responds to a query in an interview, “But the real source of my literary sensibility was my mother. I always knew it came straight from her to me. She reacted intuitively to my writing. With the rest of the family it was conscious encouragement; with her it was a primal assurance” (Ezekiel, “with Imtiaz and Anil Dharker” 44). The encouragement that he had received from his mother worked as a foundation for his career. Her inspiration and feedback to his writing had been instrumental in the shaping of what Ezekiel later became, and which he acknowledges

In his life-long concern about identity, Ezekiel explored the essences of different religions through his poetry. Judaism, the religion to which Ezekiel’s family and his ancestors belonged, influenced his work even though he did not take an interest in traditional religions. The followers of Judaism in India have a long history of their migration to India, their decision to stay in the country, and struggle as a minority. Most Jews of the past generations left India, and now very few of them live here, but it was not possible for him to deny his connection to Judaism, as the following remarks suggest:

Ezekiel belonged to Mumbai’s tiny, Marathi-speaking Bene Israel Jewish community, which never experienced anti-semitism. They were descended from oil-pressers who sailed from Galilee around 150 BC, and, shipwrecked

off the Indian subcontinent, settled, intermarried and forgot their Hebrew, yet maintained the Sabbath. There were 20,000 Bene Israel in India 60 years ago; now, only 5,000 remain. Most of Ezekiel's relatives left for Israel; he served as a volunteer at an American-Jewish charity in Bombay. (Joffe)

Ezekiel's previous generations had been oil-pressers who migrated to India a long time ago. Shipwrecked, they had settled in India, the country that they started accepting as their own, but over time, most of them went back to Israel. Unlike others, Ezekiel's parents remained in India, and started living a decent life in the country. In the poem "Background, Casually," the poet refers to his religious background: "I went to Roman Catholic school, / A mugging Jew among the wolves" (6-7). Growing up in post-Independence India, Ezekiel was influenced by the contemporary events happening in India as well as around the world, but he did not care about who belonged to which religion, because he was "raised in a secular milieu" (Joffe). He grew up in such an environment, in such a family that no one could instill the seed of narrow-mindedness about religion in him. His parents taught him to be secular, and his work bears testimony to his stance on secularism.

Ezekiel read a great number of classic, romantic, and modern writers and poets of world literature, and was an enthusiast of, to be more specific, the nineteenth-century English Romantic poetry. Romantic poets remained, therefore, a great influence in his early poetic career as he was also considered a poet with romantic attributes. The poet, in his acknowledgement of the Romantic poets' influence on his poetic career, says, "I modelled myself on the poets that are normally read in India in school textbooks – Shelley, Byron, Keats and others" (Ezekiel, "with Saleem Peeradina" 53). Romantic elements prevail in the poems that he wrote in the early days of his poetic career. Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley, and Byron were among his favorite poets during his college and university life, and Keats made a huge impact on his work. Ezekiel also treats love, one of the dominant themes of romantic poetry, in some of his poems, including "And God Revealed":

Yet we with wiser love can master love
And with the news we bring of other worlds
Enlarge the world of love with love of worlds.

As lover, Love, you know that I am lost
In continents of thought, and every urge
To see, know, hear, touch and praise the earth
Is concentrated on your lips and thighs –
The strange mysterious way of earthly love. (5-12)

The poet addresses love in his poems, but his treatment is distinctive. Love, the poet confirms, can win the complex wars taking place between nations or between two people, and the world of love expands if people extend their love for the world. In "Love Sonnet," he describes a love scene: "You and I wait for words; / Our love

has formed like dew on summer nights” (5-6). The speaker of the poem, the lover, expresses his feelings to his beloved that they will make their time special while together. Their love is as special as the dew in summer nights. At the end of the poem, the poet writes, “We look inquiringly at road and sky, / A certain happiness would be – to die” (15-16). Here the poet shows how gracefully a lover and his beloved spend their time together – their emotions and feelings are so strong that they are ready to die together. He treats love in a variety of ways in his poems, and “Love Sonnet” certainly celebrates romantic love. In another poem titled “For Satish Gujral,” Ezekiel also celebrates love and imagination:

It is the task
of love
and imagination
to hear what can't be heard
when everybody speaks. (19-23)

The lines bear witness to Ezekiel's identity as a romantic poet, but the poet did not feel comfortable with the identity as he criticized the traditional notions of Romanticism in Indian poetry. But the romantic elements in his poetry are distinct as the above lines suggest – here the task of love and imagination clearly marks a difference. Imagination is one of the most important elements of romantic poetry, whereas love is the dominant theme. Ezekiel is also found preoccupied with the thought of love at the end of his poetic career, as he writes in “Sub-conscious”: “You do not love me any more. / Unloved, I cannot stay alive” (12-13). This poem is among the ones that Ezekiel wrote in the 1980s when the poet was at a mature stage of his poetic career. Although the context of the poem is different, the lines may imply the kind of love that the poet always sought.

Apart from having a fondness for romantic elements in poetry, Ezekiel was a modern voice emerging from the postcolonial reality in India. As he had the mold of a modern poet, he was tense about losing Indianization and adopting Westernization. Many of his poems, including “A Time to Change,” reveal the frustration of the poet for the loss of faith and human relationship in modern India. As the poet writes, “We who leave the house in April, Lord, / How shall we return?” (1-2). The poet wants to show that the new generation turns back on values, finding themselves alienated in the Indian society. To have respect for heritage, rich tradition, and resourceful culture is what makes a person a proud citizen who should also look forward to the changes that help the nation advance. Aversion to changes that are pivotal in reforming a nation in line with global perspectives makes people backward-looking. On the other hand, people having global consciousness and mindset adjust with all the developments of human beings on earth, and a modern person believes in multiculturalism, multilingualism, and multiple identities.

With his progress as a poet, Ezekiel began to resonate with the modern poets of the West such as T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, W. B. Yeats, and

W. H. Auden. Among the modernists, Eliot remains the most inspiring for Ezekiel. Thus, he is sometimes called “The T. S. Eliot of modern Indian English poetry, ... a highly important figure in the field of Indian English literature” (Samal 176). Eliot’s depiction of the human condition after the world wars is the most poignant in the history of modern literature in general and modern poetry in particular. His projection of reality which is dominated by complexity, confusion, alienation, fragmentation, and despair bear the marks, many critics believe, of modernism in European literature, which later influenced the writers and the poets worldwide. Amit Chaudhuri notes, “He is, of course, also echoing T. S. Eliot’s adaptation of Ecclesiastes 3 for the purposes of expressing ...” (209). Many critics have found Eliot’s stirrings of modernism in Ezekiel’s work as well as some themes. Chaudhuri, too, offers a Biblical reference, Ecclesiastes 3, that resonates with Ezekiel’s concerns – the key point of Ecclesiastes 3 is that there is a time for everything.

Eliot’s depiction of human psychology, society, degeneration, and city life influenced Ezekiel who also dealt with the same entities from the realist point of view. The experiences that he had from his encounters with other people in society are the subject matter of his poetry. K D Verma observes, “Much of the modern poetry ... subscribes to the view that the nature of the man is finite and that its principal concern is the world of experience, the image of life as it is, the fallen world like that of Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, or the usurous [sic] world of Pound’s *The Cantos*” (229). Everyday experience of human beings is the prime concern of the modern poets – they show how people lead their life amid so many challenges and crises existing in modern societies. Images of the fallen world – the world that seems to fall apart every day – are what Eliot and Pound have presented in their work. We find similarities between Ezekiel and European modernist poets as they deal with city life. In “Commitment,” Ezekiel writes:

Truly, I am betrayed, consorting with
 The world contracts my love, vast organised
 Futilities suck the marrow from my bones
 And put a fever there for cash and fame.
 Huge posters dwarf my thoughts, I am reduced
 To appetites and godlessness, ... (1-6)

The poem clearly reveals that the poet is not happy about what is happening around him – he feels that the city has deceived him in various ways. His association with the modern city life has caused a damage to his sensitivities and sensibilities. He wants to believe that the organized disorder, chaos, degeneration, and dereliction have taken away the life force, and the people seem to run after money and fame. We find an Eliotesque tone in this poem – *The Waste Land* also features the decadence of London life, and Eliot shows people’s indifference to and negligence of ethics and morality as the root of degeneration.

Eliot presents the post-war reality of Europe in his magnum opus *The Waste Land*

(1922), whereas Ezekiel offers Indian reality of the later twentieth century. Although Ezekiel read Eliot widely, he did not follow his complexity of poetic language; rather, he developed his own style which is deceptively lucid but powerful in content. The affectations of a character and her friends and family are shown in a poem titled "Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T. S." Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" portrays, likewise, some pretentious women who have markedly different cultures and lifestyles but are similar in their artificiality. Eliot's famous lines, "In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo" (13-14), depict the women. Ezekiel essentially intends to present Indian English through "Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T. S." but Pushpa's family members and the women in Eliot's poem are found to be leading a pretentious lifestyle. In the poem, Pushpa is presented thus: "Coming back to Miss Pushpa / she is most popular lady / with men also and ladies also" (26-28). To wish bon voyage to Miss Pushpa, her family and friends arrange a party in which the guests speak a slew of words to praise her. The poet intends to show the artificial representation of a class of people as Eliot shows the artificiality of women in the poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." Some lines in the poem titled "Counsel" anthologized in *Latter-Day Psalms* give the same meaning of Eliot's "Datta, dayadhvam, damyata" in *The Waste Land*:

Express your gratitude
 By giving what you have to give.
 You may get nothing in return.
 And bear your restlessness with grace. ("Counsel" 31-34)

Eliot advises modern people to give, sympathize, and control in order to bring back rain and peace to the barren land. Ezekiel, too, suggests that a person has to be grateful, sympathetic, and restrained in order to build a peaceful society and live a peaceful life – the tone of *The Waste Land* is echoed in the above lines.

Ezekiel was also influenced by Eliot's impersonality theory that shaped the realm of modern poetry. The theory suggests, "What happens is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" (296). Eliot puts emphasis on depersonalization of the poet who is at work to produce poetry, highlighting the objective representation of particulars. The final outcome, that is to say the work itself, is more valuable than the poet's emotion, personal belief, or choice. It is important for poets to surrender and sacrifice the self to produce a valuable work of literature. Thieme's observation about Ezekiel's position on the impersonality is, therefore, worth noting, "[Ezekiel's] comments on the poetic process emphasize impersonality and the need to surrender one's sense of identity to the dictates of the particular poem being written at the time" (xxxv). Ezekiel's poetic process highlights impersonalization and surrender of the self to what Eliot considers valuable – the final product is poetry. Poems should not retain the identity of the poet, his personality, or his personal belief.

On Ezekiel's major influences, Rao claims that "there were two role-models available to him when he decided to become a poet, and that he had to choose between them, sometimes settling for a combination of both. The two were, of course, W. H. Auden and Rilke" (*The Authorized Biography* 111). Among the major influences from the West, Auden and Rilke also cast an impact on Ezekiel's work. Both Auden and Rilke had their distinctive ways of writing that he attempted to follow, but what attracted him most is the patience that they demonstrated in revising and waiting for appropriate words to come, as Ezekiel claims, "The best poets wait for words" ("Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher" 3). As far as themes are concerned, both of them dealt with the reality of city life, whereas Ezekiel also wrote a wide range of poems focusing on the decadent state of urbanity. Ezekiel's poems portray urban images that affect the minds of modern people, and the images recurrently appear in his poems.

It is widely known that Ezekiel was an anti-traditionalist who introduced a new trend of Indian poetry in English, breaking a long tradition of romantic, mystic, philosophic, spiritual, and religious poetry in India where Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, Toru Dutta, and Sarojini Naidu had been the key figures. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra observes that "Henry Derozio, Toru Dutt, Aurobindo Ghose, and Sarojini Naidu were courageous and perhaps charming men and women, but not those with whom you could today do business. The poets of the post-Independence period had therefore to make their pacts elsewhere" (2). Mehrotra goes back to the past tradition of Indian poetry, referring to some poets of the times who, he thinks, do not fit in the contemporary poetic scene in India. According to Mehrotra, the poets writing in English in post-Independence India faced a different reality, so they had to "make their pacts" with other forms, styles, and languages for their poetry. Mehrotra indicates that the post-Independence poets, including Ezekiel, promised to bring a change into the poetry scene in India, and that was possible through the lens of western modernism.

Ezekiel's attack on the traditional mystic and romantic trends of Indian poetry came out of his strong sense of modernity and individuality. About Aurobindo's work, Ezekiel comments, "In reality, Sri Aurobindo's literary ideas are commonplaces blown up like multicoloured balloons and let loose without restraint" (qtd. in Narayan 274). This comment reflects Ezekiel's harsh criticism of Aurobindo's poetry that flows uncontrollably having no relation to reality. Ezekiel's poetry, on the other hand, speaks of city life, beautiful Indian landscapes, the everyday world of human beings, and the crises of city life. But the poet did not forget to recognize how his predecessors, especially Sanskrit poets, also influenced him:

How freely they mention
breasts and buttocks.
They are my poetic ancestors.
Why am I so inhibited? ("Passion Poems III" 1-4)

The poet refers to the Sanskrit poets whom he considered bold and great, who inspired him to write passion poems. The Sanskrit poets had not refrained from writing what they would feel – they had spontaneously depicted female bodies in their poems, but Ezekiel hints in the poem that something deterred his contemporaries from drawing sensual images in their work. To him, exposing the inner impulse in poetry needs courage and forte that the Sanskrit poets had possessed, but his contemporaries hesitated to address them in poetry.

Some of Ezekiel's poems directly resonate, as critics have found, with the poems of Western modernists. As Rao quotes King, "... the purgatorial image of 'A Morning Walk' and the reference to the poet's own middle-age has echoes of Baudelaire, Blake, Eliot, and especially Dante. It suggests to him that the poems in *The Unfinished Man* may be seen as 'a mini-*Divine Comedy*, moving from Hell through Purgatory to a vision of Heaven or Salvation'" ("Ezekiel's Bombay Poems" 134). Indeed, the poets Baudelaire, Blake, Eliot, and Dante influenced the making of what Ezekiel has come to be known for: Indian poetry in English. Even a particular poem like "A Morning Walk" shows how Ezekiel employs the features of Western modernist poetry in his work. The poet writes, "Driven from his bed by troubled sleep / In which he dreamt of being lost / Upon a hill too high for him" ("A Morning Walk" 1-3). The fourth collection of poems titled *The Unfinished Man* (1960), one of his defining poetry collections, is described as having the notions of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. King's observation is justified as the poems in the collection offer a journey of a man from a hell to a heaven through purgation.

After a certain period of his fascination with the modernism of the 1950s, when Auden, Empson, Graves, Yeats, and Frost were the leading poets of the West, Ezekiel broke away from the Western conventions, and during this time, the poet discovered his own real voice. Wiseman gives an example by referring to the poem "In Retrospect":

In this poem, the rhythm moves with the mind and feelings, the line-breaks and the syntax play with and against each other, the voice is personal, dramatic and strong, sensitive to nuances of feeling and attitude and to wide tonal colouring. Nowhere do we find the arbitrary literariness which characterises Ezekiel's earlier work. The short lines, the sinewy free verse, the flexibility of syntax and tone are here perfectly appropriate, assuming into themselves without strain the impulse of the experience and allowing it to find its own shape, its own potency. (251)

Here Wiseman refers to the style and technique that Ezekiel developed as his own in the later stage of his poetic career. "In Retrospect," both stylistically and thematically an important poem, exhibits Ezekiel's mature poetic craft. There is a mark of the poet's genuine feeling in the poem that shows the flow of language, and the poetic elements are well employed in each line and stanza of the poem. The form perfectly resonates with the content, helping the speaker's voice find an appropriate shape in

the words. Here are some lines from the poem:

The spring was late
 but I was impatient.
 I used too many words,
 and now I know:
 there is a point
 in being obscure
 about the luminous,
 the pure musical
 phases of living
 which ought to be
 delicately improvised
 and left alone. (19-30)

During this time, the poet seems to have realized that it was necessary for him to shift to a new mode of writing, inspired by “the pure musical / phases of living.” In the poem, he also hints that he could not maintain precision in terms of words, phrases, or syntax in his poetry in the past, so he needed a change, which is why he sought improvisation in his craft. These lines bear witness to his mastery over phrases, words, and rhythm as well as control over line breaks. Wiseman further notes that Ezekiel “learns, with much difficulty, to abandon styles inherited from others and to create his own style for his own purposes” (251). This observation by Wiseman attests to Ezekiel’s position as a great poet having individual traits. It also reveals that he had been fond of the styles employed by Western poets for many years, but from now, he intended to speak with his own voice, developing his own style. Here is the justification that Ezekiel gradually progressed with exceptional poetic potential and demonstrated his individuality in poetry.

There are ample references to Ezekiel’s turning away from the influences of the Western poets, especially the major poets of modernism. The poet himself mentioned it several times in different interviews and essays. In such an essay published in *Times India*, the poet revealed both his association with and dissociation from the Western poets:

The early influence on me of Pound and Eliot concerned poetry as an art, as well as on criticism of poetry, of society past and present, of modes of thinking and feeling etc. But I never accepted the doctrines which Pound and Eliot, separately defined for themselves and their readers. I sorted them out for myself, modified them to suit my temperament, and so on. It would be misleading and unfair to say that Pound and Eliot influenced me only on the ‘technique side’. Their influence was far reaching, even comprehensive, but I was never dominated by it. I used it and went back to it from time to time, noting how my growth changed my attitudes to their outstanding creative as well as critical writing. (qtd. in Mishra and Kumar)

It is already established that Eliot, Pound, and some other Western modernists influenced Ezekiel, and he understood poetry as an art from them in his preliminary stage as a poet. Their works shaped the mode of his thinking and feeling, but he was not a blind imitator of the Western poets – he did not continue with their doctrines of poetry. He observed their style, technique, and mode, reread their works but created something of his own, something new, especially in his later career. Their influences were widespread, but they could not dominate over his creativity. His creative faculty began to shine more luminously since the time he demonstrated his individuality.

With his absolute awareness about Indian reality, Ezekiel created diction, style, and technique of poetry on his own – he does not match any other poet from the past, especially when he has a secure place in Indian poetry in English. The Indian poets writing in English before him did not contribute to the development of modern trends in poetry, but Ezekiel made all the difference by rejecting the past. In an interview, he claims that “The immediate environment is one of my concerns” (“with Imtiaz and Anil Dharker” 48). Contemporary society, its problems, environment, and the crises of individuals were what Ezekiel was concerned about – he widely addressed the present ambience of Indian society in his work. Here is also proof of his individuality – although he was inspired by the great American modernist poet Williams, the reflection of the inspiration in his work is minimum. Ezekiel wrote some poems following his style, but he composed a poem titled “For William Carlos Williams” in which the poet declares that he does not want to write like him, but he likes the mode of his writing. Here are some lines from the poem:

I do not want
to write
poetry like yours
but still I
love
the way you do it. (“For William Carlos Williams” 1-6)

Fascinated by Williams’s style and mode, Ezekiel, of course, had much liking for his poetry, but he did not want to imitate the American poet, because imitation is what he disliked and avoided. The poem is written in such a way that it has become close to the style of Williams’s poetry, as there is a mark of precision, finesse, and direct treatment of particulars in the poem.

In the later stage of his poetic career, Ezekiel showed

a greater command over his art, a deeper maturity in thought, a more delicate sense of craft, a higher sensitive awareness of words, and their poetical content, a more skillful tightness in organization and a deeper inward awareness of the organic form of a poem than in the past. (Shahane 253)

It is indeed an appropriate observation that Ezekiel gradually improved his craft,

achieved an exceptional command over techniques and styles of poetry, and was able to earn a secure position as the front-ranking Indian poet writing in English. Over time, he became able to demonstrate a significant progress, with individual qualities, in his work – from style to content, diction to syntax, and from control over line-breaks to organization, he left an imprint of a positive change, progress, and uniqueness. This kind of transformation took place because many things worked as a force for him. In this regard, Wiseman observes:

To change a style, a voice, a tone in a major and dramatic way does not come easily to a poet, implying, as it does, far more than a surface tinkering with words and lines. It necessitates new ways of looking at the world, new and strange rhythms of thought and feeling, and, often, new kinds of subject matter which insist upon their own particular shapes and sounds. (250)

The above observation by Wiseman is definitely a general statement concerning all poets and writers who strive to seek their own self and find their own voice in writing. Change of time, location, social structure, values, and so forth provide the poets and writers with new materials and themes for writing. Ezekiel went through the same phases of time, gathered varied experiences, and was able to establish himself as an outstanding poet with individual qualities. Regarding Ezekiel's progress, K R Srinivasa Iyengar argues, "In his later poetry ... there is revealed a more careful craftsmanship, a more marked restraint and a colder, a more conscious intellectuality, than the first two volumes" (657). Unlike his early collections of poetry, the latter ones – *The Unfinished Man*, *The Exact Name*, *Hymns in Darkness* – bear the marks of improvement, maturity, perfection, intellectuality, wisdom, restraint, precision, and finesse in style, technique, diction, and presentation. The poems show that the poet had his control over language and handled the themes more competently.

Ezekiel's poems have crisp descriptive details of Indian landscapes, with which the poet deeply feels an affinity as he writes, "The Indian landscape sears my eyes. / I have become part of it" ("Background, Casually" 66-67). The poet has used the word "sear," which, in fact, expresses his deep love for the sights and sounds of the country – he considers himself to be an integral part of India. From *A Time to Change*, his first collection of poems, to *Latter-Day Psalms*, the last collection, the poet exhibits his mastery over content and form. Apart from the details of objects from the surroundings, the poet exposes imperfections and incongruities existing in society with precise and powerful poetic language. In many of his poems, India is shown as having the lush abundance of topography, and the poet presents the bounty of the country rather than complaining much against what his land lacks in comparison with other places with which he is well familiar. India, its culture, landscape, diversity, and its rich tradition, therefore, are what have shaped Ezekiel's poetic world. Above all, the poet has been profoundly influenced by the postcolonial reality of the country.

Note

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