

CHAPTER - II

EZEKIEL AND THE HUMAN CONDITION

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Nissim Ezekiel occupies a prominent place among the post-Independence Indian English poets. He is widely acknowledged as India's most reputed English language poet who not only taught others how to write poetry in English but also irrigated the landscape of post-Independence Indian English poetry with a new sensibility. The pain, the anguish, the dilemmas of being alive in the twentieth century with all the burden of the past and its traditional beliefs and orthodoxies, the ironies and the affirmations of modern life, the quest for roots and their discovery - in brief, the vast panorama of the human condition finds a befitting expression in Ezekiel's poetry. That is why poetry, to him, is precisely a means to discover truth:

A poem is an episode, completed
In an hour or two, but poetry
Is something more. It is the why
The how, the what, the flow
From which a poem comes.¹

Thus, Ezekiel ponders in the beginning of his creative path and prays for those times which are inspiring and full of avidity for creation:

Whatever the enigma,
The passion of the blood,
Grant me the metaphor,
To make it human good.²

Ezekiel keeps an eye on human good even while combining the passion of the blood. He always dives deep into new areas of life in order to perceive the inner core of reality. In his poem 'For William Carlos Williams' he says:

Something comes
Through and through
I hear the music of it
I hear the meaning too.
I feel the flesh
Of the poem
Firm
And the bone hard.³

In his famous poem 'Background, Casually', Ezekiel remarks, "The London seasons passed me by", and his poetry is replete with such personal utterances. To him the man who suffers and the mind which creates are one and the same. And it is precisely because of this that he "feels the flesh of the poem".

It is not for nothing that Ezekiel's poetry has elicited considerable critical response in recent years, especially after the Sahitya Akademi Award and the Padma Shri were conferred on him in 1983 and 1988 respectively. And one of the reasons for such a focus on his work might be related to the fact that he considers himself a "good native" with the firm commitment,

I cannot leave the island
I was born here and belong⁴

Ezekiel's poems evince great commitment and confession. His deep relationship with India is obvious when he says: "I am not a Hindu, and my background makes me a natural outsider; circumstances and decisions relate me to India".⁵ These two statements point to a conscious decision on Ezekiel's part to speak from within India. Therefore, Chetan Karnani's critical study of Ezekiel's work⁶ is in some ways a tribute to the above fact. Karnani says, "Nissim Ezekiel occupies a position of considerable importance in post-Independence Indian English literature". The same can be said of a special issue on Nissim Ezekiel in 1976 brought out by Michigan State University (Journal of South Asian Literature). An examination of the criticism available on Ezekiel points to a recognition among the critics that in him they have an articulate and authentic Indian English poet. In his autobiographical poem, 'Background, Casually' Ezekiel declares

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I have made my commitments now.
This is one: to say where I am,
As others choose to give themselves.
In some remote and backward place
My backward place is where I am.⁷

This commitment to place and time makes Ezekiel one of the major poets of our country who takes pride in singing about India - its cultural, social, artistic and political milieu.

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He pursues India in all his works and his aim "to do something for India", both as a poet and dramatist, is admirable.

Nissim Ezekiel, during his stay in England (1948-52), acquainted himself thoroughly with different poetic trends. Critics associate his works with the works of T.S. Eliot and Auden although Ezekiel himself acknowledges that at different periods he was influenced by Rilke, Yeats and Pound. The title 'The Unfinished Man', is a borrowing from W.B. Yeats. Similarly his well-known poem, "Enterprise" bears distinct echoes of Eliot's The Waste Land and 'Journey of the Magi'. The last line of the poem "Home is where we have to earn our grace" is reminiscent of The Four Quartets. However, Ezekiel succeeds in discovering his own voice, shunning imitation and lack of individuality. In an interview to Suresh Kohli, Ezekiel states; "A clear influence is no proof of a poem's merit. Quite the contrary I was not influenced by Yeats after The Unfinished Man, nor by Eliot and Pound after Sixty Poems.... All this talk about influences may be of some value only when I write really good poetry during the next ten years or so, which I certainly hope to do".⁸ Ezekiel, in fact, did write good poetry in The Exact Name and also in Hymns in Darkness. It is quite natural, therefore, that Ezekiel combines in

himself various traditions; the English poetic traditions, mainly in the sphere of form; problems of Indian literature; the assimilation of modern poetry and the "existential immersion in the life of cod-analytical disgust".⁹

Most of the critics so far have tried to understand Ezekiel in the light of the poet's personal and variegated chronology but an objective assessment of the rich human aspect of his poetry has generally gone unnoticed. The researchers so far have examined how well Ezekiel has Indianized English in his works, how Indian his sensibility is, how Indian his style, themes, setting, language, attitude, etc. are, besides perceptive studies of the technique, irony and certain strains in his poetry. This study aims at a refreshingly original appraisal of Nissim Ezekiel in terms of his thematic concerns in his poetic corpus. It seeks to make an incisive analysis of some of the representative and major poems of Ezekiel in all the eight volumes of poems, 'A Time to Change' (1952), Sixty Poems (1953), The Third (1959), The Unfinished Man (1960), The Exact Name (1965), Hymns in Darkness (1976), and Latter-Day Psalms (1982), together with Collected Poems 1952-88 (1989) in order to take an authentic and comprehensive view of life and human issues in his poetry.

Dr. M.K. Naik holds him as the "first of the 'new' poets" and "one of the most quotable poets of his generation".⁹ Dr. Dwivedi rightly calls him "the barometer of modern India's literary atmosphere".¹⁰ Of late, Bruce King maintains that Ezekiel "emerged as the leader"¹¹ of the group of poets attempting to create a modern English poetry in India. He further observes, "whereas previously Indian English verse was a hobby, something done in spare moments, Ezekiel made it central to his life. Others wrote poems, he wrote poetry".¹² Christopher Wiseman¹³ makes an in-depth study of Ezekiel's craft. He talks about rhyme, metre and stanza pattern. He examines some of Ezekiel's important poems and points out his change of style also. This article is very useful to study the craftsmanship of Ezekiel. Indernath Kher, too, in his outstanding essay on Ezekiel¹⁴ analyses two important metaphors in his poetry. They are "pilgrimage", the metaphor of life and the movement towards its spiritual meaning, and "home" the metaphor of the self. Kher analyses Ezekiel's poems and opines that the poet in his progress through pilgrimage gets "released from worldly things" and apprehends his true identity or being. In 'Poetry Reading' Ezekiel says "In sin / And song he spelt out what they meant" and Kher rightly concludes that "the poet's sin constitutes action which brings him close to the

awareness of his being and his song constitutes poetry which brings us the reverberating 'message from another shore' ". This shore is the abyss of the human heart, which contains the aesthetic vision of Nissim Ezekiel. Chetan Karnani¹⁷ attempts to study the writings of Ezekiel and makes certain interesting observations. In analysing Ezekiel's poems, Karnani makes a poem the unit of discourse and deals with volume after volume in separate chapters. He sums up his views on the achievement of Ezekiel in the last chapter. The monograph lacks one thing, that is, the growth and development of the poet has not been perceived in the proper perspective. Hence Karnani fails to make an integral approach to Ezekiel's poetry. In his perceptive essay entitled 'Interior Cadences : The Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel'¹⁸, J. Birje Patil showers praise on Ezekiel when he asserts, "Ezekiel's poetry can be viewed as reincarnation of English poetry incorporating aspects of his own country's intellectual traditions". He further asserts, "Ezekiel's poetry evolves from English but it constitutes a revolt against the incipient romanticism and rapid narcissism which had for long made it impossible for Indian poetry in English to be a criticism of life." Ezekiel is a good craftsman and a good poet too. But to say that his poetry is "reincarnation of English poetry" and "a criticism of life"

is to misread him. Nothing on earth can make Ezekiel an English poet nor is his poetry "a criticism of life" in the sense Matthew Arnold used the term. Nevertheless Ezekiel made Indian poetry in English respectable and trained the whole generation of poets how to write poetry in English effectively. In that respect he is a great pioneer and deserves our praise. Birje Patil analyses the different volumes of Ezekiel's poems and compares some of his passages with Eliot. Although the echoes of Eliot could be heard in his poetry, Ezekiel has his distinct voice and originality. Thus, Ezekiel's contribution to the modern Indian English poetry has been unanimously and duly acknowledged.

However, none of the researches so far has, most unfortunately, sought to examine and discern the rich human ethos of Ezekiel's poetic themes. Thus, the examination of his poems from one or the other perspective has always encompassed some and missed the other aspects, especially the human aspect, resulting in fragmented and lopsided judgments. This gap in perception stems primarily from the fact that Ezekiel's poems so far have been scattered here and there, giving readers and critics little opportunity of viewing them as the product of an original and inquiring mind consistent in the belief that there are no easy answers to the questions of life; that each individual must seek his

own anew, every time on every issue. The second obvious reason seems to be the critics' preoccupation with single objectives on the thematic level. For example, Rajeev Taranath and Meena Belliappa hold him as a poet of metropolis¹⁹ Mr. Lall as a poet of woman.¹⁸ Mr.M.K. Naik has noted some similarities²¹ between Ezekiel and Ted Hughes on account of a number of bird and animal poems, etc. Some of the critics have made only a passing survey of Ezekiel's major themes throughout his poetic volumes. The publication of his Collected Poems 1952-1988²⁰ has, indeed, provided me an opportunity to have a unified approach to his poetry.

Ezekiel reflects and comments on the contemporary human condition with a complex sense of commitment to it. His own prosaic and poetic statements definitely suggest that right from the beginning his aim has been to present a unified vision of contemporary Indian life.

His justification of the inclusion of his unpublished poems in Sixty Poems (1953), on the plea that it provides him a sense of continuity, is significant. Despite the technical and thematic bankruptcy of these poems, he includes them. His poetic statement in the same volume further adds force to his prosaic statement. Ezekiel's poetry evinces his search for a deeper meaning in our very existence. It is not for nothing that in an interview with

Dr. Frank Birbal Singh (York University, Ontario, Canada, 1986) Ezekiel said, ".... I would prefer to claim that nine times out of ten my being human is more important than anything else in the whole world." How far is Ezekiel's poetry a testimony to his statement? This study attempts to find an answer to this question.

This study aims at an incisive and in-depth analysis of Ezekiel's poems in terms of their thematic concerns. The images of woman, city and the moral self are explored to locate the heart of Ezekiel's world views and convictions. Working synergically, they lead towards a realisation of the ultimate vision and testify how Ezekiel has become an authentic voice of both the contemporary and the human situation.

Ezekiel believes that poetry is crucial to an understanding of ourselves and the "deepest truths". This belief in poetry is central to his thinking and practice as a poet. He rejects the search for "pure poetry" since, in such cases, "the human ethos of poetry is sacrificed to mere method". The art of poetry is purified at the expense of its wide significance as total communication". Thus, for Ezekiel, the ends of poetry are "meaning, knowledge and truth", with knowledge at the centre of the trinity. It is the source of strength for the other two. Ezekiel holds

that very few poets or critics of literature have attempted defending poetry as a mode of knowledge. His essay 'Poetry as Knowledge' is a seminal one, both in terms of understanding Ezekiel's practice as a poet and as a uniquely compelling defence of poetry. He uses an Upanishadic yardstick in the process of his defence to knock some worth^{is}~~ness~~ off their stands. Poetry is not what they say it is, not "knowledge of a certain mood", as C. Day Lewis believes, for that is no knowledge at all; not an advanced guard for scientific knowledge, as the poet Charles Madge believes, since that is a purely egotistical claim that cannot be proved; and not pseudo-statements as opposed to the "true" statements of science as I.A. Richards believes since Ezekiel rests his entire faith and practice on the "truth" of poetry. He takes on T.S. Eliot for his remark that "neither Shakespeare nor Dante did any real thinking", and attacks the pretensions behind the remark that only critics, presumably, can do some real thinking on passages of major poetry which lack real thought.

Ezekiel's approach to poetry is pragmatic. And he is well aware that poetry and philosophy are two distinct modes of knowledge, often opposed to one another, and too much philosophy can injure the poet. Ezekiel clearly knows how much is enough for him. He rejects that "clarity of sight"

which the language of philosophy brings for "the mundane language of the senses", the area in which his poetry flourishes.

He sometimes goes to great lengths to say "Out with philosophy". But it should not be misconstrued that by rejecting philosophy Ezekiel rejects clear thinking. In one of his essays he says, "If an idea can be made clear it should be". What he does say is that poets think very differently from the way philosophers do. He agrees with Valery that every true poet is capable of reasoning and abstract thought, except that "the nature and quality of the poet's abstract thought and philosophy is in the whole poetry". And poetry, for Ezekiel, is a supremely important mode of knowledge or it is worth nothing at all. He chucks out whatever interferes with the writing of his poetry. He agrees with Shelley that "a poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth". And quoting Wallace Stevens, Ezekiel believes that the role of poetry is "of the utmost seriousness. It is, for one thing, a spiritual role". Ezekiel is sharply aware of the aspects apart from the spiritual that allow poetry its role of utmost seriousness in human affairs. The present thesis is an attempt to locate the human issues in Ezekiel's poetry which are central to his practice as a poet. Perhaps the secret

of the peculiarity of Ezekiel's poetry lies in a certain synthesis of contradictory and at times incompatible principles. His aesthetic position is similar to it, and his vision of the world is aptly described as an attempt to restrict himself to wearing "a Cezanne around his neck as he rides improbably through the discordant world that he has not yet reconciled: this is his declaration that assimilation will be achieved in the new style; that a focus will be put on life without the rejection or alteration of any part".²¹

What accounts for Ezekiel's development as a poet of the human condition is the response to his experience and its execution in his poetry. The publication of Ezekiel's first book of poems A Time to Change (1952) brought him into limelight and the themes which he has endeared since then are the themes of love and human relationship, life in the city, solitude, necessary prayer and some of the later themes are, parody of Indian colloquial English idiom, the search for 'self', philosophy, a shift towards morality and the search after "reality". But underneath lies a theme which runs through the whole poetic corpus of Ezekiel, that is, an idea about incomplete, unfinished man. The poet longs for the perfection of human personality and hence life

is viewed as a quest for wholeness, for integration in his poetry.

Ezekiel has variously emphasized the humanitarian value of literature. The poet according to him, should be "authentically a creator and not merely a cultural imitator".²² That is why he prays for those times which are inspiring and full of avidity for creation: "Whatever the enigma,/The passion of the blood,/Grant me the metaphor,/To make it human good."

Ezekiel takes a realistic and human view even of love and sex and covers various moods and situations in his treatment of man-woman relationship. Love is of vital importance to him both as man and poet:

And let my leaf be green with love,
And let me love".
('Lamentation', Sixty Poems)

Like love the call of passion is also for the poet, an integral ingredient of the nature of homosapiens :

"the anger of loins,
shapes the human face,"
and
No moral law can fill the void
Deaf and blind to all is appetite.
('Declaration' The Third)

Ezekiel's genuine concern for the welfare of the people suffering from various kinds of ills and injustice is well expressed in such poems as 'Night of the Scorpion' and 'The Truth about the Floods'. In 'Night of the Scorpion' the

poet identifies himself with the simple-minded superstitious village youth whose mother was stung by a scorpion on a rainy night. But even in this superstition-ridden world of meagre human existence, Ezekiel perceives a beautiful humanism guiding the poor peasants' lives. This humanism is articulated when the mother, after the poison in her blood had "lost its sting", says:

Thank God, the scorpion picked on me
And spared my children.

And when the poet reports on the hunger and misery of flood-affected people in a certain village in Orissa, he tells the truth:

All the houses had collapsed
Many were washed away
The men, women and children were silent
They gazed at the sky
The poet
heard the children
wail with hunger,

and he found that an "atmosphere of despair/pervaded the village". It is this concern of the poet for the pervasive despair on the humandscape or what he calls "the sense of reality" that has escaped the critical attention so far. In his last hymn in darkness Ezekiel says:

Belief will not save you,
nor unbelief
All you have
is the sense of reality
unfathomable
as it yields the secrets
slowly
one
by
one

In reading Ezekiel's poems one discerns a keen and analytical mind trying to explore the roots of human existence. For example, his poem 'Enterprise' shows how the enterprise which was started as a pilgrimage ultimately filled a sense of loss and deprivation in the group members. Ezekiel says, "Some were broken, some merely bent". The concluding stanza throws light on the whole event:

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 have to earn our grace.

This is the tragedy of modern humanity where every enterprise ends in futility. The Vedic man moved from darkness to light because his declared motto was Tamso Ma Jyotirgamaya. Hence his enterprise was meaningful. But the modern man is simply a misfit for noble missions. Like prufrock he measures out his life with coffee-spoons. "Ignoring what the thunder meant", refers to the thunder of the Brhadkaranyaka Upanishad - Da Da Da, meaning thereby Datta, Dayadhvam and Damayatta. The group of the 'Enterprise' ignores the call of thunder and consequently some are broken, some merely bent. The poet concludes, "Home is where we have to earn our grace". Thus, like a Frost poem, an Ezekiel poem begins in delight and ends in wisdom. The delight is in taking up the enterprise, in

taking up the action. Without action, human beings cannot live. The poem can be meaningfully related to Lord Krishna's conception of Karma Yoga which expects us to remain active and to submit ourselves to law and duty. Man must do the right action, for action is superior to inaction. Man is born alone. He lives alone and dies alone. A straggling crowd cannot achieve anything. It is aimless and purposeless. This is the message of the poem.

Ezekiel's poetry emanates from life and that is why his poetry patterns itself around life's ordure. He is sharply aware of the poverty, squalor and superstition that motivates the poor man's thoughts, while sex an essential part of life does not occupy sole predominance. Sexuality is treated by him as part of the human condition.

Ezekiel has been in multiple role - social critic, deflator of cant, an unabashed apologist for the highest standards in art and culture. Reacting quickly to what he views as situations of gross political or social injustice, he has tilted at both sacred cows and windmills, the self-confessed "active pool" of one of his poems. This reactive, activist aspect of the poet is the reflection of a more comprehensive view of human issues and life, making penetrating analyses. In an article entitled "The Writer as Historical Witness : Culture, Colonialism and Indo-English

Poetry'²³ Ezekiel maintains that "the bulk of Indo-English poetry is necessarily remote from historical witnessing". He is of the opinion that, "whenever there is vitality in poetry there will be variety as well, and much of it will seem, superficially, to be only self-regarding until we see it in a full human perspective. In that perspective, the personal-private has a curious tendency to become everybody's experience".

Ezekiel's poetry provides fascinating insights into his world-view and convictions. His major concerns are: Poetry and its many functions including poetry as a mode of knowledge; the practice of poetry and the temptations to philosophize, the need to question received wisdom especially when it is received through religious texts; the need for certitude and its necessary rejection when it stands in the way of "human" growth; and the value of constant self-enquiry through the use of words.

Ezekiel has a cast of mind that sometimes turns on its own propositions, questions its deepest conclusions so that, at the end of the argument the reader is left wondering which way he faces. In other words, Ezekiel goes to the limit of his argument and then tests it. He questions his own argument at various pauses and sometimes at its end, "can what I am saying be true?" He uses words forcefully to

convey the force of his argument and says, "The proper use of words is to get beyond words". If this statement, coming as it does from a writer who has often stressed the primacy of the written word, seems at variance with some of his thinking, it is still integral to his thinking and does not contradict it. "It is the very nature of things to be unpredictable as far as human life is concerned", he says. It is true that Ezekiel is a sceptic (he has confessed to being an incurable one) and his sceptical thinking continues to refresh. But at the heart of that sceptical cast of mind is something which occasionally reveals itself. It delights in its own contradictions and owes a great deal to the writing of poetry, an experience of its 'dance', as it were, and something to Zen. In the writing of poetry words can lead to unexpected combinations of other words which are, in fact, unexpected combinations of thought. These, with Ezekiel, are always addressed to someone, an audience or a reader, and sometimes, in his poetry, to God. He never gives the impression of talking to himself as some poets do.

In an interview to Dr. Frank Birbal Singh of the University of York, Ontario, Ezekiel provides fascinating insights into his world-view and convictions.

Some critics use the word 'cynical' about Ezekiel's writing, but Ezekiel represents Indian ways ironically. He

ridicules various things - mimicry, ignorance, the modern Indian ethic - as in 'Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.' Some Indians react defensively, and sometimes angrily to that poem. There may even be a streak of malice in mimicking Western habits and manners but such accurate observations display a faithfulness of temperament on the part of Ezekiel. And the temperament is a configuration of many factors including his Jewish background and the Hindu environment. But other people have reacted differently to the same situation in which he is. Scores of people in his community or in allied communities in India do not respond in the same way as he does.

On being asked, "what has been your attitude to Hinduism?" Ezekiel replied, "I don't think I have ever sat down to completely define my attitude to Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity or any other set of beliefs. Although people who are critical might apply the word 'cynicism' to me, I think 'scepticism' would be more accurate".

There are characteristic themes in his poems - evanescence, separation, loss. Throughout his poetic corpus, human experience is described as inadequate or limited. It is difficult to point out exactly where that comes from. But his poetry evinces a feeling of absolute honesty, as if his only aim is to get at the truth - the

exact thing. This encourages self-questioning. The argument of the man of faith against the sceptical person is that the latter does not understand the mystery of life at all. That scepticism, or distrust of settled views, the questioning of certainties, is represented fairly consistently throughout his writing. Though he has been writing for more than half a century, his scepticism has not changed completely over the years. It develops or may be modified as he goes along but he has not abandoned it completely at any point of time and jumped to final conclusions about the nature of existence, life and the cosmos.

Ezekiel has always distrusted certainties of any kind - political, economic and religious. He believes that distrust does not cancel out trust. It is a strengthening of trust by saying to oneself that if it is really trust, then it must stand up to the most acute cross-questioning, not only by other people, but by oneself. Ezekiel says, "I do not have to sit in front of an opponent and hear him demolish my views. I can be my own opponent. Yet I cannot destroy everything. I know I must work out values and basic attitudes, without assuming that these constitute a general truth which I can sell to everybody". His poetry reflects this tension between opposites. However we define the

opposites, whether as physical / spiritual, or as immersion / detachment, there is a fundamental pattern of statement and counter-statement which works against confident revelations in his poetry. But it does not lead him to despair. It leads him often enough to irony and humour, to statements of paradox and so on. If occasionally there is a sense of despair, it is merely a passing phase for him.

There is an appreciation of transience and contradiction in his poems, but there are sustaining elements like humour and irony, which suggest that, whereas Ezekiel observes contradictions, his attitude to them is not passive.

Ezekiel started reading the Gita and the Upanishads at a very early age, when he was in a Roman Catholic school. He has always felt that substantial truths about life are expressed in Hinduism, Islam, Judaism ~~Indianism~~, Christianity.

The failure to grasp the historical situation, which makes writing in the mother tongue impossible for Ezekiel, has led a large number of Indian writers and critics to consider the relationship of Ezekiel's work to the tradition of Indian writing as a whole and allege that they miss something of India and the Indian reality in his work which they get from even second-order writers in Punjabi or Tamil

or Bengali because they use their mother tongue. For those critics, not writing in English means that their environment, their setting, their normal sensibilities are more Indian than those of an Indian writer writing in English. They tend to have a basically negative view of the whole enterprise of Indian writing in English. But Ezekiel has never really accepted this and prefers to go on writing in the language which happens to be the one in which he feels and thinks and lives. Ezekiel holds that exceptional decisions have been made by individual writers, their historical situation, the kind of education they had, their parents, whether English was spoken at home or whether they went to an Indian (language) medium school or an English-medium school.

Ezekiel's subject has often been described and dismissed as largely "urban". Most of the critics, who use this phrase in the sense of condemnation or limitation, live in the cities. An objective examination of his poems reveals that Ezekiel takes a very comprehensive view of human issues and life, making penetrating analyses. It is the failure to recognize this most dominant note in his poems which has led critics to remark that Ezekiel's subject is too severely circumscribed by being restricted to the educated, urban environment of modern India. In Ezekiel's

view a writer's subject is only the starting point. Many outstanding Indian writers have gone back to the village they have lived in, and written a whole novel^e about life in that village. But that is not circumscribed. It is rather wonderful. They did not write about life in the big town, because they did not know it. They knew life in their own village; they were more at home there, and their characters are more real.

Here we are faced with political questions. Following colonialism and the subjugation of one nation by another, people tend to have a natural sympathy for the oppressed nation whose peasants toiling on the land appear more desirable as a subject of art than the concerns of the oppressor. But that is sentimentality and hypocrisy. In Ezekiel's confirmed opinion we have the equivalent of the rural masses even in the big cities. It is wrong to assume that everyone living in the urban centres is rich, educated and speaks English. A real urban area in India is a very composite (mixed) place. First of all, the proletariat cannot be left out, and then from that class to the bourgeoisie, we get various other classes and groups, including the poorest of the poor as the rural masses. They also work hard and struggle for survival. They have responses which can be very human. Ezekiel finds it really

amazing to see people living on the pavement, laughing frequently and enjoying life. One may draw false conclusions from that but it does suggest one mode of survival.

Ezekiel does not write poems about the suffering of the proletariat and calls for political reforms though there are references and allusions to such suffering. But his own observations of poverty and human suffering do not seem to evoke political solutions. He is of the opinion that in a lot of things we say and do, there is some justification which comes from the kind of life we live. He alerts others to be careful about this, otherwise a number of voices would be pleading on behalf of the poor giving the impression of a meaningless kind of chorus.

"Alienation" has become a code word in European literature since World War II, with Camus and Sartre and Beckett - the existentialist school. And many critics have tried to examine Ezekiel's poetry from that angle. In the case of Ezekiel we find that "alienation" represents a characteristic, rather than a malaise as it gives him a chance to perceive things in a particular way which others cannot.

Ezekiel's study of Indian thought makes him feel that it heavily stresses the positive and ultimate faith in the

cosmic scheme of things, and the powers which are beyond comprehension, which are also accessible to anyone if he follows a certain way of life. He holds that it is a philosophy which would have flourished tremendously if there had not been the modern world at all. But today it has a great appeal to people throughout the world because, in their world, the negative predominates, and then they hear the voice of faith in the distance, the guru and his explanation, yoga, transcendental meditation, and the rest of it. That accounts for the kind of "malaise" from which they are suffering.

One of the remarkable qualities of Ezekiel's poetry is its conversational lucidity which gives the impression of talking informally and with clarity. He does not delve into legends, myths, and other forms of dense, complex or obscure writing. He can only use clarity and believes that clarity is also profound. If it is not, the poet is at least clear, and that is enough. Yet critics have accused Ezekiel of not being profound, and if the conversational tone is obvious and clear, then they say it is over-simplification. There is a need to take such criticism seriously and to read the poem again. The question arises: Is the poem as bad as it seems, or has the critic prejudices of his own which lead

him to consider the poem bad because it is simple? Some of Blake's poems, too, are simple, yet profound.

An objective assessment of Ezekiel's poems reveals that there is mockery without malice. And here one is immediately reminded of Chaucer who successfully indicts almost the whole of fourteenth century English society and appears to enjoy it. Human foibles and frailties seem to delight him. The preoccupation with the human condition pervades all through Ezekiel's poetry. It is not for nothing that in an interview to Dr. Frank Birbal Singh (York University, Ontario, Canada, 1986) Ezekiel said, "I don't think everything I write or say or do should absolutely and unconditionally have what I have discovered to be my identity..... I would prefer to claim that nine times out of ten my being human is more important than anything else in the whole world". In the subsequent chapters such a scrutiny and evaluation of his representative poems will be attempted to locate his views about human issues and life.

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