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THERE IS NO  
ESCAPING  
FROM OURSELVES  
THE HUMAN  
DILEMMA  
IS AS IT HAS ALWAYS BEEN  
AND WE SOLVE  
NOTHING  
FUNDAMENTAL  
BY CELEBRATING  
OURSELVES  
IN TECHNOLOGICAL  
GLORY.

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# A Theological Study of Nissim Ezekiel's Religious Outlook

Goutam Karmakar

Assistant Teacher, Department of English, Bhagilata High School (H.S), Uttar Dinajpur, West Bengal, INDIA

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Email for correspondence:  
goutamkrmk@gmail.com

some of his verses.

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## PRESENTATION

Nissim Ezekiel is one of the greatest poets of Indian English Literature. He in his poems tries to show India's cultural heritage, identity, deep-rooted ideals. As an Indian, he has a deep sense of religion, man-God relationship, spiritual values and theologies. He shows how all these play an effective role in different kinds of socio-religious scenario. His reading of Indian religious books, mythologies left a great impact on his mind, and he wants to penetrate this impact into his poetry.

Before the start of this discussion about his theology, I want to show what God means to him. He uses the word 'God' so many times in his poetry. Sometimes like a modern poet, he takes God as a normal human being. But at the same time, he praises, advises and rebukes God. He wants to learn the Ultimate truth, and for this reason, he urges God to give him adversities and misfortunes in order to know the truth. As he says:

"Kick me around  
a bit more, O Lord  
I see at last  
There is no other way  
For me to learn  
Your simplest truths." (JSAL, 133)

## ABSTRACT

As the centuries passed by, the galaxy of Indian English Poetry become increasingly crowded. But the scenario was not like this during the early years. It is because only a few stars shine there, and Nissim Ezekiel is the pole star. His poetry contains so many aspects, themes, motives and symbols that sharpen and shape his poetic world. His poetry often shows irony, emotion, love, man-woman relationship, self-consciousness, a sense of discipline and self-criticism. He shows his concern for both modern and urban art and culture with the touch of Indian ethos and local colour. But as an Indian poet, he shows his thinking about God and religion in a vivid way. He also shows his changing view towards God and Indian theology in his poems. In this paper, I have tried to show Ezekiel's religious outlook and aspects through

But as a modernist poet, he sometimes shows that one can easily communicate with God in the day by day speech. And in these lines he shows how an urban man tries to contact with God in a simple, friendly way. As he says:

“Be drunk, occasionally  
but not with gin  
or whisky  
may the Lord  
use you up for ends  
beyond your means  
so you know what drunkenness  
really means.” (Collected Poems, 280)

But he also shows that God is someone with whom we can share our depression, frustration and anger also. In these lines, he shows his attempt to correct even God:

“Lord, few there are that trouble me  
fewer still that rise up against me  
Be thou a shield for them as for me.” (Collected Poems, 253)

Even in ‘Collected Poems’, he is ready to rebuke him and even shows his anger and disgust. As these lines show:

“How can I breathe freely  
if you breakfast the teeth of the ungodly?” (Collected Poems, 253)

Ezekiel even shows his disgust and lack of faith in God and his disciples. In his ‘Guru’, he shows that these Gurus are fake, diplomatic and don’t know the actual meaning of prayer, religion, spiritual learning and salvation. In his ‘Guru’, he says about them:

“But when we learn  
the saint is still a faithless friend,  
obstinate in argument  
ungrateful for favourite done,  
hard with servants and the poor,  
discourteous to disciples, especially men.” (Guru)

In his ‘Egotist Prayers’, he shows how prayer changes its form now-a-days. Here he denies doing work without result that Lord Krishna says in Bhagwat Gita. Here he rejects all sorts of advice that God has given to man. Even he forgets his duty and duty towards God. As these lines clearly show the decline of religious faith from rural to an urban level and also show the naked truth of Indian society:

“Do not choose me, O Lord,  
to carry out thy purposes.  
I am quite worthy, of course,  
But I have my own purpose.  
You have plenty of volunteers  
to choose from, Lord  
why pick on me, the selfish one?” (Egotist Prayers)

But it is not always same as he also believes in Supreme Being’s power. He also shows man’s relationship with God and man’s place in the universe. What a man can know about God is what God reveals to him and also to know God completely is hard, an unfathomable reality. As he shows in his 16<sup>th</sup> Hymns in Darkness:

“You are master  
neither of death nor of life  
Belief will not save you,

nor unbelief.  
 All you have  
 Is the sense of reality  
 Unfathomable  
 As it yields its secrets  
 Slowly One by One." (16<sup>th</sup> Hymns in Darkness)

Ezekiel also wants to show that we have to remove veils that cover our outer image and existence in order to know God. He shows this in 'Theological':

"I've stripped off a hundred veils  
 and still there are more  
 that cover you creation  
 Why are you so elusive?

Even as myself, my very own  
 Incontrovertible, unexceptional  
 Self, I feel I am disguised." (Theological)

Often we find Ezekiel in a prayer mode in his poetry. He realizes that it is not possible for mankind to acquire virtue which they don't have and he knows that human being will always commit vices. And he believes that it is God who somehow responsible for it as he creates mankind. So it is God's duty to save man. As he says these in the second of the 'Poster Prayers':

"The vices I've always had  
 I still have  
 The virtues I've nearer had  
 I still do not have  
 From this human way of life  
 Who can rescue man  
 If not his maker?  
 Do thy duty, Lord!" [JSAL, 133]

At the same time he turns to God to seek knowledge and wisdom. He prays to God to give him virtue, knowledge and power to understand him. As he clearly shows these in these lines:

"Give me as much knowledge  
 as I need, and then some more.  
 The extra since or two  
 from your bread of love and truth  
 is only for me greed.  
 You know what lies beyond my hunger.  
 Overlook, O Lord, my love of food." (Poster Prayers)

Ezekiel knows that wealth, property and material pleasure are desirable things, and he wants to be rich by knowing the fact that a rich man can't go to heaven. He also knows that if a camel can go there through the eye of a needle, then he can also go there. So, he prays:

"Let me be, O Lord,  
 The Camel of the Higher Income Group  
 Who passes smooth through  
 The eye of that needle." (JSAL,134)

Apart from his religious outlook, he has also shown his theological aspect in his poems. Since his childhood, Ezekiel reads Bhagwat Gita and Upanishad. And his religious poems show these books' influence on him. Also, he shows society's changing attitude towards

religion and God. In his 'Tribute to Upanishads', he shows how this book helps him to gain knowledge of real self. As he says:

"To feel that one is  
to drive oneself  
in a kind of hearse-  
the destination is obvious." (Tribute to Upanishads)

Indian mythology appeals him very much. Lord Krishna's preaching regarding the mystery of life and self left deep impression on him. He wants to search the mystery of life leaving the worldly life and the next life. He shows us what Lord Krishna shows to Arjun:

"The secret locked within the seed  
becomes my need and so  
I shrink to nothingness  
Within the seed." (Collected Poems, 205)

Vedic Hymns, Bhagwat Gita have left a mark on him. As a result, he realizes that one can understand God after complete devotion and surrender before the Supreme Being. He also shows that it is God who can show how to come out of all chaos. Again he reminds us of Lord Krishna's advice to Arjun. Here he takes the form of a common man, a city dweller to come closer to his readers. In these lines, we find all these:

"He has lost faith in himself  
And found faith at last

All forms of God  
and God in all forms." (Collected Poems, 219-220)

Ezekiel's spiritual quest, humanistic voice, his disillusionment caused by fake, false and unsubstantial world is found in 'Theological'. Here he shows two aspects of life. On one hand, he tries to rebuild man's relationship with society, Nature and God. And on the other hand, he tries to show that the realization of the ultimate truth of God is ultimate savior of mankind. And to achieve this, a broad framework is needed. As he shows these two aspects in these lines:

"Lord, I am tired  
of being wrong

Your truth  
is too momentous for man  
And not always useful." (Collected Poems.156)

Ezekiel also shows his anxiety for the modern man who does not believe God. But it is the God who can do everything. Indian myth and theology are well shown in his poem 'Counsel'. Here he wants to show man's knowledge of what he needs and what he does not need:

"Success at the moment  
is not in your interest." (Counsel)

Hindu Mythology can also be seen in his 'Morning Prayer'. In this period, he believes firmly in God and tell him to make him a good human being. He thus says here using the reference of 'Panchtava' theory of Hindu Mythology:

"...certainly  
in kinship with the sky  
Air, Earth, Fire, Sea-  
and the fresh inward eye." (Morning Prayer)

Not only Hindu mythology, but Christian mythology is also seen in his poetry, Using the reference of Adam and Eve, he tells us to remove all false knowledge as knowledge is that thing which is tasted by First Man and Woman. Also he advises that the mankind should now fast as they have acquired so much knowledge whether good or bad. As he says:

“...Learn to fast  
Do without, be absent  
Keep the eyes closed.” (Collected Poems, 229)

In poems like ‘The Cur’, ‘Enterprise’, we find the same theme as God is everywhere, and we don’t need to go to any particular place in search of God. It can be found in the home. As he says:

“Home is where we have to earn grace.” (Collected Poems.25)

Ezekiel as a religious Indian poet wants to show even his natives’ socio-religious attitude. He shows the confusion and dilemma of a middle aged man as they have to divide their time into spiritual and material world. They can’t choose only one world because both materialistic pleasure and spiritual bliss are needed in life. In ‘At Fifty’, he shows these:

“I do not want the ashes  
of the old fire but the flame itself.  
Interest in the secret of renewed  
is sign of age.  
no longer secret.” (At Fifty)

Ezekiel firmly believes in the power of God. And he wants to warn all kinds of people about, not too proud and boast of them. God is the only controller and master of all. So, we have to be normal before the Supreme Being. As he says:

“You are master  
neither of death nor life  
Belief will not save you  
nor unbelief.” (Collected Poems, 222)

As a modernist poet, he is deeply influenced by English modernists’ poets. He reads Eliot’s ‘The Waste Land’ and echoes the same theme of selfless giving, Daan and Dutta. As he says:

“Express your gratitude  
By giving what you have to give  
You may get nothing in return  
And bear your restlessness with grace.” (Collected Poems, 229)

## CONCLUSION

So in the concluding lines, it can be said that his religious outlook is vast and deep rooted. He sees God in various ways with Indian ethos, mythology and sensibilities. But it is his God for whom he surrenders himself completely and wants his natives’ complete surrender before God. Actually Ezekiel’s religious outlook is also totally Indian in form and content. And I agree totally with what P.P.Mehta said about him: “As a poet, he is aware of his cultural milieu and native problems. His sharp sensibility enables him to grapple with the situation around him; without nostalgically recalling his stay in England or drawing of a foreign land. He gives careful thought to his ideas, medium of expression and form of words and phrases; and does not attempt to depict what is gaudy and inane and more adolescent. In him, the reflective and philosophical strains are predominant.”

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