

Contradictory Practices & Perspectives: The Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel

Dr. Monika MDR Wagh

Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities & Applied Sciences

Shree L. R. Tiwari College of Engineering Kankia Park, Mira Road East Thane - 401107

+919920295384, *mmrw27@gmail.com*

Nissim Ezekiel is one of the significant poets of the contemporary period. Ezekiel – a renowned Professor, a prolific writer, has been an Honorary Secretary of the Indian P.E.N., but his valuable contribution to Indian literature, as a poet, is worth mentioning. We locate in his poems “Indian relationship between society and nature” (Mundra 437). As a result, his poetry is more authentic and realistic. “The opening up of Indian English poetry to reality in its many guises is perhaps Ezekiel’s most significant influence” (King 109). This research paper undertakes the study of a wide range of contradictions used by the poet in his poems.

Before elaborating the contradictions in detail, I have taken a fleeting look on the choice of themes by Ezekiel in his poems. He has defined love as a major theme in his poems. Several other themes viz. metropolitan life, common human relationships and situations, Indian sensibilities, religio-philosophical concern, alienation, etc. also find a notable place in his poetic works.

Ezekiel, while delineating these themes in his poems makes use of paradox and contradictions to justify the need to bring high-quality and advancement in modern Indian poetry in English language. The contradictions, Ezekiel has used in his poems, are excellent and endowed with poet’s odd wit and supple humor. The use of inconsistency/contradiction is one of his contributions in his latest poetry which has been explored by his fellow writers and successors.

Nissim Ezekiel has been hailed as the poet of metropolitan city. He lived long in Bombay. He is familiar with every aspect of men living in Bombay; their struggles, sufferings and the very mode and manner of their lives. He is also called as urban poet. He describes life in Bombay as living hell. The poet discovers that urban man is devoid of peace and cerebral creativity because he has confined himself to a fake and an illusionary environment of his mind that he has built around himself. He doesn’t want to come out of his self-built cocoon of assumptions and imaginations. He is unaware of the fact that there is another “miracle outside human mind” (Niwas 109). The city has awfully destructive impact on his mind. The poet has cited a superb example of repugnance in the lines given below:

Dead souls of men and gods,
Burnt-out mothers, frightened
Virgins, wasted child
And tortured animal
All in noisy silence (CP 131)

The poet has depicted the life of common man in Bombay city by delineating contrariness in his thoughts and expression. The protagonist has used paradoxical expression “Dead soul” for the city-dwellers. Hardships of city life make people dead and their soul is no more left alive and it is no better than death or hell. Poverty, squalor and scarcity make city ugly and barbaric. The last line, “All in noisy silence” shows the hustle bustle and clamor of the congested city and the miseries and struggles of the city dwellers. The word “silence” is used for their intense torment and anguish. The poet juxtaposes the city’s hectic and overcrowded environment to the distress of the oppressed section of Indian society. The ignorant people of the city lack proper directions and pathways, hence are described as “men of straw, having no feeling or sensibility” (Lal 72).

A clear disparity, remarkably, exists in ‘Enterprise’. The whole enterprise proves false and loses its significance. The poem finds parallelism with the ‘Pilgrimage’ of Shiv K. Kumar where the pilgrims find the journey to holy shrine futile and false trap woven by the God. Ezekiel summarizes the whole enterprise in the lines of his poem, ‘Enterprise’:

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.(TTCP 30)

The title bears contrariness. As enterprise means a great adventure that brings some good and noble end. In the present poem, the protagonist, along with his fellow pilgrims, feels disappointed finally when reached the holy shrine. Firstly, they were enthusiastic and full of faith and fervor, but struggle and hardships confronted on the way to destination make them to shun all their hopes and beliefs in such divine preoccupations. Ultimately, they find their trip futile and rubbish. They also point to the worthlessness of divine place and such pilgrimage.

Indian sensibility finds remarkable place among various prominent themes in his poems. In his poems, he has portrayed the life of majority Indian community, the Hindus, because “he is well aware of all circumstances, culture, tradition and language in India” (Dileep 1). Ezekiel exposes hypocrisy and deception in India in the name of religion in many of his poems. He is highly distressed to see how fake spiritual leaders take advantage of the poor people who blindly follow them and trust them. The contradiction springs from their words and deeds. Such people have made religion their business and they know how to empty the pockets of the ignorant people for their personal benefit. ‘Guru’ is an excellent case in point:

The saint is still a faithless friend,
obstinate in argument,
ungrateful for favours done,
hard with servants and the poor, (Paniker 67)

In Hindu religion, spiritual leaders or gurus are considered next to God who preach divine knowledge to the people. But here they are called “faithless friend”. They behave friendly with people but at the same time they deceive them. What they preach, they themselves never act upon. They are always adamant in their arguments and attract people with their practiced discourse. They cheat people with their empty speech and never do any good to them. They guide people to change their ways and manners in virtuous way but they, themselves, never hesitate to get themselves benefitted by wealth and materialistic things. In the poem, Guru is an untrustworthy, ungrateful fellow, and has no love for poor people and servants contrary to the fact that gurus or saints are always God-fearing human beings and blessed with benevolence and sincerity. It is the ill-fate of the country like India, where people still surround such fake saints/gurus and respect them.

The poet has brilliantly exposed the social degeneration and destruction of social ethics in Indian society in a conflicting manner in the poem ‘Hang Over’: “The non-drinker drinking, non-smoker smoking” (CP 232). It is the Western culture influence which is responsible for the degradation of ethics in India. It has affected the common masses to such an extent that they have shed their valuable cultural heritage. Non-drinkers have taken to drinking and non-smokers to smoking. Drinking and smoking both are injurious to health, and prohibited. Indians shows their inclination towards these bad habits. Ezekiel satirizes Indian culture: “The non-drinker drinking, non-smoker smoking”. He criticizes the society for giving up their noble standards and ethics and, instead put on fake shows by imitating alien habits and manners.

In his later poetry, there is slight shift from materialistic attitude to spiritual attitude. Ezekiel was committed to his country as well as Bombay, his native city. He does not show such commitment to any particular religion or religious thought. He has been a man of God who believes in the service of humanity. For him, religion means love and charity. He differentiates between stern system of religion and individual beliefs. In ‘Penitence’, he contradicts his repentance to his earlier errant behavior:

No more the impulse
Of a wave.
But I am still a sea
And hold with in
The muffled tumult
Of a sin. (CP 71)

The persona is repentant. He apologizes for all his bad deeds which he has done in his life. He accepts all his wicked deeds and thoughts before God. The Persona uses “sea” and its “wave” for his indulgence and aversion towards sin or wrongdoing. He metaphorically calls himself a sea of malice and corruption. The protagonist, paradoxically, like the sea, manages to hold silent commotion of sin. In the last line – “The muffled tumult of a sin”. The “muffled” word stands for silence while “tumult” means noise or commotion. The poet has brilliantly yoked these words together to show both, sinful and virtuous, facets of the protagonist. The protagonist is a successful and virtuous man in the society.

Though, he is full of wisdom and knowledge, yet he feels himself beaten somewhere within his heart. He cannot put up with the heaviness realized for his sin. His confession, and, at the same time, his willingness to stick to his deeds constitutes the greatest paradox of the protagonist's life.

Alienation has been an important theme in Ezekiel's poetry. In 'Background casually' Ezekiel beautifully captures it. The poet narrates one of his experiences in school where he is discriminated because of his Jewish parentage: "They told me I had killed the Christ, / That year I won the scripture prize" (TTCP 34-35). The contradiction lies in the line. Poet's Jewish inheritance becomes curse for him when he is admitted in Roman Catholic school. Since it was a Convent school so, most of his fellow students were from Christian background. They tortured and made fun of him. In that environment, he felt himself lonely and sad. The line "a mugging Jew among the wolves" justifies protagonist's intense fright and trepidation. The protagonist himself admits in a contradictory way that his class-mates accused him for killing the Christ but later he was awarded with prize for better reading of Christian scriptures. Both statements are antagonistic. He was called killer of the Christ for his Jewish parentage because it were Jews who betrayed Christ. But being Jew, he wins the scripture prize of that year. He was better read in Christian scriptures than the Christian students. So a contradiction lies here that it was this timid and accused Jew who is honoured with prize for knowing the Christian scriptures better than the Christian boys. The persona was very happy but he couldn't enjoy the moment: because, soon he was boxed by a Muslim boy. In this way, the lone Jew was ill-treated by both Muslims and Christians in the school. The next stanza also bears the contrariness. The poet describes his experiences with Hindu boys, too, at the same school. He uses paradoxical language for them and calls them "strong" and undernourished". He states: "I grew in the terror of the strong / But undernourished Hindu lads" (TTCP 34). Ezekiel finds Hindu boys equally unkind to him as were Christians and Muslims. Despite being famished, they were strong. It is quiet strange how the undernourished can be Strong. Like Christian and Muslim boys, they were also in group. They took advantage of their union to frighten him. For that the protagonist calls them strong.

There are many poems where he uses contradiction to explore the themes. For example we see autobiographical incidents in the poem 'London', where the poet narrates his experience by delineating an outstanding negation:

in my chronology
cold and bare, it held
a rare turbulence
in check for growth. (HD 33)

The poet gives a detailed description of his days spent in London and an account of the journey of his intellectual growth. Even situations of his dwelling were not congenial for his intellectual growth. He lived in a room in basement which was devoid of amenities. This room was only a place for the writer where he could take shelter. It provided him loneliness and peace desired for proliferation of his creative output. "Rare turbulence / in check for growth" reveals poet's sturdy experiences in the room which proves fruitful for his self-exploration and self-contemplation. No doubt, he has to pay a lot for this achievement at the cost of his physical health. He explains paradoxically: "for and against the same / creative, self-destructive self" (HD 33-34). The protagonist is contented with the place in the basement where he lives. Though it is not good for his health, yet he loves that place for it provided him seclusion and peace – the environment required for artistic growth. He talks about his "creative, self-destructive self". Both "creative" and "self-destructive" are divergent expressions. The room "becomes a metaphor of the poet's relentless struggle for artistic creation and introspection" (Dwivedi 97). But, at the same time the disagreeable conditions of the room cannot be ignored that make the protagonist sick. He grows intellectually as creative writer at the cost of personal health, what he, ironically calls self-destruction. Despite "too many contradictions and books" (HD 42) at hand. "The 'basement room' has, thus, become a symbol of a place of refuge, a shelter from the distracting external world, a place where the poet can reflect and create or 'name things' in a fresh perspective. For him, it is the 'home' where he has 'to gather grace', where he has to embark on a voyage of self-exploration and self-contemplation, where he has to perform in his new and noble deeds. About this place the poet has no misgiving or confusions, though, otherwise, he has been a 'trader in paradoxes' an ally of the dialectic" (Dwivedi 97).

Ezekiel emphasizes humanism in his poem 'Philosophy'. The poet discards logic and reason for the knowledge of universe that is a severe contradiction he has employed in the lines: "As darkest myths meander through the pain / towards a final formula light" (TTCP 31). "Darkest myths" and "light" are contradictory expressions. Mysteries of the universe are difficult to explain. As man has advanced the knowledge of science and philosophy he peels off the thickened layers of the origin of universe and life. Yet some aspects are left unknown to man. They are unable to describe human life and human nature. Darker myths are left unexplained. They wander through pains and sufferings and ultimately yield "final formula of light". The view is highly contradictory. The wisdom or the ultimate truth can be

attained through sufferings and personal experiences. The poet discards the philosophical formulae like clarity of thought that is insufficient to unfold the mysterious darkness of human relationships and behavior. Both, logics and reasons, prove futile for understanding human nature. Some hidden mysterious truths are there which cannot be revealed and they should not be explained.

Contradictions in Ezekiel's poetry reflect extraordinary transmutation of poet's personal experiences in relation to the real world. Whatever he represents, whether the comprehensive vision of love and life, or, the norms and condition of a particular society, where he lives, he uses paradoxical devices to explain the triviality as well as the supremacy prevailing in them. Contradictions in his poetry try to set straight the ambiguities of life on earth. His entire poetic corpus does not follow a consistent pattern. He appears to be compromising spirit between the two extremes. His contradictions also percolate in his faith in self-realization, but little on his faithlessness in spiritual existence. Likewise, he is not a stern follower of a particular religion, but he believes in God. The juxtaposition of the opposites in his poetry reveals the alacrity of his mind; it also compels others to think without any bias. Thus, his poetry is the poetry of mind. It is thought or ideas that dominate his poetry rather than sentiments. The depiction of paradoxical paradigm in his poetry leads people mentally to a world of ideological values and morals. This justifies the title of "moralist" for him. He instructs people to accept new social construct congenial for overall development of an individual. Such usage is far-fetched or mind-boggling. They are meant to instruct common men. They are lucid in their manner and approach. According to Ezekiel, it is not necessary for a poet to deal always with great and philosophical truths in the creation of his poetry. He constantly appears to yoke ordinariness of the incidents with his profound creative insight in his poems and opines that ordinary human actions and relationships can also constitute great poetry.

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