

# Indian Culture and Political Identity in Nissim Ezekiel's Poetry

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## Abstract

*Nissim Ezekiel is a great Indian poet, born to the foreign descent. Though, he tries to be a citizen of India but the sense of alienation is deeply rooted in his personality. The dual act of his socio- cultural and political background made him dilemma in the poetic career, not in his life. He makes it clear in one of his interviews as 'My background did not make an outsider but it is too easy to talk of being an outsider. I do not want to remain negative. I feel I have no connect and turn the situation to the positive '. In this sense Ezekeil was culturally distanced from India's heritage in his poetry, he also tries to identify himself with Indian native culture rather than political identity. One more line supports us as 'In other countries, I am a foreigner, in India I am an Indian. With this background, my paper focuses on Nissim Ezekiel's talent in using the sense of Indianness, native culture rather political identity in his poetry.*

Nissim Ezekiel is a great Indian poet, writer in English. Being a genius in poetry, he has published six collections of poems. In all his collections of poetry, we can notice his attachment with India especially with the life in Bombay, the place which he chose as home. Most of his poems are the descriptions of India, Indian culture and he has made use of Indian English in his poetry. Ezekiel knows very well about the different tradition and convention in India. His attachment with socio-economic, political -cultural life in India and his life in Bombay which talk a lot of Indian culture. The different festivals, rites and rituals, the habits, etiquettes, manners of Indian people, the old beliefs thoughts and superstition, the religious attitude of people in India, geographical changes in Indian situations, the way of living and behaviors and the peculiar use of English from region to region constitute a greater bulk of a poetry. The reflections of all these inner and outer aspects of Indian culture in his poetry has made him a typical Indian English poet.

Ezekiel's famous poems, 'Night of the scorpion', 'Background Casually', 'Entertainment', 'The visitor', 'Jewish wedding in Bombay', 'Indian Restaurant', 'In India' and 'In the country cottage' are closely sketched the contemporary socio-political situation of India. All these poems throw light on Ezekiel's views of India and different aspects of Indian culture.

The poem 'Night of the Scorpion', Nissim Ezekiel depicts a common situation in India. The poem shows Ezekiel is a very Indian poet, rooted in the Indian soil and human situation of day to day Indian life. The mother who is stung by a scorpion and the attempt of the peasant neighbors to bring relief to her by following some traditional old thought, superstition to save the life of the mother.

The poem 'Background Casually' an attempt of Ezekiel's commitment to India is displayed. This is one of the biographical poems of Ezekiel which represents Ezekiel to be a very Indian poet. In this poem he reflects on his failures and success. It also shows his love for the soil. He affirms that he is very much Indian than a foreigner. He narrates his bad experience at school. He was illtreated both by the Christian and Hindu boys in the Christian school. When he came back from England, he tried to cope up with all of his difficulties at Bombay. His Indianness could be noticed in the following lines 'In other countries, I am a foreigner. In India am an Indian'. So, he has become the part of composite culture of India to which he belongs. Even though his friend from abroad gets surprised to see how he has managed to live with heart Indian atmosphere that too in Bombay, the city of his choice. He is proud of his Indian environment which has brought out in the following lines

*"All Hindus are  
like that my father used to say,  
when someone talked too loudly or  
knocked at the door like the devil,  
they hawked and spat the sprawled around."*

The poem 'Entertainment', Nissim Ezekiel depicts the monkey show on the Indian street. It is acrobat participant in the show, the audience including the coolie and the highclass man. The poet displays the contemporary Indian society and the attachment of both the upper class and lower class in Indian soil.

The poem 'The Visitor' also represents Ezekiel's Indianness by focusing ordinariness of most of the events. The warning of arrival of guest given by the cawing of the three times of the crow represents the typical social Indian situation in the poem.

*"Three times the crow cawed  
At the window  
Three times I got the message."*

Ezekiel's treatment of Indian life is characterized by the poem "In India". One could see the realistic approach of Ezekiel towards Indian life. In the very beginning of the poem through the speaker, the poet describes the poverty, the squalor, the filth and ugliness of Indian Bombay city which he described as

*"Always in the Sun's eye  
Here among the beggars,  
Hawkers, pavement sleepers,  
Hutment dwellers, slums etc.  
Dead souls of men and gods  
Burn out mothers, frightened  
Virgins, wasted child...."*

The second part describes secular Indian state and the way religions live in it

*"The Anglo-Indian gentlemen,  
Drinking whisky in some Jewish den  
With Muslims slowly creeping in  
Before or after prayers"*

The last part of the poem shows the conflict of culture in Indian situation. The attempt of English boss to seduce his Indian secretary represent the cultural conflict and dirtiness of mind and city life.

The poem 'In the country cottage', Ezekiel shows his sensitivity to the Indian environment. He finds birds and animals are more human and friendly than the corruptive people. He thinks that men wear masks whereas birds and animals do not. The lizard shows patience and attains perfection in its work. Thus, he has brought out Indian flora and fauna in a grand manner. Whereas Jewish wedding in Bombay, portrays the performance of rituals in a mechanical manner in Indian geographical situation.

To conclude we can say that Nissim Ezekiel, no doubt is an Indian English poet in all aspects though he was born to a foreign descent. He depicts the typical Indian culture rather than political identity in his poetry. His sense of Indianness has brought out in all of his poems particularly socio-economy and cultural identity.

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