Chapter I

Introduction

Chapter I
Introduction

1.1 Modern Indian Drama

Drama, being a performative art, has an appeal which may not be the case with a poem or fiction. Basically, drama has been written for the stage performance. The success of a play can be tested only on the stage. Dramatic writing requires selection of a theme which is both presentable and appealing to the audience. In comparison with Indian English fiction and poetry, drama has not been so fortunate. The outsider's language has been the main hindrance in the growth of Indian English drama. Indian drama mostly flourished in regional languages. The failure of Indian English drama largely lies in its unsuitability on the stage. It has not been very successful in theatrical effects.

Features of Modern Indian Drama:

1) Modern Indian drama is marked by natural language, crisp dialogues, and present day problems.
2) It also deals with natural expressions, new tones and techniques.
3) It is also marked by impressive craftsmanship and the plays are stage oriented.
4) Modern Indian drama cannot be labeled under a title as it deals with various themes.
5) The dramatists have used historical themes by skillfully modifying them and presenting in new style.

6) The themes are based on socio–cultural, economical, familial and religious matters.
7) Modern Indian drama also deals with social and political realities and violence. It deals not only with physical violence but mental too.
8) Modern Indian drama is also marked by bold innovations and experiments.

Indian drama has a long history. Modern Indian drama in English starts either with Shakespeare's plays, in translation or adaptation in Indian language or with Sanskrit plays of Kalidasa and Bhavabhuti. K.M. Banerjee's *The Persecuted* (1841) is the first Indian English play. T.P. Kailasam wrote in English and Kannada. He used the bombast and rhetoric of Victorian English. His plays are based on the great Indian epics Ramayana and Mahabharata. They are: *The Burden* (1933), *The Curse of Karna* (1946), and *Keechaka* (1949).

Rabindranath Tagore was greater a poet than a dramatist. Most of his plays were first written in Bengali and then translated into English. They include *Sanyasi* or *The Ascetic* (1884), *Malini* (1884), *Sacrifice* (1917), *The Post Office* (1914), *Red Oleanders* (1925) etc. G.V. Desani's *Hali* (1950) is an autobiographical play which portrays writer's love-affair leading to frustration and failure. Over the past few decades many plays have been written in English but most of them are not stageable. J.M. Lobo-Prabhu, Harinadranath Chattopadyaya, Dilip Kumar Roy and V. Srinvasa Iyengar are the early writers.

Asif Currimbhoy's plays give us an idea of the difficulties which the Indian writer has to negotiate while writing in English. His *The Doldrummers* (1960), *Goa* (1964) etc. are rich in theatrical devices. Currimbhoy employs everyday speech and simple language in his plays. Partap Sharma's *A Touch of Brightness* (1968) is set in red light district of Mumbai. In his *The Professor Has a Warcry* (1970), sex is the main theme. Gurucharan Das' *Larins Sahib* (1970) focuses attention on the Punjab of 1946-47. It is a historical play. His *Mira* (1969) and *Jakho Hill* (1996) are recent plays. Nissim Ezekiel's *Three Plays* earned him a name. There is a skillful use of ironical fantasy in these plays. Ezekiel's plays mostly concentrate on the hollow middle class life in cities and on the social institution of marriage. Lakhan Deb with historical themes has written plays like *Tigers Claw* (1967), *Murder at the Prayer Meeting* (1976). Gieve Patel's *Princes* (1970) deals with the waning fortunes of the Parsi's.

In the post-independence era dramatists like Mohan Rakesh, Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar and Badal Sircar experimented with bold innovations and revived the theatre. They used myth, history, and religio-centric tradition to reflect the contemporary situation. Contemporary drama portrays the social and political realities. Mohan Rakesh humanizes the legendary characters, an approach which the audience found difficult to accept. He has used semi-historical, semi-legendary situations in *Aasadh Ka Ek Din* (1958), and *Lahron Ke Rajhans* (1963). *Aadhe Adhure* (1969) deconstructs the very notion of the 'ideal' as well as the possibility of the 'real'. It locates itself into the present and also moves outside cultural constructs. *Aadhe Adhure* is comparable with Edward Albee's

The Zoo Story. The focus is on urban middle class people with their fragmented desires.

Vijay Tendulkar deals with issues like caste and gender identity. Tendulkar directs our attention to the domestic, private spaces of marriage and family as there is urgent need for social change. He takes up a family situation, an existing set of relationships and roles in *Sakharam Binder* (1972), *Kamala* (1981), and *Kanyadan* (1983). *Ghashiram Kotwal* (1972) was banned even before its performance. The new language and its naturalistic trend become a source of embarrassment to the middle classes. In *Silence! The Court is in Session!*, he has worked with enclosed spaces and personal conflicts of the characters.

Girish Karnad works through abstractions and philosophical ideas, through questioning of tradition and traditional moral constructs and generates the conflictual element from this questioning. Being a cultural hybrid, Karnad dips into both Indian as well as Western scholarship in the construction of his plays. Camus and Brecht are his Western sources. He was also impressed by naturalistic plays of G. B. Shaw and Henrik Ibsen. The device that predominates in his plays is the use of masks. The conflict between head and body is the typical theme of Karnadian play. It is found in *Hayavadana* (1975), *Naga-Mandala* (1990), and *Tale-Danda* (1989). History is the source of *Tughlaq* (1989).

Badal Sircar's plays challenged the strategies of traditional drama. He attacked all the conventional rules of dramatic action, motivation and language. His *Evam Indrajit* (1962) exemplifies the characteristics of the

Theatre of the Absurd through its structure and ideas. His plays explore the uncertainties and the incompleteness of the process of life as well as history. Sircar's *Procession* (1972), *Bhoma* (1974) and *Stale News* (1979) are typical street plays.

Mahesh Dattani, in an interview said that "his characters are personification of his perception. What moves him actually is an individuals struggle for identity." (Sahara Time). Dattani explores issues related to homosexual identity in his plays like *Do the Needful* (1997), *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* (1998), *and Seven Steps Around the Fire* (1998). *Final Solutions* (1992-93) deals with the sensitive issue of communal prejudice. *Tara* (1990) questions the role of society that treats the siblings with double standard. Dattani depicts the struggle of characters with internal as well as external pressures.

The modern plays abound in social, familial and political violence. Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out* (2000) presents the tragic spectacle of daily rape of women. Dina Mehta's *Getting away with Murder* also portrays physical violence. Mehta's *Brides Are Not for Burning* (1993) is based on the grim social reality of violence against women by those who are in power. Cyrus Mistry's *Doongaji House* (1991) is a play, set in the late 1960s, against the background of the 'Maharashtra for Maharashtrians' movement.

The Indian dramatists writing in English are under constant burden of English poetic tradition. They have to be conscious of their own culture and also have to work under the pressure of creative production. In

a way, they have to synthesize both the Indian and English form. They have to cater to the demands of both native and foreign. They have the fear of imitation of English poetic tradition. The translated works of Mohan Rakesh, Girish Karnad and Tagore found place in academic studies but not the ones written originally in English.

In a way, Indian English drama has to deal with myth, history and social reality. The translations are now in progress. The performances of the plays whether translated into English or originally written in English are still very few and also limited to cities. The plays written originally in English are yet facing the problem of creating their own audience. In India, drama lagged behind poetry and fiction while it developed in various other regional languages. Indian English drama has been in search of living theatre.

1.2: Nissim Ezekiel – As a Poet

Ezekiel began to write poems when he was 12 years old, in imitation of those he liked in school text books. There were forces which he tried to use in his poetry, such as his awareness with the contemporary world and the ways in which it was different from the past. There were conflicts within him of a psychological complexity which demanded expression and writing poetry helped in coping with them. Events such as failures in personal relationships, marriage, and career setbacks etc. served as themes in his poetry.

Ezekiel's earlier poetry is marked by autobiographical elements but in later poems he changed this formula. His first collection of poems is A

Time to Change (1952) of which most of the poems were written in London. Ezekiel calls his later poems as not necessarily better than early poems; they may be only different and sometimes weaker. *Latter Day Psalms* (1982) received Sahitya Akademi Award in 1983. Ezekiel's poetry is called as 'public' poetry for which he got inspiration from conversation with people in the restaurants and streets. Most of his poems are introspective but many include elements from the public sense. In his poem, *Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher*, he says that, "the best poets wait for the words."

Ezekiel in one of his poems, talks about the singing voice and the talking voice. He says that there should be harmony and variety as well between them. His family poems ironically describe the "ordinariness of experiences". They imply acceptance of such experiences. Humour, irony and pathos may be part of such acceptance. It is a contribution to poet's self discovery. He calls himself as an 'alienated' individual due to many reasons, including his Jewish heredity and other circumstances, while on the other hand he acknowledges that he belongs to the Indian culture. This tension between two opposite and contradictory conditions is a reality in many human experiences. Ezekiel has tried to cope with both Western and Indian culture. He has been certainly influenced by T.S. Eliot and W. B. Yeats.

Ezekiel, in his later poetry, tries to understand India's past and his Jewish background does not create any obstacles. His poems are free from conventions, exaggeration and abstract ideas. Many of his poems are generalizations from his own intimately felt experiences. Ezekiel was a poet seeking harmony between existential involvement with life and an

intellectual quest. Ezekiel tries to belong to a wider humanity historically while living in the present moment which shows his Indianness. It is not only urban modern India but also a rural India where he finds reality. The poems like *Night of the Scorpion*, *In the Country Cottage* show Ezekiel's ambition to strike roots in the reality which is the meaningful centre of Indian life.

Ezekiel's search for identity reflects East-West dichotomy. Its sordidness and misery evoke passionate sympathies in him. He is alive to the modern world and his exposure to western philosophy and English poetry has sharpened this sensibility. In some of his poems, he undermines sentimental attachments to the Indian past and cultivates a view of the predicaments of modern India.

Ezekiel is generally regarded as a poet of the city; particularly of Bombay (Mumbai). Though he belongs to Mumbai, he does not glorify it. He is aware of its stark reality. As an urban poet, he has delved into the heart of Mumbai. Ezekiel tries to create a picture of a man who wants to run away from the city's turmoil. Ezekiel no longer feels romantically melancholic about his loneliness. The sense of belonging to a particular place has brought a whole dimension to Ezekiel's poetry. He endeavours to find roots as a social being. For him, rootlessness is a matter that bothers not merely a poet, but anyone who has not been able to cultivate a sense of belonging.

Talking about alienation, Ezekiel defines it as, "For an Indo-English writer to be alienated, he must have contempt for his audience and a similar failure on his part, pointlessness in trying to communicate. I

know no such Indian writer, isolated like Camus or Dostoevsky character. What they really mean is that these writers use an alien language." (Sharma.1994.53). Ezekiel's background itself provides social and cultural alienation. He himself declares that, "My background makes me a natural outsider: circumstances and decisions relate me to India." (Ibid.54). The poet's realization of his dilemma and the precise nature of his dimensions are very clear; his alienational lack of communication is threefold – the failure to communicate with truth, with his own self and with the larger world outside. Despair ultimately leads to resignation and in this condition we find the poet swallowing the bitter truth with as much grace as he can.

Ezekiel's poetry is a personal quest for identity, commitment and harmony in life. In this way, the quest for identity resulting into spiritual emptiness and disillusionment in life is in his poetry perhaps leads to the satisfaction of this quest through drama. Influence of W. B. Yeats and T. S. Eliot adds weight to this. His poetry includes *A Time to Change* (1951), *Sixty Poems* (1953), *The Third* (1959), *The Unfinished Man* (1959), *The Exact Name* (1961), *Hymns in Darkness* (1976). In all these volumes, Ezekiel explores the same theme and longs for the "perfection of human personality", the traits of which are rather unspecified. Ezekiel's poetry is full of self analysis and introspection and is related to the life he sees around him. His poetry does not represent any philosophical, historical or psychological problem, but basically is the imaginative reconstruction of life as it is lived. The poet is more interested in exposing the views rather than the highlighting the virtues.

In Ezekiel's poetry, the city figures prominently and depicts the scene in a realistic manner. Ezekiel is essentially a poet of the city and the city he describes is Mumbai. To him, Mumbai is the metaphor for the urban life in India. Inspite of his Jewish background, he confesses his total identification with India. He acknowledges that India's backwardness coincides with his own. The urban scene in Ezekiel's poetry is inhabited by people who are sick. The city with its vastness and the feel of polluted air seems to be having a death wish. Ezekiel has a love-hate relationship with his environment. He is full of anger and dissatisfaction with it, but the criticism has a positive side in that the awareness may pave the way to improvement.

The love poems of Ezekiel mostly deal with physical relationship. The descriptions are intimate and lack inhibitions. They are both direct as well as suggestive. The ordinary life, their day to day life, relationships, frustrations and insignificant events figure prominently in Ezekiel's poetry. The outward simplicity of his poems is deceptive as we are aware that for Ezekiel, the craftsmanship in a poem is as important as the content. Ezekiel brought a sense of discipline, self criticism and morality to Indian English poetry.

Ezekiel introduced a note of objectivity to his felt experiences although much of his poetry is autobiographical in nature. He realized the need for a living language to give expression to his thought. It was not necessary for him to discard old poetic forms for this purpose. He used contemporary language and idiom which is the by – product of prose as well as poetry.

Ezekiel writes poetry with his own experiences and encounters with people at different places and time. Ezekiel's contribution to Indian English idiom lies in his attempt to recreate Indian characters in their situations. The language in his poems is based on colloquial speech, rhythm and the tone is conversational. Ezekiel has tried to recreate the Indian characters, which happen to speak English in wrong manner and with a native accent. The use of present progressive tense in place of simple present tense is a habit and perhaps a way with Indians.

There is a frequent use of irony, paradox and metaphor in Ezekiel's poems. Ezekiel was famous for harmony of emotional effect, for subtlety of variation and subtle touch of irony in his narrative poems. Ezekiel wrote in regular iambic meter, in blank verse as well as in free verse. Ezekiel's clarity of thought, precision of words and phrases and use of imagery makes his poetry distinctly Indian. Ezekiel's primary concern is not the India which appeals to the west, but the India to which he truly belongs.

Ezekiel's education in convent and his stay in England for four years brought him perfection in English language. But it resulted in the loss of his mother tongue, Marathi. His background makes him natural outsider. The poet in Ezekiel is too self-conscious of artistic excellence while the man in him strives to explore the real meaning of existence through art. "Nissim Ezekiel in the Indian scene is a permanent expatriate, but one who has freely elected to stay. Displaced by his own spiritual past, he is in place by an act of the will. His eye is familiar with, but at a distance forms the object, and his specifically Indian poetry is both inward

and detached, a combination making for a peculiar strength and validity". (Walsh.1990.130)

1.3 Nissim Ezekiel: As A Dramatist

Ezekiel's fame rests mainly on his corpus of poetry. He is also known as an art critic. He bears the title of "Poet's Poet' with honour. His literary corpus in verse is astounding but as a dramatist, he has written only six plays. His plays are also very short in length; most of them are one-act plays. They are *Nalini, Marriage Poem, The Sleepwalkers, Song of Deprivation, Don't Call It Suicide and Who Needs No Introduction.* These plays are hardly unconventional, yet, the treatment and approach has something unconventional about it.

Ezekiel has contributed significantly to Indo-English poetry. The same cannot be said of his plays. Some of his plays have not been published even in the book form. He was not directly connected with any theater group and also his plays have not been performed widely. Yet his plays reflect contemporary condition of society, hollowness of human life, absurdities and themes he deals with in his verse.

Ezekiel was disturbed about the peripheral nature of modern existence. His poetic sensibility tries to locate the question of identity, isolation and alienation. The boundary between seriousness and triviality overlaps in his play *Nalini.* It is a feature of the comic playwright. The whole scene in *Nalini* is suggestive of mock seriousness. The truth is revealed without moralizing and with high seriousness. But Bharat and

Raj appears to be incapable of seriousness. Ezekiel shows us that the world before us is a shallow one where everything is unreal. This world has only commercial aspect. There is a self contradiction in Ezekiel's characters. Ezekiel shows the mixture of good and evil. Such weakness in the characters is presented with the help of confessional dialogues. Ezekiel has portrayed the split personalities.

The man-woman relationship is portrayed as something more than mere physicality. The male thinks of a female as a commodity and not as a human being. *Marriage Poem* centers on the extramarital affairs and the unhappy marriage. Ezekiel points out the opportunities that men have where women are socially and culturally bound. Ezekiel shows that giving suggestions for the others is very easy while implementing them in one's own life is very difficult. It is easy to advice but difficult to follow in one's own life. The extramarital affair is not a new theme but Ezekiel has portrayed the seriousness of the problem in the modern context. Ezekiel shows that there cannot be any conventional formula in emotional matters. Ezekiel portrayed the common incidents of everyday life, the incidents which are normal and natural. Ezekiel's plays avoid artificiality. The return to nature is a significant contribution of Ezekiel to Indo-English theatre.

In *The Sleepwalkers* the Indian guests wear masks. Ezekiel's masks are more revelatory than concealing. Ezekiel uses this device to make the types of characters. Ezekiel has portrayed the Indians dependence on foreigners. He shows the slavish mentality of Indians. The playwright points out the artificiality of modern society. The characters crave for publicity without being interested in reputation. This publicity mania in

Ezekiel's plays is very important in a commercial world. Ezekiel's characters keep away themselves from thinking. They live a surface life as they are representatives of commercial culture.

The paradigm between intellect and thoughtlessness is very dear to Ezekiel. Ezekiel's characters are individuals. They lack the togetherness in life. It is the depiction of loneliness. Ezekiel's characters try to hide their sorrows. The dreams in *Nalini* and *Marriage Poem* show the surrealistic nature of his plays. Ezekiel's women characters do not give in easily, they protest against circumstances.

The world which Ezekiel has presented is just a show of truth. The playwright shows the thin gap between genuineness and pose. Ezekiel shows the schizophrenic nature of the modern man who lives more than one life at once. Ezekiel's sensibility is significantly poetic. His concern for the problem of existence is revealed through the understanding of human nature. Ezekiel's art is not dependent on conventional forms but on his psychological understanding of personalities. Ezekiel was a conventional playwright but he has created a convention of his own which is not conventional.

Song of Deprivation is also a very small play. It has only two characters He and She. Ezekiel calls it as a comic morality. The characters are not named. It represents the sexual side of love. These two characters have a universal appeal. The play is observation of modern life. Ezekiel has portrayed it with mock purpose. Ezekiel speaks through these characters. Ezekiel is "laughing at the characters and through them at the world around him." (Rodrigues. 1986.130)

Ezekiel himself never thought about his plays too highly. In an interview, Ezekiel comments on his plays, "Everything that I've written, I feel I had to write. It was all an extension of myself. At times I felt I should concentrate on my poetry, but then I wrote the other things anyway, inspite of myself. They had to be. The thought of growing is important to me: I have a great enjoyment of being alive, even if living includes a lot of suffering, and I feel I have to live twelve lives simultaneously. But my focus has always been on myself as a poet. If I'm to attain any distinction as a poet, it'll have to be in spite of extending and over extending myself." (Beston.1979.48)

Ezekiel has written plays on his favourite themes – hollowness of urban middle class, futility of social mores and the institution of marriage. His plays provide social criticism. Irony, wit and satire are skillfully woven to expose the vanity of urban middle class people. Ezekiel himself stated that he did not think too badly of his plays, but also did not think very highly of them either. In an interview he also stated that: "I've been writing poetry for more than twenty years, while my plays were all written in 1968, quite recently. It is too early for me to start making comments on them."(Blackwell.1976.265)

1.4 Hypothesis

Ezekiel rose to fame as a poet and an art critic. His literary corpus in verse is astounding. That is why he is probably regarded as the most influential poet in the post-independence era. However, his career as a dramatist is hidden behind the curtain. This dissertation is an attempt at asking why he wanted to write plays. What was the compulsion that made

Ezekiel shift his genre form poetry to drama? What were the implications of this shift? Though the research work has been already done on Ezekiel's plays, there is no comprehensive statement made on him as a dramatist. This dissertation is an attempt to study not only the themes of his plays but also an attempt to show that however limited the dramatic corpus by him, yet it is important in the literary context and for the future readers of drama.

References:

1) Blackwell, Fritz. *Journal of South Asian Literature.*1976.
2) Beston, John B. *An Interview with Nissim Ezekiel: Indian Writing in English.* Sinha, K.N., ed. New Delhi: Heritage, 1979.
3) Naik, M.K. *A History of Indian English Literature.* New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1982.
4) Rodrigues, Santon. *The Plays: Journal of Indian Writing in English*, July 1986. 130.
5) Walsh, William. *Indian Literature in English.* United Kingdom: Longman Group, 1990.
6) Sharma, T.R., Comp. *Essays on Nissim Ezekiel.* Meerut: Shalabh Prakashan, 1994.
7) Dwivedi, A.N., ed. *Studies in Contemporary Indian English Drama.* New Delhi: Kalyani Publishers, 1999.
8) Talwar, Urmil and Chakrabarty Bandana, ed. *Contemporary Indian Drama: astride two traditions.* New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2005.
9) Tondon, Neeru, ed. *Perspective and Challenges in Indian-English Drama*: New Delhi: Atlantic, 2006.