Chapter II

Life and Works of Nissim Ezekiel

BARR. BALASAHEB KHARDEKAR LIBRARY
SHIVAJI UNIVERSITY, KOLHAPUR.

Chapter II

Life and Works of Nissim Ezekiel

2.1: Life and Works of Nissim Ezekiel:

Nissim Ezekiel was born in a Jewish (Bene-Israeli) family, on December 24, 1924 in Bombay (Mumbai). Ezekiel has inherited the academic background from his parents. His father has worked as a Principal in various colleges and also as a Professor of Botany and Zoology. His mother too has worked as Principal in a school founded by her. Ezekiel's father and mother passed away in 1969 and 1974 respectively. Ezekiel studied English at Wilson College, Mumbai and Philosophy at Birkbeck College, London. He worked as a Professor of English at the University of Mumbai and also as a Visiting Professor at the University of Leeds in 1964. In 1978, he was invited at the Rotterdam International Poetry Festival.

Ezekiel has also worked as a editor of the Quest; a bi-monthly and Poetry - India; a quarterly and encouraged new poets. He has been called as a 'Poet's poet'. He nurtured the upcoming talented poets in Mumbai. He has received Sahitya Akademi Award in 1983 and also Padma-Shri; India's highest civilian honour in 1988. Ezekiel received education mainly through missionary schools in Mumbai. He also worked as a part-time teacher at the Hansraj Morarji Public School, Mumbai while studying M.A. He stood first in Mumbai University in his M.A. examination which

won him the R.K. Lagu Prize. He published literary articles and reviews in various newspapers and periodicals.

Ezekiel went to England in 1948 and spent more than three years in achieving knowledge about theatre, philosophy and modern Indian culture. He left England in 1952 after publishing his first book of poems *A Time To Change*. He even worked as a deck-scrubber and coal carrier on an English cargo ship. He worked in various fields but writing becomes most prominent of all. He worked in the editorial staff of *The Illustrated Weekly of India* for two years. He broadcasted from 1952-62 on art and literature for the All India Radio, Mumbai.

Ezekiel married Daisy Jacob in 1952. In 1953, he joined Shilpi Advertising and worked as a copywriter and in 1957, went to America for some time as a manager of Shilpi. Later in 1959, he left Shilpi Advertising and came back to teaching. He has also worked for a picture frame manufacturing company, Chemould. Ezekiel's association with *Imprint*, the books monthly, gained him reputation as a critic. He wrote reviews in it for several years.

Ezekiel again joined as a Professor of English in Mithibai College of Arts, Mumbai, in 1961. He worked there till 1972. He has also worked as an art critic of *Times of India* from 1964-66. In 1967, Ezekiel again visited America and gave lectures at various colleges. He also delivered lectures on Indian writing in English at the University of Chicago. Ezekiel has also conducted a course in art appreciation during 1969-72 for various institutions. He also worked as a Reader in the Department of English,

Mumbai University. He was also a member of Sahitya Akademi and Lalit Kala Akademi.

In a way, Nissim Ezekiel was a versatile personality. He was a poet, lecturer, art critic, broadcaster of literature and art. But he was not fortunate enough with his familial life. His marriage was shattered. He has a son and two daughters but nobody looked after him in his last days. He passed away on Jan.9, 2004 in Mumbai at the age of seventy nine. He suffered from Alzheimer's disease. He was laid to rest at the Jewish Cemetery, Worli.

2.2: Works of Nissim Ezekiel:

Poetry:

A Time to Change and Other Poems. London: Fortune Press, 1952.

Sixty Poems. Published by the Author. Bombay, 1953.

The Third. Bombay: The Strand Book Shop, 1959.

The Unfinished Man. Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1960.

The Exact Name Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1965.

Snakeskin and Other Poems. (Translations of the Marathi poet Indira Sant) 1974.

Hymns in Darkness. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1976.

Latter Day Psalms. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982.

Collected Poems 1952-88. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Drama:

Three Plays: Nalini, Marriage Poem, The Sleepwalkers. Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1969.

Song of Deprivation. Enact, Delhi, July 1969.

Who Needs No Introduction. Enact, Delhi.

Don't Call It Suicide. Madras: McMillan, 1993.

Books edited by Nissim Ezekiel:

Indian Writers in Conference. Bombay: The P.E.N. All India Centre, 1964.

Writing in India. Bombay: The P.E.N. All India Centre, 1965.

An Emerson Reader. Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1965.

A Martin Luther King Reader. Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1969.

Arthur Miller. *All My Sons.* Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1972.

Literary Essays by Nissim Ezekiel:

Ideas and Modern Poetry: Indian Writers in Conference, 1964. 48-54.

Poetry and Philosophy: Quest 50, 1966. 25-30.

Poetry as Knowledge: Quest 76, 1972, 43-48.

Journals edited by Nissim Ezekiel:

Quest. From August 1955 to July 1957.

Imprint. 1961-1967. (Associate editor)

Poetry India. Six issues from January-March 1966 to April-June 1967.

Poetry Page of the Illustrated Weekly of India, 1969-73.

The Indian P.E.N.; Monthly journal of the P.E.N. All India Centre, Associate Editor since June 1973.

2.3: Critical reviews on Nissim Ezekiel:

1 "He is an excellent craftsman. The plays are merely theatrical plots without drama. Most of the action is in fact in action- the real

happening relegated to the arena of the reader's mind... It is Ezekiel the playwright laughing at the characters and through them at the world around him. The characters seldom grow beyond caricatures. Only in *Nalini* does Ezekiel succeed in going beyond the farcical. Otherwise, these are only drawing room plays about the banality and banter of life."
(Rodrigues.1986.130)

2 "In his satire of current fashion, in his exposure of pose and pretence, he comes very close to the spirit of some English social satirists in the theatre. Like them, he gives elaborate stage directions, visualizing his play as a thing not meant to be read but to be seen. This gives a certain totality of effect which cannot be imagined in cold print."
(Karnani.1974.126)

3 "Like Yeats and Eliot, Ezekiel has chosen to seek an expression in a different medium because there has been real paucity of Indian drama in English...But the paucity is not only quantitative but also qualitative. Ezekiel deplores the fact that there is no healthy critical environment for the creation of plays..." (Ibid.111)

4 "To begin with a supposition that a poet as a playwright provides certain interesting points of study seems quite relevant with respect to Nissim Ezekiel. His approach to theatre, quite unlike Eliot's, is with the prose drama and it would appear thus, that there is nothing in the plays that could even remotely approximate to poetic forms.

Yet, a deeper probe will show that the scenes and settings of his poetry, the characters who inhabit it and their essential attitudes and bias, constitute the world of his plays as also they reveal the true artist...In the process of poet's development there appears to be a shift in the gesture when he takes leave form poetry for the time being and chooses drama instead. No wonder, the plays as vehicle of the poet's basic attitude towards life and the world are static, individual wholes. What merits an evaluation here is their worth as drama – their techniques and the dramatist's sincerity."
(Rahman.1979.50)

5 "Nissim Ezekiel's plays do not present any philosophical, historical or psychological problems, but are basically the imaginative reconstructions of life as it is lived. The playwright is more interested in exposing the vices rather than highlighting the virtues. The themes are derived from Indian life; the scenes are common, the characters and situations being the types we confront quite often in real life. The plays represent the high and, at times, low tension of living in the contemporary Indian situation. The participants in his drama are presented with a psychological insight. There is little of action or tension in the plays and the scene is also laid in a single room. Such a situation is presented with technical proficiency on the stage. The playwright appears to be fully conversant with the problems of stage as is shown in his emphasis on scene and setting, sound, light, music, mask and vivid stage directions..."
(Ibid.51)

6 "Nissim Ezekiel, though recent in the history of Indo-English writing is one of the earliest writers using a comprehensive scepticism, as a verificatory discipline, by which are tested and controlled the many kinds of creative experiences we find in his writing...It is always interesting to watch a poet moving into play-writing, especially when the sequence is fairly clear. He is faced with the phenomenon of the response suddenly becoming immediate and close. Further, his function as a man among other men, and speaking to them, while paradoxically muting his own voice, presses upon him. Remotely he is challenged to shed some of his inhibitions and wear other inhibitions and, in the process, mould his creative sensibility to new purposes."
(Taranath.1974.117-118)

7 "The plays are in a minor vein, and it is to be regretted that Ezekiel has not followed them up so far with any attempt at writing major drama, particularly because there is a keen sense of the dramatic in some of his later poems." (Naik.1982.262)

8 "Ezekiel's sensibility is essentially poetic. His understanding of human nature shows his deep concern for the problem of existence. Without taking recourse to novelties of theatre technique, Ezekiel has been able to project the psychological malaise of the modern man. Moreover, the man-woman relationship that he portrays is not only limited to conventional understanding of meek submission, but points to independence-feminism without 'bile' in it. This is because he prefers to be covert and not loud. Ezekiel's art is not

dependent on conventions of form, but on his psychological understanding that a man's personality is, in the ultimate analysis, indefinable. There lies real drama." (Chakravartee.1994.93)

9 "In addition to dissecting the man-woman equation, his plays explore a wide range of gender related issues like power relationships in the family, sexual politics, gender inequality, and men's inability to accept rejection by women, and several others. Ezekiel makes an attempt to sensitize his audience to the problem and predicament of women and he deserves special credit for tackling these subjects much before the International Women's Year in 1975 after which India saw a proliferation of writing on gender themes. To that extent, the articulation of these crucial issues at a time when they were rarely raised underlines the significance of Ezekiel's achievement." (Mahan.2005.124)

References:

1) Taranath, Rajiv. *Ezekiel's Nalini: Indian Drama.* Gowda, Anniah H.H., ed. Mysore: Prasaranga, 1974.117-118.
2) Karnani, Chetan. *Nissim Ezekiel.* New Delhi: Arnold Heinemann publishers, 1974.126.
3) Blackwell, Fritz. *Journal of South Asian Literature.*1976.
4) Rahman, Anisur. *Techniques and Motif in Nissim Ezekiel's Three Plays: Indian Writing in English.* Sinha, K.N., ed. New Delhi: Heritage, 1979.50.
5) Naik, M.K. *A History of Indian English Literature.* New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1982.262.
6) Rodrigues, Santan. *The Plays: Journal of Indian Writing in English*, July 1986. 130.
7) Chakravartee, Moutushi. *An Unconventional Conventionalist: Nissim EzekielAs Playwright: Essays on Nissim Ezekiel.* Sharma, T.R., Comp. Meerut: Shalabh Prakashan, 1994.93.
8) Mahan, Shaila. *Viewing Women: An Exploration of Ezekiel's Plays: Contemporary Indian Drama: astride two traditions.* Talwar, Urmil and Chakrabarty, Bandana, eds. New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2005.124.