

Symbolism in the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel

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Abstract

Poetry has emerged as an art in the modern Indian literature and poets have been using it to express their thoughts and ideas through poetic licence. Nissim Ezekiel was a great poet of our country who won millions of hearts through his style of writing. The symbolism he used in his work had deep meaning which can encourage any reader to think further about the life from a fresh perspective. His work was awarded time to time with Padmashri in 1988 and Sahitya Akademi in 1983. To understand his notable contributions in the world of Indian poetry, it is very important to know about the techniques he used in his writing. Symbolism is one of the most appreciated techniques he used in his poems which justifies his intellectual approach in his writing styles. Symbolism is basically an art of expressing ideas and thoughts through symbols. For example in one of his popular poems called 'Enterprise' Nissim has made meaningful use of symbols to present his ideas. The word 'pilgrimage' in his poem symbolises life, 'sun' symbolises hostility between nature and human aspirations, 'thunder' symbolises your inner voice and so on. The use of symbols in his poetry has given beautiful meaning to his ideas which can be easily related and understood by all of us.

Keywords:; Poetry, Symbolism, Indian writers, Literature.

Nissim Ezekiel (1924-2004) was a Mumbai based poet who did a lot of work illustrating human nature. His vast collection of poetry has left a remarkable impact on the young writers and they consider him as their source of inspiration. Nissim's poem collection includes 'The Couple', 'Enterprise', 'A time to change', 'Philosophy', 'Island', 'The professor', 'Soap', 'Marriage', 'Night of the scorpion' and many more as this list is quite long to mention here. He also wrote many books, plays and prose and became a popular English writer of the modern era. In one of his popular interviews with Malvika R khanna, Nissim Ezekiel said:

"It was the total silence of my hotel room, that made me want to write. I had no reading material with me but a copy of the Gideon Bible beside my bed. I read some of my favourite passages from Jonah and Job, then turned to Psalms. I've had a special relationship with them since the age of twelve, a dissenting relationship, which had been suppressed. Feeling, stretching over 40 years, suddenly crystallized. Before leaving Rotterdam, I had completed nine Latter Day Psalms, the tenth and concluding one being written in Berlin." [1]

Nissim's most of the work belongs to the era when we did not have the privilege of using internet or any of the online libraries. That time used to be when the writers used to observe the world around them and their work represented their ideas and thoughts based on their observation. The creativity added interest to the mundane happening of life and encouraged the readers to go through and understand his work. 'Unfinished man' depicts symbolism using urban theme to describe the objects of nature and its significance. The poem says:

“The hills are always far away.

He knows the broken roads,

And moves in circles tracked within his head.

Before he wakes and has his say,

The river which he claims he loves is dry,

And all the winds lie dead.

At dawn he never sees the skies which,

Silently, are born again.

Nor feels the shadow of the night

Recline their fingers on his eyes,

He welcomes neither sun nor rain.

His landscape has no depth or height.” [2]

The nature’s symbols hills, roads, river, wind, sky, sun and rain symbolises the impact of nature on humans and their cultural revolution. The symbols used here act like a metaphor to explain the happenings around the writer in a most relevant manner. The reliability of his work has been noted and appreciated everywhere. Christopher Wiseman was the first one to analyse the writing technique of Nissim Ezekiel and had made the following observation

“Prior to The Exact Name, Ezekiel’s poetry is notable for an extreme technical formality. In this of course, he was merely reflecting the conventions of the 1950’s when most poets of the English speaking world were obsessed with low toned poetry, carefully worked in traditional metrical and stanza forms, Not surprisingly Ezekiel’s poetry of this period fits squarely into this convention with strong metres, formal stanza structures and regular rhyme. It’s my convention however, that he is never completely happy in this style, that it often restricts and limits him and that his real voice is often suppressed. I think it is significant that Ezekiel never experimented with traditional forms to the extent that most British or American poets did, seeming to be content with strict accentual syllabic patterns and relatively straightforward stanza forms, and . For all his obvious innate talent, many of his earlier poems suffer from an almost mechanical rigidity, a monotony of sound which deadens and weighs down the buoyancy of his content.” [3]

The observation reveals that the Nissim’s style of writing has been highly technical and conventional. His ideas were presented formally and were not experimental. His rhyming added weight to his thoughts and the meanings came out with beautiful learning. Since independence, the face of Indian culture has been changing and the writers have been depicting the same in their work. Nissim Ezekiel confessed the same in one of his talks and said

“I am conscious of my very special situation in relation to India, as a poet, but as a person and citizen I identify myself completely with the country. Its politics, social life, civic problems, education, economic difficulties, cultural dilemmas are all part of my daily life. I would like that identification to be fully expressed in my poetry but it is perhaps only partially so.” [4]

He clearly explains the changing aspects of our country along with his dilemma about this cultural revolution. He speaks about every aspect of the changing world and has tried to portray the same through his writings. In his work of 'Sixty Poems', called a poem of dedication, he talks about the harmony of life and nature where he says

"There is a landscape certainly,
 the sea Among its broad realities, attracts
 Because it is a symbol of the free Demonic life within,
 Hardly suggested by the surface facts,
 And rivers what a man can hope to win
 By simple flowing, learning how to flow,
 And trees imply an obvious need of roots,
 Besides that all organic growth is slow.
 Both poetry and living illustrate:
 Each season brings its own peculiar fruits,
 A time to act, a time to contemplate" [5]

Each symbol of nature used here has a meaning and has been compared with life to give a meaning to this symbolic relationship existing in harmony. These symbols expand the horizon of thoughts and bring out a special meaning to the change happening in the world. For one of his popular work, 'The unfinished man', K.D.Verma said that

"The imaginative cosmos of the Romantics presupposes the capacity of the mind to experience infinitude and consists of both the worlds of experience and reality. It is a world in which the heroic spirit of man projects his totality of being, thereby achieving fulfilment, self-realization and identity. Although the world of experience, the fallen world, stands in an ironic contrast to the ideal world, the two worlds together offer a full and comprehensive canvas, both in terms of form and content, to represent life and reality. Much of the modern poetry, on the contrary, subscribes to the view that the nature of man is finite and that its principal concern is the world of experience, the image of life as it is, the fallen world like that of Eliot's *The Waste Land*, or the usurious world of Pound's *The Cantos*. However, there is a significant thread of continuity running through the two sensibilities, especially in reordering and restructuring literature as a total order of experience: as the Romantic myth of freedom, equality, wholeness and happiness is a radical reconstruction of imaginative experience in which the entire hierarchy of symbols is displaced, so is the modern myth in its representation of life." [6]

In one of the critically acclaimed work of Nissim Ezekiel 'Enterprise', the symbolism has been used to describe nature and human emotions. It says

"Symbolism: 'Enterprise' is a symbolic poem. Symbolism refers to the use of symbols to represent ideas or facts. The various symbols used in Enterprise are listed below: *Pilgrimage in the poem symbolizes life. *The 'crowd of pilgrims' symbolizes a group of men, who undertake to achieve common goal which begins with excitement and hope but ends with disillusionment and

frustration. *The 'Sun' is the symbol of hostility of nature towards human aspirations and ambitions. *A 'desert patch' is symbolic of the challenges and hardships which the group faces or the differences that rise among them. * 'A shadow falls on us and grows' is symbolic of the differences in opinion that leads to a discord in the enterprise and consequently, a member leaves the group and the disharmony grows. * 'A straggling crowd of little hope' symbolizes a group of people who had a well-focused goal and during the course of their journey loses their zeal and becomes a crowd of aimless and frustrated wanderers. * 'Thunder' is symbolic of man's inner voice. * 'Home' symbolizes remaining rooted to the soil or remaining true to oneself." [7]

The poem talks about the journey of life at each stage and is compared with the symbols of nature to explain the human emotions. It talks about the feelings at the start of the journey of human life when vigour and enthusiasm is high. The poem then talks about the hardships faced by people in their life which has been indicated by the hostility of nature. Ezekiel's usage of words in the poetry has been very simple and has been relatable to the common people. His choice of symbols and expression of ideas has always been appreciated and well known for his simplicity. Dr. Hareshwar Roy in his analysis of Ezekiel's poetic technique said that

"Nissim Ezekiel uses highly evocative and suggestive symbols and images in his poetry. Through these devices he makes the abstract concrete. The women, the city and the nature are recurring images in his poetry. Hills, rivers, winds, skies, sun and rain are also some important images. With the help of these natural images Ezekiel skilfully evokes graphic picture of human life. Ezekiel's best poems have an indefinable pictorial quality. They show an obvious affinity with the visual arts. For instance in 'In India' the poet has given us vivid pictures of Bombay." [8]

This supports the fact that Ezekiel's style of writing was not only impressive but artistic. His exact usage of symbols to express his ideas was an example of his creativity. In his poem 'Night of the Scorpion', the writer recalls the time when his mother was bit and poisoned by a scorpion. He described the feeling of his mother by the words

"My mother only said
Thank God the scorpion picked on me
and spared my children." [9]

The feeling of this mother has been beautifully described using these lines and Nissim has been ironic in using the expression 'Thank God' to exemplify the expression of his mother's thoughts. Nissim Ezekiel depicts real image of India in his modern poetry. His work has a balance of the two worlds, the traditional and modern India. Bruce King rightly claimed that

"A large proportion of the significant history of modern Indian poetry in English was made by or has some connection to Ezekiel. In a world of increasingly narrow specializations he showed that it is possible to be a poet, a man of letters, and an intellectual actively engaged with culture and politics." [10]

This states that literature has gone through a lot of change over the period of time and it becomes a great responsibility for the writers' to talk about that change in their work and make people understand about it. The work of Nissim Ezekiel has been phenomenal in capturing that change over the period of time. His symbolic writing style would be appreciated and remembered even after his demise and the world will remember him for his amazing writing style. HE would be the source of inspiration for many writers all around the world.

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