

Classic Poetry Series

Nissim Ezekiel
- poems -

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Nissim Ezekiel(16 December 1924 - 9 January 2004)

Nissim Ezekiel was an Indian Jewish poet, playwright, editor and art-critic. He was a foundational figure in postcolonial India's literary history, specifically for Indian writing in English.

He was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1983 for his Poetry collection, "Latter-Day Psalms", by the Sahitya Akademi, India's National Academy of Letters.

Early Life

Ezekiel was born on 16 December 1924 in Bombay (Maharashtra). His father, Moses Ezekiel, was a professor of botany at Wilson College, and his mother was principal of her own school. The Ezekiels belonged to Mumbai's Jewish community, known as the 'Bene Israel' . In 1947, Ezekiel earned a BA in Literature from Wilson College, Mumbai, University of Mumbai. In 1947-48, he taught English literature and published literary articles. After dabbling in radical politics for a while, he sailed to England in November 1948. He studied philosophy at Birkbeck College, London. After three and a half years stay, Ezekiel worked his way home as a deck-scrubber aboard a ship carrying arms to Indochina.

He married Daisy Jacob in 1952. In the same year, Fortune Press published his first collection of poetry, *The Bad Day*. He joined *The Illustrated Weekly of India* as an assistant editor in 1953 and stayed there for two years. Soon after his return from London, he published his second book of verse *Ten Poems*. For the next 10 years, he also worked as a broadcaster on Art and literature for All India Radio.

Career

Ezekiel's first book, *The Bad Day*, appeared in 1952. He published another volume of poems, *The Deadly Man* in 1960. After working as an advertising copywriter and general manager of a picture frame company (1954–59), he co-founded the literary monthly *Jumpo*, in 1961. He became art critic of *The Names of India* (1964–66) and edited *Poetry India* (1966–67). From 1961 to 1972, he headed the English department of Mithibai College, Bombay. *The Exact Name*, his fifth book of poetry was published in 1965. During this period he held short-term tenure as visiting professor at University of Leeds (1964) and University of Pondicherry (1967). In 1967, while in America, he experimented with LSD. In

1969, Writers Workshop, Kozhikode published his *The Damn Plays*. A year later, he presented an art series of ten programmes for Indian television. In 1976, he translated Jawarharlal Nehru poetry from Marathi, in collaboration with Vrinda Nabar, and co-edited a fiction and poetry anthology. His poem *The Night Of The Scorpion* is used as study material in Indian and Columbian schools. Ezekiel also penned poems in 'Indian English' like the one based on instruction boards in his favourite Irani café. His poems are used in NCERT English textbooks.

Goodbye Party For Miss Pushpa T.S.

Friends,
our dear sister
is departing for foreign
in two three days,
and
we are meeting today
to wish her bon voyage.

You are all knowing, friends,
What sweetness is in Miss Pushpa.
I don't mean only external sweetness
but internal sweetness.
Miss Pushpa is smiling and smiling
even for no reason but simply because
she is feeling.

Miss Pushpa is coming
from very high family.
Her father was renowned advocate
in Bulsar or Surat,
I am not remembering now which place.

Surat? Ah, yes,
once only I stayed in Surat
with family members
of my uncle's very old friend-
his wife was cooking nicely...
that was long time ago.

Coming back to Miss Pushpa
she is most popular lady
with men also and ladies also.

Whenever I asked her to do anything,
she was saying, 'Just now only
I will do it.' That is showing
good spirit. I am always
appreciating the good spirit.

Pushpa Miss is never saying no.
Whatever I or anybody is asking
she is always saying yes,
and today she is going
to improve her prospect
and we are wishing her bon voyage.
Now I ask other speakers to speak
and afterwards Miss Pushpa
will do summing up.

Nissim Ezekiel

Island

Unsuitable for song as well as sense
the island flowers into slums
and skyscrapers, reflecting
precisely the growth of my mind.
I am here to find my way in it.
Sometimes I cry for help
But mostly keep my own counsel.
I hear distorted echoes
Of my own ambiguous voice
and of dragons claiming to be human.
Bright and tempting breezes
Flow across the island,
Separating past from the future;
Then the air is still again
As I sleep the fragrance of ignorance.
How delight the soul with absolute
sense of salvation, how
hold to a single willed direction?
I cannot leave the island,
I was born here and belong.
Even now a host of miracles
hurries me a daily business,
minding the ways of the island
as a good native should,
taking calm and clamour in my stride.

Nissim Ezekiel

Jewish Wedding In Bombay

Her mother shed a tear or two but wasn't really crying. It was the thing to do, so she did it enjoying every moment. The bride laughed when I sympathized, and said don't be silly.

Her brothers had a shoe of mine and made me pay to get it back. The game delighted all the neighbours' children, who never stopped staring at me, the reluctant bridegroom of the day.

There was no dowry because they knew I was 'modern' and claimed to be modern too. Her father asked me how much jewellery I expected him to give away with his daughter. When I said I didn't know, he laughed it off.

There was no brass band outside the synagogue but I remember a chanting procession or two, some rituals, lots of skull-caps, felt hats, decorated shawls and grape juice from a common glass for bride and bridegroom.

I remember the breaking of the glass and the congregation clapping which signified that we were well and truly married according to the Mosaic Law.

Well that's about all. I don't think there was much that struck me as solemn or beautiful. Mostly, we were amused, and so were the others. Who knows how much belief we had?

Even the most orthodox it was said ate beef because it was cheaper, and some even risked their souls by relishing pork.

The Sabbath was for betting and swearing and drinking.

Nothing extravagant, mind you, all in a low key and very decently kept in check. My father used to say, these orthodox chaps certainly know how to draw the line in their own crude way. He himself had drifted into the liberal

creed but without much conviction, taking us all with him.
My mother was very proud of being 'progressive'.

Anyway as I was saying, there was that clapping and later we went to the photographic studio of Lobo and Fernandes, world-famous specialists in wedding portraits. Still later, we lay on a floor-matress in the kitchen of my wife's family apartment and though it was part midnight she kept saying let's do it darling let's do it darling so we did it.

More than ten years passed before she told me that she remembered being very disappointed. Is that all there is to it? She had wondered. Back from London eighteen months earlier, I was horribly out of practice.

During our first serious marriage quarrel she said Why did you take my virginity from me? I would gladly have returned it, but not one of the books I had read instructed me how.

Nissim Ezekiel

Minority Poem

In my room, I talk
to my invisible guests:
they do not argue, but wait

Till I am exhausted,
then they slip away
with inscrutable faces.

I lack the means to change
their amiable ways,
although I love their gods.

It's the language really
separates, whatever else
is shared. On the other hand,

Everyone understands
Mother Theresa; her guests
die visibly in her arms.

It's not the mythology
or the marriage customs
that you need to know,

It's the will to pass
through the eye of a needle
to self-forgetfulness.

The guests depart, dissatisfied;
they will never give up
their mantras, old or new.

And you, uneasy
orphan of their racial
memories, merely

Polish up your alien
techniques of observation,
while the city burns.

Nissim Ezekiel

Night Of The Scorpion

I remember the night my mother
was stung by a scorpion. Ten hours
of steady rain had driven him
to crawl beneath a sack of rice.

Parting with his poison - flash
of diabolic tail in the dark room -
he risked the rain again.

The peasants came like swarms of flies
and buzzed the name of God a hundred times
to paralyse the Evil One.

With candles and with lanterns
throwing giant scorpion shadows
on the mud-baked walls
they searched for him: he was not found.
They clicked their tongues.

With every movement that the scorpion made his poison moved in Mother's
blood, they said.

May he sit still, they said
May the sins of your previous birth
be burned away tonight, they said.
May your suffering decrease
the misfortunes of your next birth, they said.
May the sum of all evil
balanced in this unreal world

against the sum of good
become diminished by your pain.
May the poison purify your flesh

of desire, and your spirit of ambition,
they said, and they sat around
on the floor with my mother in the centre,
the peace of understanding on each face.
More candles, more lanterns, more neighbours,
more insects, and the endless rain.

My mother twisted through and through,
groaning on a mat.
My father, sceptic, rationalist,
trying every curse and blessing,
powder, mixture, herb and hybrid.
He even poured a little paraffin
upon the bitten toe and put a match to it.
I watched the flame feeding on my mother.
I watched the holy man perform his rites to tame the poison with an incantation.
After twenty hours
it lost its sting.

My mother only said
Thank God the scorpion picked on me
And spared my children.

Nissim Ezekiel

Philosophy

There is a place to which I often go,
Not by planning to, but by a flow
Away from all existence, to a cold
Lucidity, whose will is uncontrolled.
Here, the mills of God are never slow.

The landscape in its geological prime
Dissolves to show its quintessential slime.
A million stars are blotted out. I think
Of each historic passion as a blink
That happened to the sad eye of Time.

But residues of meaning still remain,
As darkest myths meander through the pain
Towards a final formula of light.
I, too, reject this clarity of sight.
What cannot be explained, do not explain.

The mundane language of the senses sings
Its own interpretations. Common things
Become, by virtue of their commonness,
An argument against their nakedness
That dies of cold to find the truth it brings.

Nissim Ezekiel

Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher

To force the pace and never to be still
Is not the way of those who study birds
Or women. The best poets wait for words.
The hunt is not an exercise of will
But patient love relaxing on a hill
To note the movement of a timid wing;
Until the one who knows that she is loved
No longer waits but risks surrendering -
In this the poet finds his moral proved
Who never spoke before his spirit moved.

The slow movement seems, somehow, to say much more.
To watch the rarer birds, you have to go
Along deserted lanes and where the rivers flow
In silence near the source, or by a shore
Remote and thorny like the heart's dark floor.
And there the women slowly turn around,
Not only flesh and bone but myths of light
With darkness at the core, and sense is found
But poets lost in crooked, restless flight,
The deaf can hear, the blind recover sight.

Nissim Ezekiel

Soap

Some people are not having manners,
this I am always observing,
For example other day I find
I am needing soap
For ordinary washing myself purposes.
So I'm going to one small shop
nearby in my lane and I'm asking
for well-known brand soap.

That shopman he's giving me soap
but I'm finding it defective version.
So I'm saying very politely — -
though in Hindi I'm saying it,
and my Hindi is not so good as my English,
Please to excuse me
but this is defective version of well-known brand soap.

That shopman is saying
and very rudely he is saying it,
What is wrong with soap?
Still I am keeping my temper
and repeating very smilingly
Please to note this defect in soap,
and still he is denying the truth.

So I'm getting very angry that time
and with loud voice I am saying
YOU ARE BLIND OR WHAT?
Now he is shouting
YOU ARE CALLING ME BLIND OR WHAT?
Come outside and I will show you
Then I am shouting
What you will show me
Which I haven't got already?
It is vulgar thing to say
but I am saying it.

Now small crowd is collecting
and shopman is much bigger than me,

and I am not caring so much
for small defect in well-known brand soap.
So I'm saying
Alright OK Alright OK
this time I will take
but not next time.

Nissim Ezekiel

The Hill

This normative hill
like all others
is transparently accessible,
out there
and in the mind,
not to be missed
except in peril of one's life.

Do not muse on it
from a distance:
it's not remote
for the view only,
it's for the sport
of climbing.

What the hill demands
is a man
with forces flowering
as from the crevices
of rocks and rough surfaces
wild flowers
force themselves towards the sun
and burn
for a moment.

How often must I
say to myself
what I say to others:
trust your nerves—
in conversation or in bed
the rhythm comes.

And once you begin
hang on for life.
What is survival?
What is existence?
I am not talking about
poetry. I am
talking about

perishing
outrageously
and calling it
activity.
I say: be done with it.
I say:
you've got to love that hill.

Be wrathful, be impatient
that you are not
on the hill. Do not forgive
yourself or other,
though charity
is all very well.
Do not rest
in irony or acceptance.
Man should not laugh
when he is dying.
In decent death
you flow into another kind of time
which is the hill
you always thought you knew.

Nissim Ezekiel

The Patriot

I am standing for peace and non-violence.
Why world is fighting fighting
Why all people of world
Are not following Mahatma Gandhi,
I am simply not understanding.
Ancient Indian Wisdom is 100% correct,
I should say even 200% correct,
But modern generation is neglecting -
Too much going for fashion and foreign thing.
Other day I'm reading newspaper
(Every day I'm reading Times of India
To improve my English Language)
How one goonda fellow
Threw stone at Indirabehn.
Must be student unrest fellow, I am thinking.
Friends, Romans, Countrymen, I am saying (to myself)
Lend me the ears.
Everything is coming -
Regeneration, Remuneration, Contraception.
Be patiently, brothers and sisters.
You want one glass lassi?
Very good for digestion.
With little salt, lovely drink,
Better than wine;
Not that I am ever tasting the wine.
I'm the total teetotaller, completely total,
But I say
Wine is for the drunkards only.
What you think of prospects of world peace?
Pakistan behaving like this,
China behaving like that,
It is making me really sad, I am telling you.
Really, most harassing me.
All men are brothers, no?
In India also
Gujaratis, Maharashtrians, Hindiwallahs
All brothers -
Though some are having funny habits.
Still, you tolerate me,

I tolerate you,
One day Ram Rajya is surely coming.
You are going?
But you will visit again
Any time, any day,
I am not believing in ceremony
Always I am enjoying your company.

Nissim Ezekiel

The Professor

Remember me? I am Professor Sheth.
Once I taught you geography. Now
I am retired, though my health is good.
My wife died some years back.
By God's grace, all my children
Are well settled in life.
One is Sales Manager,
One is Bank Manager,
Both have cars.
Other also doing well, though not so well.
Every family must have black sheep.
Sarala and Tarala are married,
Their husbands are very nice boys.
You won't believe but I have eleven grandchildren.
How many issues you have? Three?
That is good. These are days of family planning.
I am not against. We have to change with times.
Whole world is changing. In India also
We are keeping up. Our progress is progressing.
Old values are going, new values are coming.
Everything is happening with leaps and bounds.
I am going out rarely, now and then
Only, this is price of old age
But my health is O.K. Usual aches and pains.
No diabetes, no blood pressure, no heart attack.
This is because of sound habits in youth.
How is your health keeping?
Nicely? I am happy for that.
This year I am sixty-nine
and hope to score a century.
You were so thin, like stick,
Now you are man of weight and consequence.
That is good joke.
If you are coming again this side by chance,
Visit please my humble residence also.
I am living just on opposite house's backside.

Nissim Ezekiel

Urban

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 shadows of the night
Recline their fingers on his eyes.
He welcomes neither sun nor rain.
His landscape has no depth or height.

The city like a passion burns.
He dreams of morning walks, alone,
And floating on a wave of sand.
But still his mind its traffic turns
Away from beach and tree and stone
To kindred clamour close at hand.

Nissim Ezekiel