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Reminiscing Indian Sensibility in the Selected Poems of Nissim Ezekiel and A.K. Ramanujan

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Abstract:

Indian English Poetry has been a major campaigner of the country's ethos, culture, belief systems, societal norms and familial values besides its spiritual and philosophical principles. Among the noted poets, Nissim Ezekiel and A.K. Ramanujan have been vociferous about Indian consciousness. The raw material, ideas, nuances and images in most of the poems are genuinely Indian. Everytime when their poems are critiqued the flavor and aroma of Indian milieu lends a pleasant and nostalgic feelings. The present endeavour Reminiscing Indian Sensibility in the Selected Poems of Nissim Ezekiel and A.K. Ramanujan tries to revisit those poems to explore the Indianness and their adherence to Indian values. Juxtaposing their poems and correlating them is a rewarding exercise. The paper looks at the identical aspects in selected poems of the two writers and offers insights about their Indian sensibility.

Keywords: Indian English Poetry, Indianness, Indian values, Indian sensibility.

Nissim Ezekiel and A.K. Ramanujan's poetical works lend us the taste and essence of Indian culture, tradition, psyche and familial values. At a juncture when Indian writers were decolonizing their minds and contemplating to free themselves from the fetters of cultural imposition, they strengthened the mission of protecting the Indian ethos through their poetical offspring. Unlike the early Indian poets such as Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu who initially were aping the Euro centric ideas and depicting nature's splendor and grace, they left no stone unturned to present the native and cherished thoughts which enhanced the value and worth of Indian English Literature. In the present endeavour Reminiscing Indian Sensibility in the Selected poems of Nissim Ezekiel and A.K. Ramanujan- attempts to examine the Indian ness in

some of their selected poems by juxtaposing their works contextually. It is not out of place to mention that these viewpoints are developed after relishing the experience of teaching the poems which by all means is a rewarding experience. Teaching literature especially poetry is truly aesthetic enriching one's own literary sensibility. The intention is not cotton stuff the paper with critical quotes and it is intended to explore the evocative musings in some of their poems.

The theme of familial bonds and intimate relationships is one coral area in the writings of Ezekiel and Ramanujan. Two poems *The Night of the Scorpion (The Exact Name 1965)* and *Of Mothers among all Other Things (1971)* reveal the sanctity of a mother who is an epitome of patience, love and sacrifice. In both the poems one finds a true mother who derives pleasure in sharing love and who is concerned about the safety and security of her children. The depiction of fond relationship between mother and children is a tribute to Indian familial values which form the basis for stronger and affectionate relationships. Ezekiel's poem peripherally is all about the scorpion bite episode denouncing the blind superstitions and meaningless rituals. Bu an in-depth reading gives an impression about the typical Indian psyche. The gathering of the peasants is typical Indian scene where people especially the rural folk come forward to offer help to the needy and suffering. It is contrary to what called invasion of privacy which is a fashionable expression today is used in Cosmopolitan societies. The crowd, though irrational, in their frantic search for the scorpion has singular agenda of providing respite to the victim. The philosophical thoughts, notions of rebirth and previous birth emerge from Indian thinking. Ezekiel's mention about the poison purifying the thoughts and cleansing the evil originate from Indian consciousness. The twist in the poem is the craving of the mother and her thanksgiving to the Almighty for sparing her children which is Indian sensibility. The following lines 'Thank God, the scorpion picked on me and spared my children' speak volumes about the mother-children relationship which has its own sentimentality in the Indian context. Of course, the universality of mother's love cannot be ignored.

A.K. Ramanujan's poem *Of Mother's Among all Other things (Relations, 1971)* is the poet's admiration for his mother who has been affectionate, caring and protective at all times. The poet recollects the image of her mother in her youth, the resplendent light from her diamond studded earrings and the soothing touch of her silk saree. The picture of an Indian woman traditionally dressed passes through one's mind's eye and the poet reminiscences it. His mother



is worried about the ‘splash of handful needles’ and rushes to the rescue of the crying children in the cradles. In her youth she is quick and agile like an anxious eagle rushing to save her little ones. In pursuit of protecting her children she hurts herself and doesn’t bother about the pain caused by the injury. Like the victim of scorpion bite in *Night of the Scorpion* she bears the agony and longs for the well being of her dear children. The poet proceeds to visualize the image of her mother who grows old and “His saris do not cling: they hang loose feather of one-time wing”. (21).

The poet presents the divine nature of Mother and Indian belief of considering mother as God. The dictum of *Mathrudevo Bhava* is typically an occidental and Indian in particular. Yet another idea that displays Indian sensibility on the part of the poet is the image of his mother picking the grain of rice from the floor with great difficulty. It is a picture of an Indian mother who scrupulously saves everything for the children sacrificing her own comforts. It is small scale representation of austere life by abandoning the luxuries characteristic of the west. Hari Mohan Prasad (2002) in his introductory remarks about A.K. Ramanujan in his compilation Indian poetry in English makes the following observation:

“His poetry has nothing palpably American or British; it communicates most naturally and unaffectedly the Indian sensibility”. (Preface)

The commonality in the poems lies in depiction of a mother and the adoration that she receives in India for her endurance, magnanimity, selflessness and sense of sharing.

The portrayal of human relationships in the poems of Nissim Ezekiel and A.K. Ramanujan on keener observation reveals their propensity to Indian familial and social values which form the basis for a healthier society. In the poem ‘Professor’ (*Collected Poems*, 1989) which can be termed as a specimen of Indian English, Ezekiel writes about a retired Professor and a family man who seeks the welfare of one and all including his student yearning for his attention. The following lines express the importance of familial bonds in India:

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. (34)

Both have cars. Others also doing well, though not so well.

He foresees a bright future for the country and reposes faith in its progress. The obsession of what is humane is the hallmark of Ezekiel's poems. The language of Ezekiel in the poem today and forever stands as an example for Indian English used without flowery and cosmetic touches.

In the poem *Visitor* the speaker is unsure about the result of the guest's visit and wants things to be cordial and friendly. The thought of coexisting in spite of differences is a cherishable Indian trait. The cawing of the crow in the poem perplexes the speaker and he becomes cognizant about his own terms. The state of mind is best expressed in the following lines:

“To meet the visitor whose terms
I knew would compromise my own” (42)

The ending of the poem, with a tinge of philosophy about 'ordinariness of things' reflects Indian sensibility.

A.K. Ramanujan's simple yet striking poem *Self –Portrait* has philosophical overtones about the perennial quest for the self. The poet launches a rigorous search to explore his own identity as he is caught in the web of multiple identities. He brings into context the concept of optics which complicates his mission. Constant obsession for self realization is an Indian tendency.

Ezekiel undertakes a similar task of self exploration in the poem *Philosophy* (*Collected Poems, 1989*) and wonders at the mysteries of the infinite. The common factor in *Self Portrait* and *Philosophy* is the quest for truth. The Indian sensibility lies in reposing faith in belief systems and continuing efforts in search of the truth.

Concern for the poor and the needy is conspicuous in the poems of A.K. Ramanujan and Nissim Ezekiel. In the poem *A River* (*Relations 1971*) Ramanujan appeals to the poets to be more humane and not to be merely report human miseries. He wants them to lend human touch to their creative works. The vivid and artistic description of the floods washing away the houses and inundating the cobbled steps is undoubtedly poetic. But the poets lacked the Indian consciousness which calls for large heartedness and empathy. Poetry probably in Ramanujan's view is not glorification of greener pastures, brooks and streams. Literature aiming at addressing the problems of human existence is more meaningful and purposeful. The agony of



a woman who was expecting twins according to the poet skipped the poetic imagination making the poetry less intense. Unlike the British Romantic poets who were engrossed in painting in best colors Ramanujan articulates the true tales of suffering without causing any dent to aesthetic part of literature.

The Poverty Poems -2 (Collected Poems 1989) by Nissim Ezekiel also convey similar sentiments and anxieties about those who are unfortunate and dispossessed. He writes about a deaf and dumb leper who leaves imprints in his mind stimulating his poetic imagination. He perceives the ‘zest’ in the soulful singing of the leper who sings in praise of the Almighty. The predicament of a beggar becomes raw material for the poet to expand his horizon of thinking and express his passionate feelings. The beauty lies in comparing the beggar to a ‘happy saint’ who gains happiness by seeking inner peace and renouncing everything. It is again a typical Indian philosophical notion to surrender before Him and be contended.

The poem *Goodbye party Miss Pushpa T. S (Hymns in Darkness 1976)* in a certain sense a dig at those people who crave to go the West in search of comforts and luxuries. The befitting farewell to sweet mannered and ever smiling Puspha is a pretext to mock at those who go in search of bigger fortunes leaving the motherland. The Post Colonial Indian tendency to migrate to the West is presented in discreet terms.

The quantum of Indian Sensibility in the poems of Nissim Ezekiel and A.K. Ramanujan is significant. Both made the presence of the nation in their works apparent and appealing. The country is deeply rooted in their thought processes. Both were critical of meaningless rituals and customs which become stumbling blocks in making progress and more civilized. Ramanujan called for the audacity to break the taboos and Ezekiel denounced orthodox.

Regardless of the advent of various trends in Indian poetry, Ezekiel and Ramanujan remain ever relevant and worth critiquing. Their efforts to glorify the local yet universal elements and lend them Indian hue make their creative works more relishing and admirable. Indian realities which caught the attention of these poets received true and genuine response in the form of some very fine pieces of poetry.

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