



An Effigy of Insecurities: A Study of Dichotomy of the Indian Urban Space in Nissim Ezekiel's poem "Minority Poem"

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Abstract

This academic study delves into the poetic oeuvre of Nissim Ezekiel, a quintessential post-independent Indian poet, renowned for his cold, detached, and analytical style. Ezekiel's poetic expressions serve as a canvas for his skepticism and anxieties, reflecting a nuanced portrayal of the dichotomies inherent in modern-day Indian life. Employing a brisk conversational style, Ezekiel navigates the complexities of contemporary existence, revealing ironies through meticulous observations.

The analysis centers on Ezekiel's poem "Minority Poem," where he skillfully juxtaposes mythic traditions of a bygone era with the stark urban reality, presenting a compelling exploration of the collision between the past and the present. The poem serves as a microcosm for Ezekiel's broader thematic concerns—his frustration with the mundane aspects of human existence confined within imperceptible, contradictory, and ephemeral spaces.

This study scrutinizes Ezekiel's worldview, contending that his analytical approach unveils the challenges faced by individuals in negotiating the evolving socio-cultural landscape. Moreover, it examines how Ezekiel's vision for his nation and the world is compromised by the inherent contradictions and complexities of modern life.

Keywords: Nissim Ezekiel, Minority Poem, Babri Masjid, India, Communal riots, Nationalism, Urban, Indian poets

Introduction

The poem "Minority Poem" is situated within Nissim Ezekiel's significant literary corpus, specifically within his culminating work, "Latter-Day Psalms" (1982). This particular poem, emblematic of the collection, explores the pervasive insecurities experienced by minority communities throughout

the nation. Ezekiel's lifelong endeavor to reconcile his alien upbringing with his Marathi roots, as well as his endeavor to bridge the ancient and the modern, finds manifestation in this poem.

Nissim Ezekiel's distinctive poetic prowess manifests in his adept unraveling of the enigmatic dimensions inherent to the Indian ethos, characterized by a nuanced interplay of humor and irony. Furthermore, Ezekiel demonstrates a skilled navigation of the deep-seated socio-religious contradictions pervasive in the Indian milieu. This unique capacity to shed light on the often-mysterious Indian aura adds a layer of complexity to Ezekiel's body of work, elevating it beyond a mere thematic exploration to embody a profound socio-cultural commentary. In alignment with his inherent nature, Ezekiel exhibits meticulousness in articulating his disquietude regarding prevalent social inequalities within Indian society. His commentary extends to a critical examination of the restrictive religious dogma entrenched in the cultural fabric of the Indian people.

The title of the poem 'Minority Poem' directs attention to the term 'minority,' serving as a manifestation of society's inclination to categorize and stratify individuals based on class or caste. This choice of title not only alludes to a bold vocalization of the speaker's status but also underscores the author's deliberate expression. Moreover, the title draws focus to the diverse societal labels prevalent in contemporary India. Within this context, the poet-speaker seeks to elucidate their powerlessness in effecting positive societal change, a limitation imposed by their status. Nissim Ezekiel, as an inside-outsider, effectively unveils societal insanities and foibles through his verses. This role allows him to expose aspects that might evade mainstream Indian consciousness, deeply embedded as it is within the societal structure.

In the initial stanza of the poem, Ezekiel constructs a literary space within the private confines of the speaker's room, setting the scene for an introspective discourse. The speaker engages in a dialogue with invisible guests, explicitly identified as individuals belonging to the upper-caste Hindu religion. This deliberate choice of guests serves as a nuanced exploration of the socio-religious dynamics prevalent in Indian society.

Ezekiel's poetic inclination towards Hindu deities is discernible throughout his body of work, with an evident affinity for the cultural and spiritual aspects of the religion. However, a crucial distinction arises as Ezekiel selectively embraces the metaphysical and symbolic dimensions of Hinduism while maintaining a critical stance towards the political manipulations and narrow perspectives associated with the faith. Ezekiel's perspective unveils ideological tropes that have weaponized language, customs, and traditions, ensnaring society in an illusory self-perception. The poem begins within the private space of the speaker's room, where he speaks to the invisible guests. His invited guests belong to the upper caste Hindu religion. In his poems Ezekiel can often be seen to favour the Hindu Gods but not the politics behind the faith nor its narrow-minded followers who have been misled and continues to misread and misinterpret their lofty Gods.

The guests are polite, amiable and patient enough to listen to the speaker and wait for him to wrap up his monologue. They remain silent and contemplate over his words but leave soon afterwards with unreadable expressions. This naturally frustrates the speaker and he hopes he has made progress in changing their minds, but he lacks conviction and says that he "lacks the means to change their amiable ways". He respects the Hindu Gods but everything else about the Hindu culture is alien to him and feels like an outsider. He says "it's the language that really separates". Here the speaker talks about

how gods have been misrepresented and misinterpreted by its followers. Scriptures and religious books have caused strife and violence in the world. These grand narratives have always succeeded in dividing people rather than unite them. The poet speaker comes with a solution. The way to peace and unity is possible if we adopt the religion of love and service. He gives the example of Mother Teresa who spoke just one language, the language of unconditional love for the needy. In her arms there are no minorities. Each life she saves, is considered precious and they no not die ignoble deaths. Those who come to her (Mother Teresa) are acknowledged as human beings and as visible individuals. The speaker hopes that people will shed aside their differences and their prejudices about class and caste identities and learn to lead a selfless life like Mother Teresa. The speaker mocks at the so called 'caste conscious intellectuals' and those who belong to the upper strata of society and tells them that it is futile to learn about mythology or the redundant customs of an orthodox value system that is no longer valid in the modern times. Mythologies are no longer going to provide answers or relief to those suffering. Incredibly what is required of the people of the nation is to develop a keen sense of focus and will power to become selfless and serve one's nation and its people like Mother Teresa who serves as a symbol of peace and hope in a world filled with dissension and fear.

The last two stanzas of the poem convey a sense of dismay and hopelessness at having not being able to convince his audience about his idealistic vision for the nation. "The guests depart, dissatisfied; they will never give up their mantras, old or new". He feels that his sermons have not moved them. His guests are reluctant to give up their old ways and hold on to their prehistoric rituals and customs that fail to ease the modern tensions that exist in society. The last few lines " And you, uneasy orphan of their racial memories merely polish up your alien techniques of observation, while the city burns" refers to

the present scenario of communal violence where lives are being sacrificed in the name of religion and Gods. Here the speaker who belongs to the minority race fails to do anything more than simply make observations, draw inferences that fail to shift or move the masses. The image of the 'burning city' can be seen in several of Ezekiel's poems like "Urban" and "A Morning walk" where he alludes to Dante's Inferno and envisions the city like purgatory is burning. (Dulai 153-154).

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