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PART ONE
NISSIM EZEKIEL (1924 – 2004)
GENERAL INTRODUCTION

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I. NISSIM EZEKIEL'S LIFE AND WORKS

Ezekiel was born in 1924 in Bombay of Jewish parents (Bene-Israel) both devoted to education. His parents influenced him very much. His father was the principal of several colleges in the latter part of his life. He was rational, questioning and had an immaculate taste for proverbs and homespun wisdom. Ezekiel inherited from his father love for proverbs and homespun wisdom, which runs deep in his poetry. His mother was also the principal of a school started and runs by herself for over thirty years. Teaching passed into his blood. Ezekiel has taught at school, at college and at university. He is primarily a teacher both in life and poetry. Gieve Patel comments :

When he conducts programmes on art appreciation for Bombay television, he teaches. When he sits in his industry office at the Indian P.E.N. as its most active office bearer, reading quantities of other people's poems and giving his comments on them – thereby earning lifelong friends and enemies – he is teaching again. When he writes his poetry he teaches, this time largely himself. In all these contexts the pedagogic bone is relieved, even subverted, by self-directed irony, subdued passion, and simple, direct concern for what's at hand.¹

Gieve Patel

When Ezekiel was an undergraduate he came under the influence of M. N. Roy and was an active member of the Radical Democratic party until 1947. He took his Master's degree in English literature in 1947. He went to England in 1948 and studied Philosophy at Birbeck College under C. E. M. Joad. Ezekiel has been a man of varied interests. He has been manager of a well-known advertising firm in the fifties, manager of the Chemould, a pictureframe manufacturing company for a year. In 1952 he even worked as deck scrubber and coal-carrier on an English cargo ship to earn his passage home from England.

Ezekiel won lasting renown in literature. His progression as a teacher of English literature for a number of years at Bombay University shaped

1 Gieve Patel : "Introduction" *Nissim Ezekiel : Collected Poems* (O.U.P., 1989) p. XVII.

his literary personality. In 1964 he was visiting Professor at the University of Leeds. He edited *Quest, Imprint* and six issues of *Poetry India*. A renowned critic of arts and literature, Ezekiel conducted a course in art appreciation of J. J. School of Art and other institutions. He has also remained Director, Theatre Unit, Bombay. One of the front-rank poets in the Indian English tradition he has published six collections of his verse. O.U.P. has brought out in one volume published in 1989, collected poems of Ezekiel from 1952 to 1988. Besides writing poetry, Ezekiel has edited many books, including *The Emerson Reader, A Martin Luther King Reader* and *Writing in India*. He has also edited the Indian P.E.N. Ezekiel visited England and U.S.A. He has won distinguished honours for his poetry.

Ezekiel is passed away on Jan. 12, 2004 and is survived by three children, a son and two daughters.

Ezekiel's poetry collection consists of *A Time to Change* (1952), *Sixty Poems* (1953), *The Third* (1959), *The Unfinished Man* (1960), *The Exact Name* (1965), *Hymns in Darkness* (1976) and *Latter-Day Psalms*. In all his poems he leaves the impression of an urban poet, the poet of the great metropolis—Bombay, where he was born and where he has been living since his birth. Bombay haunts his imagination:

Barbaric city sick with slums,
Deprived of seasons, blessed with rains,
Its hawkers, beggars, iron-lunged, *rush out*
Processions led by frantic drums *everybody*
A million purgatorial lanes, *of Bombay*
And child-like masses many-tongued,
Whose wages are in words and crumbs.

2. EZEKIEL'S CONCEPTION OF POETRY

Nissim Ezekiel, one of the major poets in Indian English literature, has expressed valuable ideas on literature and life in his letters, critical writings and interviews. It is essential to know his critical credo in order to evaluate his poetry in the right perspective. He looks at literature in relation to society. In all his writings Ezekiel stresses the centrality of man in the universe and prefers poetry of statement and purpose. In American poetry of the sixties Ezekiel found "another kind of lyricism, an easy, controlled flow, not a surrealist eruption, not a trance-like aesthetic dexterity but poetic reasonableness."¹ "Poetic reasonableness" is the soul of poetry. This poetry expresses "a milieu and its culture."²

Ezekiel praises the American poetic tradition "that can be traced back to Whitman. Its peculiar qualities belong to its time and place, a poetry of the utmost freedom, informality and freshness which expresses directly its own independent sensibility. No organized theory, no moral

1 Nissim Ezekiel: *The Sixties*, Span, Sept. 1971, p.9.

2 *Ibid.*, p.9.

or social doctrine, no mask of reason or respectability, no imaginal, symbolist or other, technical imperative shapes the consciousness that secretes this verse.¹ It implies that literature of a very high order can only be created in an atmosphere of intellectual freedom. In an essay, entitled *Censorship and the Writer*, Ezekiel says that writers should enjoy absolute freedom acting as "witnesses to the truth within them."² The aim of literature is "discovery and expression of truth", which is entirely personal experience for the writer. The society that promotes literature should aim at "the development of human sensibility." A writer should be a man of convictions, upholding human values.

As critic and poet, Ezekiel advocates cultural synthesis. In an interview he said: "The problems of Indian writers are strange. They have to make a synthesis between the ancient and modern cultures."³ In Ezekiel's own writings a noticeable synthesis happens between the Jewish and the Indian, the Western and the Eastern, the urban and the rural. This synthesis is nicely expressed in *Latter Day Psalms* :

The images are beautiful birds
and colourful fish ; they fly,
They swim into my Jewish consciousness.
God is a presence here
and his people are real.
I see their sins, I hear
His anger.

Literature not only strengthens cultural contacts but it also promotes the understanding of humanity and its future. He says that a poet should be "authentically a creator and not a cultural inheritor."⁴ A poet, divorced from his milieu and cultural ethos, cannot create genuine poetry. He says : "All growth independent of one's environment has an alienating effect."⁵ He carefully avoids "the sophistication of the rootless" and "the parochialism of the native."⁶ In his poetry, he writes :

I have made my commitments now.
This is one : to stay where I am,
As others choose to give themselves
In some remote and backward place.
My backward place is where I am.

Ezekiel recognises "the primal stuff of which poetry and mysticism are made."⁷ However, he is opposed to the mystical poetry of Sri

1 *Ibid.*, p.9.

2 *Censorship and the Writer*, Seminar, July 1963, p.7.

3 *Indian Express*, Nov. 7, 1982.

4 "Poetry as Knowledge", *Quest*, May-June 1972, p. 44.

5 *Free Press Bulletin*, Oct. 7, 1974.

6 "To Poets : A. K. Ramanujam and K. N. Daruwalla." *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, June 18, 1972, p. 43.

7 "Poetry as Knowledge", *Quest*, May-June 1972, p.43.