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NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE

Indian Poetry in English

Lecture 08: Nissim Ezekiel

BINOD MISHRA

DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES



Socio-Politico Conditions

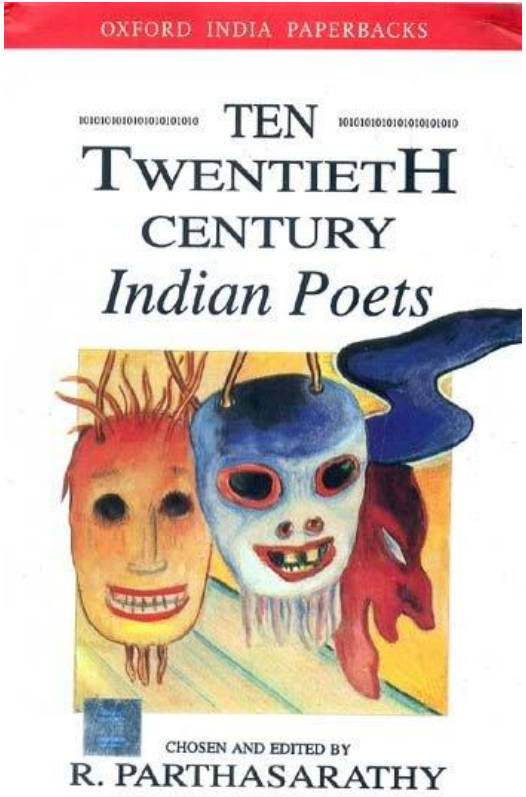
- Post-Independence and Post-colonial poet
- Riots were being raged all over the country.
- Poets, artists, writers were trying to locate the identity of the country.



Literary Conditions

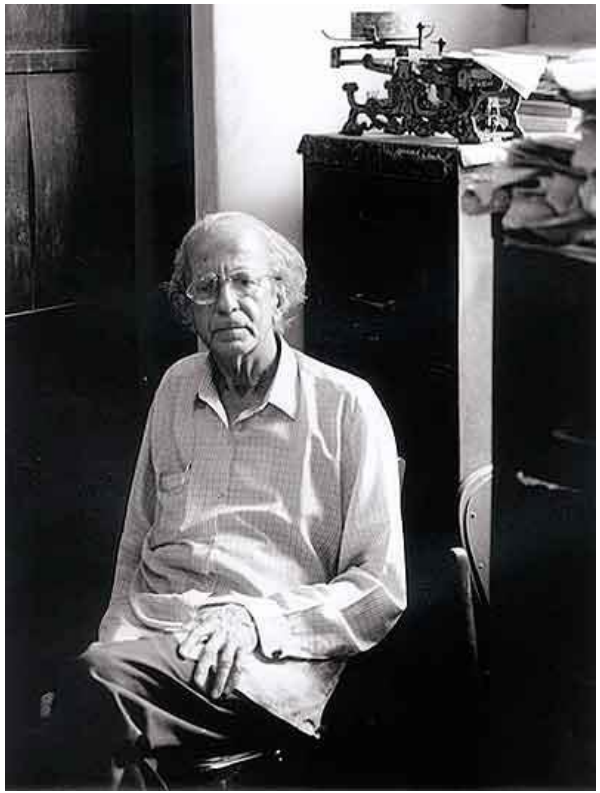
- Writers Workshop by P. Lal and his associates in 1958
- Emergence of ‘New Poets’
- Appearance of critical studies
- International recognition of Commonwealth literature

- ‘ The phase of Indo-Anglian romanticism ended with Sarojini Naidu’

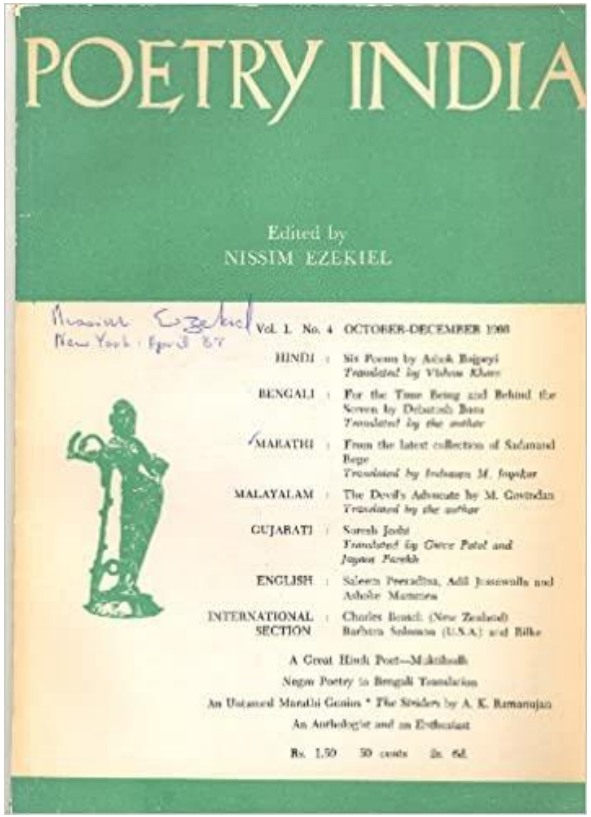


Introduction

- Born in 1924 in a Bene-Israel family, which had migrated to India
- Visited England at 22 but returned soon.
- His father was a professor of Botany and Zoology.
- First poem in 1942 in *Social Welfare*
- Earlier politically active and in trade unionism, democratic socialist and follower of M. N. Roy's Radical Democratic Movement.

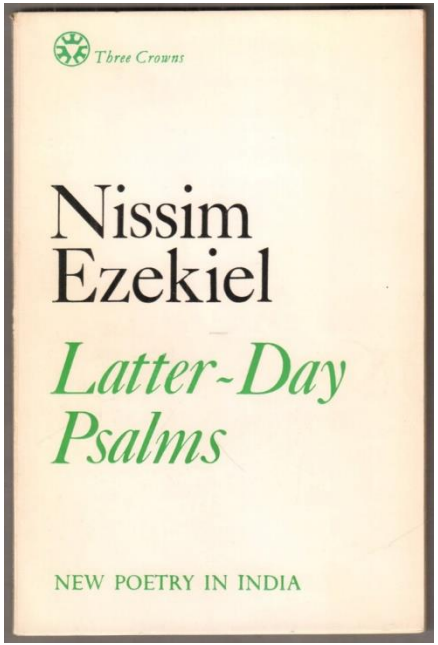


Contd…



- Edited: *Poetry India* (1966-7)
  - (Articles, reviews and translations)
- Evolution of contemporary Indian English Poetry.
- Published in *Illustrated Weekly, Thought, Literary Half-Yearly.*
- Philosophy about life and poetry

Ezekiel's Poetic Corpus



- Founded *Quest* (1955) which ceased publication with the Emergency and was superseded by *New Quest* concerned

  with problems of modern India.

✓ Free verse to traditional prosody

✓ Quest helped make modern Indian poetry part of contemporary Indian culture

A Time to Change(1952)
Sixty Poems(1953)
The Third (1959)
The Unfinished Man(1960)
The Exact Name(1965)
Hymns in Darkness(1976)
Latter Day Psalms(1982)





Contd…

- ✓ Intellectual ironic tone
- ✓ Personal story
- ✓ Disillusionment of marriage, love affairs and moral choices
- ✓ A fluidity of choices

When, finally, we reached the place ,
We hardly know why we were there.
The trip had darkened every face,
Our deeds were neither great nor rare.
Home is where we have to gather grace.
(“Enterprise”)

Lovers, when they marry, face

Eternity with touching grace.

Complacent at being fated

Never to be separated…
Then suddenly the mark of Cain
Began to show on her and me.

Why should I rain the mystery

By harping on the suffering rest,

Myself a frequent wedding guest?
(“Marriage”)

Characteristic Features

- ✓ Influenced by Rilke, Eliot, and Auden
- ✓ Quest for physical, social and spiritual integration of the self.
- ✓ Viewed poetry as a way of life, an expression of a life as a poet.
- ✓ Alienation and a sense of 'poet in exile'.
- ✓ Poems on animals

Everything is coming-
Regeneration, Remuneration,
Contraception…
Be patiently, brothers and sisters.
You are going?
But you will visit again
Any time, any day,
I am not believing in ceremony.
Always I am enjoying your
company.

("Very Indian Poem in Indian English")

Contd...

- “Expresses personal, intellectual, moral, and religious concerns in contemporary voice without mystical diffusion and artificial diction” (King, 2012, p. 14),
- Mastery over colloquial idiom, technical skills, rhyme and rhythm.
- Distinct persona and point of view
- Aesthetic distancing

“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.

Contd…

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

Contd…

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.

Characteristics of the Poem, “Night of the Scorpion”

- Setting of a village
- Demonization of the scorpion
- Cultural and religious element
- Superstition
- Atonement
- Mother’s love
- Animal Survival vs human survival
- Father: Sceptic, pragmatic, and rationalist

- Narrative style



“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.

Contd…

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.

Contd...

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.

Characteristics of the Poem “Island”

- Relationship between the native and the island
- Commercial urban predicament
- Is the world not conducive to health and wholeness of the self?
- Search for intellectual and spiritual order
- Post-Freudian Consciousness
- Comparison of psyche through geographies
- Mayhem of the inner world
- Search for Identity

“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

Summing up

- Precision of diction and imagery
- Rejection of provincialism of colonial verse
- Delineation of Contemporary problems
- Multiplicity of tones balancing emotion and reason
- Rounding off with conclusion

Searching for the point of it,
The meaning and the mood, one learns
Over and over again the same thing:
That women, trees, tables, waves and birds,
Buildings, stones, steamrollers,
Cats and clocks
Are here to be enjoyed.
("Conclusion" from The Third)

Thank You

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