

From the Streets to the Roots: The Modern Voices of Nissim Ezekiel and A.K. Ramanujan

Diya Adlakha¹, Dr. Swati Chauhan²

¹Master of Arts (English), Department of English

²Professor & HOD, Department of English

Abstract-- Modern Indian English Poetry was very strong after the independence of India and brought realism, irony, simplicity and Indian identity in English literature. Nissim Ezekiel and A. K. Ramanujan are regarded as two of the most important voices of Modern Indian English Poetry due to their realistic depiction of Indian society, family life, alienation, memory and cultural consciousness. The research paper discusses the style, theme and contribution to literature of both poets by comparing some of their poems, especially the poems *Night of the Scorpion* and *Obituary*.

The study discusses the ways in which Ezekiel and Ramanujan abandoned romantic and idealized poetry and introduced the concept of realism and commonplace discourse to depict Indian experiences. Ezekiel was primarily concerned with urban Indian life, social irony, superstition and human relationships while Ramanujan was concerned with memory, family burdens, cultural displacement and emotional detachment. Both poets depicted the problems and reality of the Indian society in contemporary poetic style and Indianized English.

The method used in research is qualitative and analytical by close reading, thematic interpretation and stylistic analysis. It examines great themes like alienation, family conflict, realism, identity, nostalgia and cultural belonging. The paper also explores the balance between modernity and Indian tradition in the works of both poets and how both poets have made Modern Indian English Poetry a realistic picture of the Indian life.

The book's conclusion is that Nissim Ezekiel and A. K. Ramanujan are the two poets who have helped pave the way for the poetic expression of modern India, using simplicity, irony, realism and emotional honesty. Poems of theirs are still relevant because of their social and psychological representation of Indian society and still have strong cultural roots.

Keywords-- Modern Indian English Poetry, Realism, Alienation, Indian Identity, Irony, Nostalgia, Cultural Consciousness, Indianized English.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Modern Indian English Poetry is a great literary movement after the independence of the Indian subcontinent in 1947.

Indian poets during this time gradually discarded the Romantic style of writing English poetry and started writing about real Indian experiences and social life, family life, urban life and cultural identity. Modernism in Indian English literature introduced new themes, simplicity of language, irony and psychological depth in poetry. Poets began to convey Indian thoughts and feelings in Indianized English that spoke of what was happening in post-Independent India. The uploaded reference material expounds the idea that Modern Indian English Poetry was about “realism” and “the real life in India,” not about “romantic imagination”.

Nissim Ezekiel and A. K. Ramanujan were the principal poets of this movement who have made a significant contribution to the modern voice of Indian English Poetry. Both poets employed common speech, irony, realism and autobiographical details to depict the Indian society and the human experiences in an honest way. Their poetry is socially and emotionally relevant to India and yet has a strong sense of Indian cultural heritage.

Nissim Ezekiel is sometimes treated as the “Father of Modern Indian English Poetry” for his realistic depiction of the urban Indian life and society. Ezekiel was born in Bombay and keenly watched the life of India's common people and translated his observations into poetry. His works in poetry include themes like alienation, superstition, existential anxiety and social hypocrisy, and Indian identity. According to the uploaded content, Ezekiel had “captured the pulse of Indian society”, and was a “the representative of the realistic sensibilities and connectivity of Indians with their roots and culture”. Ezekiel composes *Background*, *Casualty*, in which he relates an autobiographical story:

“I have made my commitments now. This is one: to stay where I am...”

These are the lines that show his feelings towards India and how he accepts the Indianness despite the social alienation.

In a similar manner, A. K. Ramanujan was working on the themes of memory, family relationships, nostalgia, and cultural displacement in his realistic, emotionally restrained poetry.

Although Ramanujan spent many years in America, his poetry never left its Indian traditions nor his family experiences. His multicultural and multilingual background had significant impact on his poetry. The uploaded presentation says Ramanujan looked “inwards at his roots and memories” and that he presented “the real feelings of being Indian” in clear and simple language. There are emotions of detachment, family burden, modernity and tradition in his poetry.

This work is about comparative study of Ezekiel and Ramanujan with some poems like *Night of the Scorpion* and *Obituary*. Themes explored include realism, alienation, family conflict, cultural consciousness, nostalgia, and irony. It also examines the way both poets revolutionized Modern Indian English Poetry by employing realistic imagery, ordinary language and modern poetic techniques. Ezekiel and Ramanujan in their works, articulated the psychological and social conditions of the post-Independent Indian society.

There is a great deal of study done on Modern Indian English Poetry, mainly focusing on the features of realism in relation to Indian life, social consciousness and cultural identity. It has been noticed by scholars that Indian poets after independence abandoned Romantic Idealism and started to concentrate on common man, social realities, urban life, family relationships and psychological conflicts. Among the key poets linked to this metamorphosis of Indian English poetry are Nissim Ezekiel and A. K. Ramanujan.

The major lines of study have been his realism, his irony, his urban imagery and his modern approach to poetry. He is said to be the pioneer of Modern Indian English Poetry as he brought the ordinary English in the Indian literary world and the realistic themes. Bruce King notes that the poetry of Ezekiel “helped establish Indian English poetry as a serious literary form”. His poems deal with social hypocrisy, existential anxiety, Indianness and traditional-modern dichotomy. The uploaded reference materials also mention that Ezekiel emphasized upon “ordinary human experience” and “city life and society” were depicted realistically.

Ezekiel's poem *Night of the Scorpion* has been interpreted by many critics on its portrayal of the elements of superstition and rationalism in Indian society. According to M. K. Naik, the poem is about 'the conflict between scientific rationality and traditional belief systems'. The realism, irony and emotional resonance of the poem are also valued. Critics also point out that Ezekiel refrained from employing any fancy and romantic words and used simplicity and realism in his depiction of Indian life.

In the same way, A. K. Ramanujan has been analyzed for his exploration of memory, nostalgia, family relationships and cultural displacement.

Ramanujan is said to be a poet who was both influenced by Indian tradition and by western modernism. In Ramanujan's poetry, K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar writes that the burden of memory and the complexity of cultural identity can be seen. His poems are frequently about emotional isolation and familial obligations, using irony and autobiography to showcase his experiences.

The poem *Obituary* of Ramanujan has been critiqued for its ironic use of death and burden of family. Some critics state that the poem challenges the traditional emotional reaction to death as it is conveyed in a detached and realistic way. According to the uploaded material, “Ramanujan depicted “the messy side of Indian families” and “family burdens and inherited responsibilities”. His direct and simple use of language enhances the realism of his poetry and also his poetry is a reflection of the middleclass life in India.

Studies have been conducted that compare the work of Ezekiel with that of Ramanujan and suggest that the two poets are both realistic, make use of irony, and depict the Indian identity. Both poets used modern poetic devices and were very much in tune with Indian social and cultural concerns. Ezekiel was more inclined towards the external world of social observation while Ramanujan was more into looking at his internal world of memory and family. But both writers revolutionized Modern Indian English Poetry in terms of realism and emotional honesty. Their poems portray the psychological and the social complexities of the post-independence Indian society and are of significance in the study of Indian English literature.

II. POEM INTRODUCTIONS

Nissim Ezekiel — Night of the Scorpion

One of Nissim Ezekiel's most important poems, *Night of the Scorpion* is a favourite due to its realism in depicting Indian rural life, superstition and family relationships. It is a true story from the poet's childhood: One night, during the rainy season, the poet's mother was stung by a scorpion. Ezekiel shows in this incident the clash between rationalism and superstition, as well as the love of the mother and behaviour in the community. The poem shows the poet's keen observation of Indian society and his capacity to make common experiences into literary expression. Ezekiel, the uploaded material explains that he used realism, common language, to describe the life of Indians and social conditions. The poem also shows how Ezekiel employed the use of irony and modern poetic style to unveil the emotional and cultural realities of Indian society.

A. K. Ramanujan — Obituary

Among A. K. Ramanujan's most celebrated poems were *Obituary*, which deals with the burden of family, emotional detachment, memory and social criticism. The poem is about the death of the poet's father and the duties and burdens that are now on the family. Ramanujan's attitude towards death is ironic and realistic, depicting the reality of the Indian family life. The poem is similar to Ramanujan's modern poetry, which is a mix of biography and social criticism. The uploaded text reveals that Ramanujan described the burden of family and inherited responsibilities with clear expressions and realistic language. Using the devices of irony, symbolism, and emotional restraint, *Obituary* is both a personal statement and a commentary on conventional family life in the Indian society.

III. POEM ANALYSIS

Nissim Ezekiel — Night of the Scorpion

In *Night of the Scorpion*, Nissim Ezekiel portrays a slice of reality of Indian society by portraying a common household incident. The poem talks about the night when the poet's mother got bitten by a scorpion and villagers surrounded her to recite prayers and do rituals. This event is one of Ezekiel's themes of superstition, rationalism, fear, family love and social belief. The poem starts with the aspects of heavy rain and darkness which in the atmosphere of fear and uncertainty. The villagers think it will lessen the impact of the poison and remove the mother's pain through prayers and chants. They are doing so in the light of the superstitions that are entrenched in the Indian rural society. Ezekiel depicts these villagers fairly, but yet not directly deriding them. On the uploaded reference material, it says that the villagers tried to heal the mother using "superstitions and rituals."

Meanwhile, the poet's father is presented as a rationalist character, one who attempts scientific solutions to save his wife. But, in his desperation he tries everything, even traditional and religious things at some time. Ezekiel writes:

**"My father, sceptic, rationalist,
 trying every curse and blessing,
 powder, mixture, herb and hybrid"**

(Ezekiel 36-37)

These lines stress the question of science vs. superstition. The father has rational thinking but due to emotional fear he has to rely on irrational practices as well. This is a good use of irony because during a time of crisis, the superstitious villagers act like the rational father.

Maternal sacrifice and emotional strength are also themes of the poem. The mother explains how she endured a night's suffering, and reveals that she is glad that the scorpion stung her rather than her children. This final statement makes the poem shift from observation of the social to reflection on the emotional. Ezekiel's vision of Indian womanhood is one of sacrifice and caring. Stylistically, the poem is in free verse and the language used is conversational and this has added to the realism and simplicity in the poem. Ezekiel is not a poet, and eschews poetic flourishes in favour of realistic imagery and common speech. The novel *Night of the Scorpion* is a strong representation of Indian social life and human experience through the means of irony, realism and emotional honesty.

Obituary by A. K. Ramanujan is a highly ironic and realistic poem that explores death, burden of the family, emotional detachment and inherited responsibilities. The poem does not view the passing of the poet's father as an emotional set-back but as a continuation of the practical family struggles and social needs.

The poem begins by saying:

**"Father, when he passed on,
 left debts and daughters,
 a bedwetting grandson"**

(Ramanujan 1-3)

These lines set the tone of the poem, an ironic and detached one. The poet addresses the material and social responsibilities of the father that remain, rather than emotional grief. Recurring mundane things like debts and family responsibilities show the hard truths of middle-class Indian life. The material uploaded states that "the messy side of Indian families" was the one that Ramanujan depicted and that he "emphasized the burden on family rather than emotional idealism." The poem questions social norms and familial expectations related to death. The poet has an emotionally detached and ironic narration of the traditional customs after the father's death. The symbolism of decay and instability of family structure is also present in Ramanujan. Dust and unpaid debts, and weak house structures, allude to emotional emptiness and inherited burdens. *Obituary* is unconventional in rendering death in realistic and almost bureaucratic terms, rather than glorifying the deceased. It is a modern approach, which has Ramanujan's detached poetic style and existential point of view.

Another key element in the poem is the autobiographical nature. Ramanujan paints a realistic picture of Indian social life, based on his own experience and family history.



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His use of language is simple, direct, and conversational, thereby enhancing the realism of the poem. The poet through irony and understatement reveals emotional alienation and burden of inherited tradition.

In this way, *Obituary* is a personal and social commentary. Ramanujan skillfully weaves realism, irony and emotional restraint to capture the nuances of family dynamics and cultural norms in Indian society.

IV. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Nissim Ezekiel and A. K. Ramanujan were two poets whose work was important in the development of Modern Indian English Poetry, characterized by realism, irony and emotional honesty. Their poetry abandoned the romantic idealism and instead, addressed everyday Indian experiences and social realities. Ezekiel primarily examined urban Indian society, superstition, social behaviour, and realism whereas Ramanujan's themes were memory, family burden, nostalgia and cultural dis-placement. Both poets depict emotional isolation and the complexities of Indian life, albeit with some differences in theme.

Another major resemblance is the fact that they employ common speech. Both poets refrained from the poetic ornament and opted for simplicity and realism. Ezekiel's style of criticism in Indian society is through irony and satire while Ramanujan's style is emotionally restrained and based on autobiographical reflection.

They also have a high level of cultural awareness and sense of Indian identity in their poetry. Both poets, despite their use of modern poetic devices, were very much aware of the Indian socio-cultural realities. They were able to present Modern Indian English Poetry as a strong voice of the post-Independent Indian life through realism and Indianized English.

V. CONCLUSION

The present study investigated the modernity of the poetic voice of Nissim Ezekiel and A. K. Ramanujan in the context of Modern Indian English Poetry. Themes of realism, alienation, family conflict, irony, nostalgia, and cultural consciousness were examined through poems like *Night of the Scorpion* and *Obituary*.

Both poets played a major role in the evolution of Modern Indian English Poetry for introducing simplicity, reality and simple conversational style in poetry. Ezekiel's writing was ironic and satirical within the context of urban Indian society, whereas Ramanujan's autobiographical work dealt with memory, emotional distance, and cultural exile. In spite of the difference of styles, both poets were very well anchored in Indian identity and social reality.

This study concludes that Ezekiel and Ramanujan converted the Indian English Poetry to the realistic mirroring of the Indian life post-independence. They have been relevant even to this day because their poetry is honest and has an artistic depth and presents the psychological, emotional, and social aspects of India with honesty and artistry.

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