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REPRESENTATION OF POST-INDEPENDENCE INDIA IN NISSIM EZEKIEL'S POEMS "NIGHT OF THE SCORPION" AND "IN INDIA"

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Abstract

India's independence marks a major landmark in the history of the nation. Prior to independence, the country was colonized by the British and its resources were plundered from the nation. The society at large was in shambles due to the horrors of partition and India took its time to restore its normalcy. The modern English poet, Nissim Ezekiel represents the condition of India during the post-independence period with all its intricacies. The poems "Night of the Scorpion" and "In India" were written by Nissim Ezekiel in 1960's and deal with the major issues faced by Indian society. This paper is an attempt at understanding Indian society through the poetical representations of Nissim Ezekiel.

Keywords: Post-Independence, Superstition, Poverty, Diversity, and Illiteracy

Introduction

Nissim Ezekiel was one of the finest poets of modern Indian poetry. He contributed immensely to the ambit of Indian English literature through his plays and poems. He made his name in the field of journalism and edited journals such as Poetry India (1966-67), Quest (1955-57) and Imprint (1961-70). Born in Mumbai in 1924, Ezekiel witnessed India's struggle for Independence in the last few years from close quarters. After India's independence, there was a need to express the emerging India through poetry with native colours. This demanded a language which could be intrinsically called Indian. Ezekiel tried to create this language skillfully through his poetry. Though Ezekiel's poetry is written in a prosaic style, the poetry is alive through its speech rhythm. The poems "Night of the Scorpion" and "In India" represent the post-independence India with all its complications and glory.

Post-Independence India and Ezekiel's Poetry:

After India's independence in 1947, India tried to overcome its problems and develop a robust framework for its path to glory. The partition of India rattled the communal bond and India was trying to build a country where every citizen was free and proud. The immediate years of India after Independence were characterized by mass poverty and illiteracy. One of the most common problems among the people was the belief in superstition. Dipkesh Chakraborty in his article, "The Power of Superstition in Public Life in India" states that "superstition" must be put under quotation marks as one's superstition can be somebody else's religion. For him, one can be said to practice superstitious beliefs when one seeks "supernatural, extra-human forces" to intervene their life to create either a positive or negative impact (16). He also states that these forces cannot be systematized into religious

doctrines. The roots of superstition date back to the days of India's struggle for independence. The article, "Gandhi as Mahatma: Gorakhpur District, Eastern UP, 1921-2" written by Shahid Amin explores the relationship between the peasants and Gandhi. He opines that Gandhi was associated with miracles. He was treated almost as a demi-god, capable of miracles. Though he observes that such rumours were spread by local leaders, the characteristic of Indian population with a lack of proper education. Superstitious beliefs were not restricted to private life, but public life was influenced by these beliefs as well. In Nissim Ezekiel's poem "Night of the Scorpion", we get a picture of the superstitious beliefs prevalent in Indian society quite vividly. The poem recounts an incident of the speaker when his mother is stung by a scorpion. As the poem begins, the readers are informed about a rainy day when a scorpion finds its way to a sack of rice in the speaker's household. Representative of Hindu faith, villagers throng the house like the buzz of bees and chant the "Name of God a Hundred times" (130). The scorpion is referred to as an "Evil" which paralyses the speaker's mother with its poison. The words "diabolic tail" gives the scorpion an enigmatic and sinister character which the villagers are wary of. The beliefs of the villagers are instrumental in understanding the Indian society post-independence, particularly during the first half of the 20th century. The villagers click their tongues to find the location of the scorpion. They are in a race against time to find the scorpion and cure the mother. The intention of the villagers seems to be noble as they think that it will heal the sins of the previous birth. Ezekiel is not judgemental while presenting these superstitious beliefs of the villagers. Instead, he shows that during this post-independence period, Indian rationalism was growing in the minds of the Indians. In the Introduction to the book, *Nissim Ezekiel: Collected Poems*, John Thieme writes:

'Night of the Scorpion is, then, a dramatization of an encounter between secular Indian rationalism and pre-modern Hindu faith. At the same time, for those who eschew interpreting literature as national allegory, it can be read as a

precisely realized verse account of a very specific personal experience. (xxvi)

The Indian rationalism is represented by the father of the speaker. He is referred to as a sceptic and a rationalist who pours paraffin into the wound of the mother. Despite the holy man performing his rites and trying to tame the poison incantation, the father, with all rationality, thinks of treating his wife with medicines. The act of the father might be in direct conflict with the beliefs and actions of the villagers, but the readers do not find any instances of altercation brewing henceforth.

India's representation during the post-independence period with all its intricacies is found in the poem "In India" written by Nissim Ezekiel. The poem exposes the "noisy silences" of Indian society. The poverty of India is represented by the "beggars", "hawkers", "pavement sleepers", "dwellers", and "slums". The Roman Catholic Goan boys, Islamic boys, Anglo Indian boys form the fabric of Indian society. Their obedience to religion is apparent as they do not miss their prayers despite engaging in unspeakable vices. India did not shy away from Western influences at that point in time. The Anglo-Indian gentlemen are seen drinking "whisky". The behaviour of men is not in consonance with the traditional Indian men. They are comfortable in foreign styles, and flirting and the speaker acknowledges pressing the 'thigh' of women in sly innocence. On New Year's Eve, the speaker finds himself in the company of people representing six nations. This reflects the diversity of the Indian nation in the post-independence period. As India was colonized and ruled by the British, the relationship between the English and Indians came to the fore in the poem. The speaker mentions an Indian woman talking to an English Boss where they discuss the changes India needs. This hints at the progress of Indian women in society. At the same time, the woman and the boss are seen to get into a struggle in an apartment where the boss must have tried to inflict some assault on the woman. Ezekiel seems to imply that violence against women is one of the prime issues which persisted in India post-independence.

Conclusion

Nissim Ezekiel's presentation of India in the post-independence period is elaborative and optimistic. Though he represents the immediate problems in the post-independence period, Ezekiel hits at the progress of India through the radical thoughts and actions of the Indians.

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