
Nissim Ezekiel's unique devotional sensibility

¹**Dr. Ram Bahadur**

¹Associate Professor of English M.P. Govt. P.G. College, S.Rao , Hathras

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Abstract

During the entire course of its inception and establishment the religion in European countries offered checks, bondages and dogmatism at various levels and, therefore, it was considered to be a regular obstacle in the free and spontaneous utterances of human soul. Poetry on the other hand needs a poetic personality breathing and growing as naturally as leaves to a tree. Nissim Ezekiel did not have a very high culture of prayers and devotional exercises in his background. He was the follower of the truth, therefore, he opposed the derogatory remarks of the father about Hinduism. He developed a grand philosophic temperament and hereafter he made a continuous search for himself. He gets real strength of life in the world of seclusion, meditation and prayer. He does not believe in for granted traditions of the existence of God. All the gospels of Christianity were proving a nullity despite the faith of the people. Did God remain silent over the killings of the thousands, nay lacs of the people simultaneously? Were all of them the sinners or deserved such cruel treatment in any scheme of God? Nissim Ezekiel's God can be defined in easy terms. Prayer is, therefore, a very effective method of peeping within the soul and to feel for a moment what we actually are.

Keywords:- Sensibility, Community, Prayer, Humanity, Philosophic temperament, Transformation.

Introduction

During the entire course of its inception and establishment the religion in European countries offered checks, bondages and dogmatism at various levels and, therefore, it was considered to be a regular obstacle in the free and spontaneous utterances of human soul. Poetry on the other hand needs a poetic personality breathing and growing as naturally as leaves to a tree. Religion and poetry were, therefore, considered incompatible with ulterior motive to alienate the bulk of verse writings written under the dominance and dogmatism of religion during the middle ages. Milton was, however, the first great poet who was considered capable of reconciling the spirit of poetry with that of religion and, thus, he could

compel the critical observers to change their outlook so as to look for real poetic virtues even in religious poetry, and hence forward we find frequent outlets of glorious poetry even from the gates of religion.

Malcom has, in Poetry and Dogma, written that Milton's Paradise Lost Christian dogma and symbolism in the 17th century reached a state of static equilibrium to be followed in the 18th century by formalized decay. These observations may not appear to have the entire truth of the matter but they do provide us with an opportunity to form our opinion about the 18th century religious poets. If there was decay in religious verse and vision in the 17th and early 18th century the causes must also be found somewhere. However we cannot resist the temptation of asking why the existential personal Calvinist strain in Marvell and Talyor died out or why the great religious prose of Baxtor and Bunyan lacked successors. Dogma did get hardened and as the century opened individuals lost personal interest in the sense of religious mythic pattern. The reasons for this sad state of affairs, after the fervor of 17th century, are to be found both within and outside the religious community. Within the religious community a timidity of purpose and attitude arose owing to the rise of rationalism and the decay of puritanism politically. From without more seriously as regards Anglican poetry than puritan, the spirit of rationalism lured away the best poetic minds of the late 17th and early 18th century into other spheres¹.

The formalized pattern of morality and even of Christian faith in the 18th century discouraged the religiosity and devotional sensibility of the poets. Intense religious experience and its expression needed a personality blooming at large with subjectivity. But the formalism and other positive aspects² of the age helped to convert fervent subjective religion into a generalized objective religiosity.

"Towards the close of the 17th century", writes Wilberforce, "the divines of established Church professed to make it their chief object to inculcate the moral and practical precepts of Christianity which they conceived to have been too much neglected, but without sufficiently maintaining, often without justly laying the grand foundation of a sinner's acceptance with God, or pointing out how the practical precepts of Christianity grow out of her peculiar doctrines and are inseparably connected with them. But this fatal error, the very genius and essential nature of Christianity was imperceptibly changed."³

The greatness of religious devotion as an intense poetic experience fell down with the changed nature of Christian faith. Religious dogma faced the crisis, once again, of becoming dogmatic instead of remaining spontaneous under the transparent light of the Christian faith. So, the attempts of the religious poets during the 18th century fell on unfortunate conditions and foiled attempts. In the 18th century the psychological issues relating to madness among the writers of devotional sensibility have not been studied carefully and probed deeply. A proper investigation of the whole issue will confirm that a regular

check, the formalism and forced objectivity of the 18th century social, religious and literary atmosphere suppressed the free and spontaneous utterances of the great souls of the time. Thus, it was a kind of psychological repression of a genius in the face of that literary atmosphere which was hostile to their natural impulse. Other reasons, pious, literary, were available to discredit the religious Muse. Religious imagery which suggested an anthropological view of God was not encouraged by the diest mentality of the Augustans. Johnson has a derogatory opinion about the devotional poetry of that time. His uneasiness with Milton's figures in Paradise Lost was widely shared. His comment on Watts' religious poetry is intended to stand for the species of devotional poetry :

.....But his devotional poetry is, like that of others, unsatisfactory. The paucity of its topics enforces perpetual repetition and the sanctity of the matter rejects the ornaments of figurative diction. It is sufficient foe Watts to have done better than others what no man had done well.⁴

Notwithstanding the disparaging remarks of the contemporary reviewers and acknowledged scholars the writers of devotional songs made it their religion to give vent to the free and spontaneous utterance of their soul. In the intensity of their devotional feelings and in the expression of such richly subjective feelings such writers were cutting off the mainstream of the 18th century writers- that coterie of coffee-house wits.

In Blake the religious tradition again attains the level of the first rate and also commences the Romantic Movement.⁵

The religious writers of mid-eighteenth century played an important role in making the deism and devotional sensibility an essential element of the romantic poetry.

What is subject personal and usual in Watts, Smart and Cowper is of interest in itself and as the bridge between earlier puritan sensibility and Romanticism.⁶

Romanticism at its deepest and most intense is a religious experience.⁷

Nissim Ezekiel's personality was the product of the submissiveness and honest working of his community. His ancestors lived as a minority community in India. They maintained their own tradition of prayer and worship. At the same time they came in touch with the local Indian systems of worship, prayer and meditation. However, the community lived at the level of peasants and, therefore, there was not much significant contribution of these people in society and literary circles. Despite their domicile

dating back to 378 A.D., the community could not rise higher in its social status. Ezekiel makes a mention of his impoverishing ancestry during an interview with Eunice de Souza.

The Jews in India had their historical weakness and the community was not able to produce scholars, poets or musicians – not even a theologian – all the figures one identifies with as representing the vitality of a culture. Compare this with American Jews. It can't be an ancient. I am not blaming the community. The community existed at a peasant level in the early years and must have found it necessary to be isolated for survival. It was small, insignificant and just about kept the rituals going.⁸

In this manner, it can't be learnt that Nissim Ezekiel is not having a very high culture of prayer and devotional exercises in his background. Sometimes, he was impressed by the great rituals of Christianity at another time he took interest in the devotional songs of some other community. But he always thought about life and universe.

Nissim Ezekiel's thoughtfulness and meditative temperament brought him close to the high traditions of Indian mysticism. In a Christian school of his early education, he heard derogatory remarks about Hinduism from the father of the school. As Nissim Ezekiel could not be a blind follower of any dogma or social creed, his mind was allured towards the great Hindu texts. He wanted to confirm for himself whether the statements made by the father were true. But it was a different story when he exposed himself to the influence of the Upanishads, the Gita and the mantras of the Vedas. In a sense, he nurtured within himself a great devotional sensibility after a close study of the great Indian texts. Nissim Ezekiel developed a grand philosophic temperament and hereafter he made a continuous search for his self. Let us mark the words of Nissim Ezekiel himself which he spoke to P. Bayapa Reddy during an interview :

I do not make a claim about a whole philosophy of life expressed in the plays. There are perceptions, views, ideas reasonably integrated.⁹

When Ezekiel developed a meditative temperament, he made a continuous search of the self. His early poetry is the direct presentation of his particular temperament. Paniker writes in this connection thus :

The Upanishads quest continues with relentless devotedness and takes the quest to a high point of self realization.¹⁰

Nissim Ezekiel gets real strength of life in the world of seclusion, meditation and prayer. What a grand explanation he offers in this regard:

So much light in total darkness

So much courage given, with the abyss !¹¹

The lines cited above have deep overtones from the philosophy of the Gita. Nissim Ezekiel is deeply interested in discoursing the truth of life deeply integrated to the soul of an individual. Lord Krishna announces in the Gita “Aham Brahamasmi”-I am the light- I am the darkness – I am the entire universe- the whole universe is within me.

Nissim Ezekiel has several questions about the traditional practice of the celebration of God in the image of different beings as existed among the people of the world in different names. The fantastic people of the people of the world have generally believed in the existence of God as the benefactor of mankind with an ever-ready scheme of creation. The Judeo Christian Lord did not satisfy the questions arising in the mind of Nissim Ezekiel. This great God inspite of his grand schemes of creation and his basic urge is perverse. The good appears to be pitted against the work of Devil. However, he does not deny the existence of God but becomes suspicious about the nature of His work existing in the universe. In his poem An Atheist Speaks, the poet raises several questions and tries to understand the mystery that underlines the whole scene. Let us mark the following lines :

He

Made Hitler and Stalin

He

Made the Inquisition

He

Made the holocaust

It's all quite plain

If you look into a mirror

It's the Devil reflected

And God remote.¹²

What appears to Nissim Ezekiel is that the work of the devil is faster than that of God. Looking at the demonic face of the modern circumstances which came to happen during the years of his youthfulness, it was quite natural for the sensitive poetic genius of Ezekiel to raise such questions about the existence

of God. All the gospels of Christianity were proving a nullity despite the faith of the people. Did God remain silent over the killings of the thousands, nay lacs of the people simultaneously? Were all of them the sinners or deserved such cruel treatment in any scheme of God? Or did God remain busy in some other creation of His better designs to disregard the plight of the people under the uncurbed devilish attitude of the devil-humans like Hitler or Stalin?

In his poem A Time to Change, he again looks at the Christian God with a realistic attitude. He believes in the existence of God despite several questions and doubts arising in his mind. Man lives in the duplicity of his dealings. He craves for the mercy of God, although he does not remain truthful to his soul. The poet questions about the faithlessness of a man in the life of flesh.

We who leave the house in April, Lord

How shall we return ?

Debtors to the whore of love.

Corrupted by the things imagined

Through the winter nights alone.

The flesh defiled by dreams of flesh

Rehearsed desire dead in spring

How shall we return ?

The juice of life is in us still

But when the mind determines everything

The leap is never made, the music

Never quite completed, redemption

Never fully won.¹³

The people of the world do not remain stable in their religious promises. They easily break their fidelity. People's going to the whore house for their satisfaction in love is symbolic of breaking the promises of the religious faithfulness and falling a prey to worldly attractions. However, the fulfillment of love even in such matters is an individual matter. This time of change has been noticed by the poet. What happens

in the field of religion and the related devotion of the people is this that they easily succumb to worldly pressures and perform religion, not as a true devotion but only a ritual. Let us mark the following lines again :

To own a singing voice and a talking voice
A bit of land, a woman and a child or two,
Accommodated to their needs and changing moods
And patiently to build a life with these,
A bit of land, a woman and a child or two-----
Practising a singing and a talking voice
Is all the creed a man of God requires ?¹⁴

In this way on the basis of what has been discussed in above paragraphs, it can fairly be summed up that Nissim Ezekiel was not very much conscious about his philosophy of life or his concept of God. He expressed himself to the truth of life and left his mind open for anything that appeared to his soul. A constant search of the self prepares the whole story of Nissim Ezekiel's deep devotions, solitude and prayer. His devotion sensibility, therefore, prepares a firm background for his higher poetic notions. If one, who follows what has been denoted in the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel, may make his life peaceful and devotional. In this way, it would be a good signal to the whole humanity.

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