



Social Realism in the Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel

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DOI - 10.5281/zenodo.21454728

Abstract:

Nissim Ezekiel occupies a prominent position in Indian English poetry as one of the pioneers of post-independence Indian English literature. His poetry reflects the complexities of Indian society through a realistic portrayal of ordinary people, urban life, cultural contradictions, social customs, and moral dilemmas. Unlike the romantic and idealistic tradition, Ezekiel presents life as it is, capturing both its strengths and weaknesses with irony, humour, and compassion. His poems depict the experiences of the middle class, the persistence of superstition, the effects of poverty, the challenges of modernization, and the search for identity in postcolonial India. Through his keen observation of everyday life, Ezekiel transforms common incidents into profound reflections on human nature and society.

*This paper examines the theme of social realism in Ezekiel's poetry by analysing selected poems such as *The Night of the Scorpion*, *The Patriot*, *Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T. S.*, *The Professor*, *Entertainment*, and *The Railway Clerk*. Employing a descriptive and analytical approach, the study argues that Ezekiel's poetry serves as a realistic record of Indian social life while simultaneously questioning prevailing beliefs, customs, and institutional practices. His balanced perspective, marked by irony rather than bitterness, makes his poetry relevant to contemporary readers and establishes him as one of the most significant voices of modern Indian English poetry.*

Keywords: *Nissim Ezekiel, Social Realism, Indian English Poetry, Urban Life, Middle Class, Superstition, Postcolonial India, Irony.*

Introduction:

Literature has always reflected the realities of society by portraying human experiences, cultural practices, and social institutions. Among the various literary movements, social realism occupies a significant place because it represents life in its authentic form without romanticising or idealising it. Social realism focuses on

the everyday lives of ordinary people, exposing the inequalities, contradictions, customs, and challenges that shape society. In Indian English literature, Nissim Ezekiel is one of the foremost poets who employed realism to depict post-independence Indian society with remarkable honesty and artistic precision.

Born in Bombay (now Mumbai) in 1924, Nissim Ezekiel is widely regarded as the father of modern Indian English poetry. His contribution to Indian literature extends beyond poetry to literary criticism, editing, and cultural commentary. His poems reflect the changing social landscape of independent India, particularly the experiences of urban middle-class life. Unlike many earlier poets who concentrated on mythology, nationalism, or romantic imagination, Ezekiel shifted attention towards contemporary realities and the lives of common people.

Social realism in Ezekiel's poetry emerges through his close observation of everyday events. His poems deal with ordinary situations such as family relationships, office life, social gatherings, religious practices, public transportation, and educational institutions. These seemingly simple experiences become powerful commentaries on broader social realities. His poetry reveals the contradictions between traditional beliefs and modern values, individual aspirations and social expectations, as well as morality and materialism.

One of Ezekiel's distinguishing qualities is his balanced perspective. He neither glorifies nor condemns Indian society; instead, he presents it with affectionate irony. His poems often expose social weaknesses while maintaining empathy for the people who embody them. This combination of realism and humour

enables readers to recognise their own society in his works without feeling alienated.

Urban life occupies a central place in Ezekiel's poetry. Mumbai, with its crowded streets, diverse population, economic inequalities, and cultural plurality, frequently appears as both the setting and the subject of his poems. The city symbolizes the opportunities and anxieties of modern India, where people struggle to balance tradition with rapid social change. Ezekiel portrays urban existence not as glamorous but as a complex reality shaped by routine, loneliness, ambition, and survival.

Another important dimension of his social realism is his portrayal of the Indian middle class. His characters are professors, clerks, office workers, students, teachers, journalists, and ordinary citizens whose concerns reflect everyday life rather than heroic achievements. Through these characters, Ezekiel examines social mobility, professional frustrations, family obligations, and the desire for respectability. His poetry demonstrates that ordinary lives contain profound emotional and social significance.

Religion and superstition also receive critical attention in Ezekiel's works. Rather than rejecting religious belief altogether, he questions practices rooted in fear, ignorance, and blind faith. His poems illustrate how traditional customs continue to influence modern

Indian society despite scientific advancement and education. This critical engagement makes his poetry both culturally rooted and intellectually stimulating.

Language itself becomes an instrument of realism in Ezekiel's poetry. His deliberate use of Indian English, particularly in poems such as *The Patriot* and *Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T. S.*, captures the distinctive speech patterns of educated Indians. Instead of treating Indian English as a linguistic deficiency, Ezekiel transforms it into a legitimate literary medium that reflects India's multilingual identity. His humour arises naturally from speech rather than ridicule, thereby reinforcing the authenticity of his social observations.

The present study seeks to analyse how social realism functions as the central artistic principle in Ezekiel's poetry. It argues that his realistic portrayal of everyday life provides valuable insight into the social, cultural, and psychological realities of post-independence India. His poems remain relevant because the issues they address—urbanization, inequality, identity, education, corruption, and cultural conflict—continue to influence contemporary Indian society.

Social Realism in Ezekiel's Poetry:

Social realism in Ezekiel's poetry is rooted in his commitment to portraying life truthfully. Rather than presenting extraordinary events or idealised

characters, he focuses on ordinary experiences that reveal broader social realities. His poems depict the aspirations, frustrations, beliefs, and contradictions of common people living in a rapidly changing India.

One of the most striking characteristics of Ezekiel's realism is his concern for the common individual. His poetry celebrates neither kings nor mythical heroes; instead, it gives voice to teachers, clerks, office workers, professors, and housewives. These ordinary figures become representatives of the larger social order. Their struggles with employment, family responsibilities, economic insecurity, and cultural expectations illustrate the realities of post-independence Indian society.

The poet's realistic vision is strengthened by his careful observation of human behaviour. Everyday conversations, public ceremonies, family rituals, and social gatherings become occasions for deeper reflection on Indian life. Through irony and subtle humour, Ezekiel exposes social pretensions, hypocrisy, and moral contradictions without losing sympathy for his characters. His realism therefore remains humane rather than cynical.

Analysis of Selected Poems:

Among Ezekiel's poems, "The Night of the Scorpion" is perhaps the finest example of social realism. The poem narrates a simple domestic incident in which the poet's mother is stung by a

scorpion. However, the incident becomes a realistic portrayal of rural Indian society, where traditional beliefs coexist with modern medicine. Villagers gather around the suffering woman and chant prayers, believing that the movement of the scorpion's poison corresponds to the movement of evil in the body. They interpret the incident through religious faith, karma, and superstition. Ezekiel neither mocks nor glorifies these beliefs; instead, he records them with remarkable objectivity. Simultaneously, the poet presents his father as a rationalist who attempts to cure his wife with scientific methods and medicines. The coexistence of faith and reason reflects the social reality of India, where traditional customs and modern knowledge often exist side by side. The mother's final words, expressing gratitude that the scorpion stung her instead of her children, emphasize maternal sacrifice and family values, which remain central to Indian culture (Ezekiel 65).

Another important poem illustrating social realism is "The Patriot." Here, Ezekiel uses Indian English deliberately to represent the speech patterns of an ordinary educated Indian. The speaker proudly expresses his love for the nation while simultaneously revealing social contradictions. His comments on politics, foreign influence, cultural identity, and economic conditions expose the complexities of post-independence India. The poem humorously depicts the

Dr. Chintamani Yashwantrao Jadhav

confusion between nationalism and blind patriotism. Ezekiel demonstrates that genuine patriotism requires self-examination rather than exaggerated pride. Through satire and colloquial language, he captures the voice of the Indian middle class and its anxieties regarding modernization and national identity.

"Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T. S." offers another vivid example of Ezekiel's realistic portrayal of Indian social life. The poem recreates a farewell speech delivered in Indian English during an office gathering. The exaggerated politeness, grammatical peculiarities, repetitive expressions, and ceremonial tone realistically reflect the language used in many Indian institutions. Ezekiel does not ridicule Indian English; rather, he transforms it into a literary medium that represents cultural authenticity. The poem also reflects the importance attached to social relationships, community gatherings, and emotional expressions in Indian society. Its humour arises from familiarity, allowing readers to recognize everyday situations in their own lives.

Social realism also appears prominently in "The Professor." The speaker, an elderly retired professor, proudly discusses the achievements of his children and the changing social values of modern India. Although the conversation appears casual, it reflects important social realities such as population growth, changing family structures, economic aspirations, and generational differences.

The professor's repetitive concern for respectability and family success illustrates the values of the Indian middle class. Ezekiel subtly reveals how individuals often measure personal worth through social status and family accomplishments. The poem therefore becomes a realistic portrait of middle-class aspirations and anxieties.

In "The Railway Clerk," Ezekiel portrays the frustrations of a lower-middle-class government employee struggling with monotonous work, financial insecurity, and limited opportunities. The railway clerk symbolizes thousands of ordinary workers whose lives are characterized by routine, responsibility, and unfulfilled ambitions. His dissatisfaction reflects the bureaucratic structure of post-independence India, where employment provides stability but rarely offers personal fulfillment. The poem exposes economic inequalities and the emotional burden of middle-class existence without resorting to melodrama. Through simple language and realistic characterization, Ezekiel gives dignity to an otherwise unnoticed member of society.

The poem "Entertainment" extends Ezekiel's social realism by focusing on poverty and public indifference. It portrays a poor street performer who risks his life merely to entertain spectators and earn a small income. The audience enjoys the performance but remains largely indifferent to the performer's suffering and economic hardship. Ezekiel exposes the

unequal social structure in which poverty becomes a spectacle for entertainment rather than a matter of human concern. The poem raises ethical questions regarding social responsibility, compassion, and economic injustice, making it highly relevant even today.

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Another remarkable feature of Ezekiel's social realism is his portrayal of urban life. Unlike romantic poets who idealize nature, Ezekiel celebrates and criticizes the city with equal honesty. Bombay (Mumbai) appears in his poetry as a place of ambition, diversity, loneliness, overcrowding, and continuous movement. The city represents both opportunity and struggle. People migrate to urban centres seeking employment and

prosperity but often experience alienation and emotional isolation. Ezekiel captures these contradictions with extraordinary sensitivity, making the city itself an important social character in his poetry.

The theme of identity also contributes significantly to Ezekiel's realism. As an Indian Jew writing in English, Ezekiel experienced multiple cultural identities. His poetry reflects questions concerning belonging, nationality, religion, and language. Rather than presenting identity as fixed, he portrays it as dynamic and continuously negotiated within the realities of modern India. His poems suggest that true identity emerges through honest engagement with one's society rather than through imitation of foreign cultures or blind adherence to tradition.

One of Ezekiel's greatest strengths lies in his use of irony and humour. His criticism of society is never harsh or destructive. Instead, he gently exposes social weaknesses through wit and satire. This balanced approach encourages readers to reflect on their own attitudes without feeling personally attacked. His humour is humane because it is based on sympathy for ordinary people rather than contempt for them.

Language itself becomes an instrument of social realism in Ezekiel's poetry. His use of conversational English, Indian idioms, and everyday expressions makes his poetry accessible to a broad audience. By incorporating Indian English

Dr. Chintamani Yashwantrao Jadhav

into literature, he validates the linguistic identity of postcolonial India. His poems demonstrate that English can effectively express Indian experiences without losing their cultural authenticity.

From a broader perspective, Ezekiel's poetry reflects the transition of Indian society after Independence. Rapid urbanization, educational expansion, economic inequality, political uncertainty, cultural hybridity, and changing family values are recurring themes throughout his works. His poems therefore function as literary documents that preserve the social history of modern India.

Conclusion:

Nissim Ezekiel remains one of the most influential poets in Indian English literature because of his commitment to social realism. His poetry portrays ordinary people and everyday experiences with remarkable honesty, sensitivity, and artistic restraint. Through realistic characterization, conversational language, irony, and humour, he reveals the complexities of Indian society without idealizing or condemning it.

Poems such as *The Night of the Scorpion*, *The Patriot*, *Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T. S.*, *The Professor*, *Entertainment*, and *The Railway Clerk* demonstrate his ability to transform common incidents into profound reflections on social reality. His exploration of superstition, urbanization, poverty, middle-class aspirations,

bureaucracy, identity, and cultural contradictions establishes him as a perceptive observer of post-independence India.

Ezekiel's realism is distinguished by its balance. While exposing social weaknesses, he also acknowledges the resilience, compassion, and humanity that characterize Indian life. His poetry encourages readers to question social practices, appreciate cultural diversity, and cultivate a deeper understanding of ordinary human experiences. Consequently, his works continue to remain relevant in contemporary society, where many of the issues he addressed—economic inequality, cultural identity, urban stress, and social change—persist in new forms.

In conclusion, Nissim Ezekiel's poetry stands as a significant contribution to modern Indian English literature because it combines artistic excellence with social commitment. His realistic vision transforms poetry into a powerful medium for understanding the changing realities of Indian society and reaffirms

literature's enduring role as a mirror of human life.

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