

Chapter—III

Nissim Ezekiel – A Biographical Overview.

I've stretched my two dimensional
Nudity on sheets of weeklies, Monthlies,
Quarterlies, a sad sacrifice¹.

It was Coleridge who said that poetry is great but life is greater. The relationship between art and life is defined in terms of umbilical cord. The relationship between art and life is universally accepted though critics inform that an artistic creation is not often the by-product of existential chronicle. The chequered life history of Alzheimer's disease-ridden poet Nissim Ezekiel shows that his life history is an amalgamation of anecdotes, experiences, education, perception and his Jewish entity. It is deeply entwined into the network of his artistic production. Whatever may be the mask of the poet, the poet is never unaware of his biological self, barring a few visionary poems. The development of the poet is always against the background of the fluctuating Indian scenario. The Jewish entity, the politics of M.N. Roy, bohemian life spirit, Daisy-Linda oscillation, experiments with LSD and sex knit the gamut of his existence as well as his poetic life. Sometimes like a detached observer, he looks at the amusing ongoing of his life in "Jewish wedding ceremony" and at times he takes a dip into the life of his own and narrates the story of his life in a subjective vein in "Background, Casually".

Be it a first person mask or a third person mask, the personality of the poet mostly peeps in like the shining sun through the patches of the cloud. The private sensibility is so powerful in his poems that the poet himself has to say that his poems mostly are composed for his personal therapeutic purposes. His poetry seems to be an artist's

dive deep into psychosomatic panorama of existence. The Fullbright scholar Linda Hess sketches Ezekiel as “an endless explorer of the labyrinths of the mind, the devious delving and twisting of the ego and the ceaseless attempt of man and poet to define himself to find through all ‘the myth and maze’ a way to honesty and love” (Hess. 1966. 30-31.).

Throughout his life Nissim always tries to knit a bond of balance between art and life, however, ineffectual is his venture. Another scholar Michael Garman is more explicit in this regard and he remarks, “His poetry and his life are inextricable and whole purpose in writing is to make a harmony of life poetry out of purely biological fact (existence)” (German. 1976. 209.).

Nissim has no sense of Diaspora as it haunts Ramanujan. He is deeply rooted in the soil of India. The images employed by Ezekiel are springing out from the *spiritus mundi* of the poet. But the inner recess of his poetic self is not a void affair. But it is shaped and shared by environment, biological facts, experience, education, observation, and other factors. The recurrent images of Bombay, are directly drawn from his experiences in life. An experience remains dormant in the heart of a poet. It has a lot of metamorphosis. It is soaked into poetic imagination and ultimately comes up as a poetic image. The images are very important since they show the growth and development of his poetic self. And Ezekiel’s poetic self is basically contradictory and complex. According to R. Raj Rao, Ezekiel being a Jew grows up in a non-Jew atmosphere. He has complex marriage relationship with his wife. All these factors make his poetic self basically contradictory and complex. His mental alienation and stay in complex urban society are mainly responsible for such complexity in his poetic craftsmanship. He has candidly confessed:

I have heard the endless silent dialogue

Between the self – protective self

And the self naked.

I have seen the mask

And the secret behind the mask (CP :106)

The poet observes any object with naked eyes and transmutes the same in the domain of the Muse. After a series of mental transformation, the object comes out as a poetic image. So mental colour seems to be a shaping factor in the image formation. Without a minute analysis or study of the images in Ezekiel, it is wellnigh impossible to get in touch with the poetic development of the poet. So many events pass through the life of a poet like a phantasmagoria. Some of them are retained in the poet's mind and images are directly or indirectly associated with the retentive experiences of the poet. These experiences may grow, may alter till they take the shape of an image. Veiled or unveiled, even his camouflaging self is based on subjectivity that the poet acknowledges a number of times. The poet himself acknowledges the fact that his poetry is based on the life in and around him. He could not get rid of the environmental influence. Following an interview to the Gentleman the poet plainly states:

To start with, my own inspiration is and always was 'my inner life'. And writing is, for me a way of coping with tension between my inner life and the outer life. Looking back this from the earliest days seems to be the main source of my writing. Every other source is somehow related to it, even the experiences of other people. My poems are often introspective and therefore, express self-criticism and self-doubt. I also write about my relationship with other people: love, sex, the individual in society etc.²

Even ultra modern literary theories like 'Phenomenology' also support the view that the literary artist's 'consciousness' is not an airy substance but based on a number of factors. Northrop Frye in his *Fables of identity: studies in poetic Mythology* (1963) tries to reconstruct the poet's consciousness in relation to time, space, nature and society—of course milieu predominating.

Nissim Ezekiel's biographical details percolate through his poetic self. The poet aims at maintaining a balance between his poetic self and the worldly self ineffectually and finally he presents a complex spectrum of life-poetry. R. Raj Rao in his *Nissim Ezekiel – the Authorised Biography* has tried to highlight the career of Nissim Ezekiel in an exhaustive way. Nissim was born at a Chawl near the Byculla Bridge, Bombay in the month of December 1924. His parents Moses and Daina belonged to the Bene-Israel community who migrated to India nearly two thousand years ago following a ship-wreckage. Regarding his birth and belonging the Poet states:

I am an Indian national. I was born in India, my tribe of the Jewish community has lived in India for 2000 years. If I had rejected my Indianness, which some Indian writers obviously have done and if I had decided that I am so much of an outsider that I have to settle down in London or New York and then if I did write about India, I don't know if I could be regarded as an Indo-English writer.³

Nissim's parents – Moses and Diana injected a spirit of discipline among their children in terms of scientific attitude towards life. Nissim's father was a professor of Botany and his mother was the head of a Marathi language primary school. Born and bred in an orthodox Bene-Israel atmosphere Nissim could not totally ignore the environmental atmosphere. As the days rolled on, Nissim accepted only the logical

things instead of being a blind follower of the Jewish culture. That's why he would never wear the tzitzit which is generally associated with the orthodox Jew people.

Though Nissim had tried his best to overcome the religious customs of the Jewish-Bene-Israel community, he had to yield to a number of ceremonial norms that affected his poetic self deeply. It was the *Hath Boshi* or the ceremony of kissing the hand. Shirley Berry Isenberg in her *Indian's Bene Israel: A comprehensive inquiry and source book* gave a good account of the said ceremony practised at the synagogue: A senior person thumbs uppermost, approached a junior, took the junior's hand in both of his/her own hands, while the junior placed his/her remaining hand on the outside of the hand of the senior: then both released hands and immediately, putting the tips of their respective fingers to their mouths, kissed their own fingertips: then they proceeded to repeat the process with another person until the entire congregation (if possible) had thus greeted each other (Isenberg 1988. 49.).

This ritualistic convention is very predominating in Nissim's life as well as his poetry. Here is Nissim's own version of the kissing ceremony reflected in *Nudes – 1978*:

You haven't learnt to kiss, she said,
 'Open your mouth a little, yes,
 That's the way.' I was quite ashamed
 But quick to learn – or so I thought.
 Is this all you want, you funny boy?
 I waited and my wanton friend
 Displayed her body, turned around,
 Her laughter filled my basement room. (CP: 246)

Not only this particular ceremony but there are a number of ceremonies which Nissim has obeyed like a docile social man. When Nissim was thirteen years old (1937), Bar Mitzvah ceremony was solemnized at the Rodef Shalom Synagogue. Being a father Nissim could not give up the practice. He used to take Elkana, his son to Rodef Shalom Synagogue for the practice of Bar Mitzvah.

During his childhood days Nissim dressed shabbily. He showed his poetic genius even at the age of seven. Perhaps he had a dishevelled and shabby image of a poet in his mind's eye and nurtured this habit till now. Even in his prime days of youth Nissim had shown a stoical attitude to his appearance. The Bene Israel people have wavy black hair, brown eyes, oval face and pointed nose. Nissim had oval face and pointed nose but the influence of the surroundings was so powerful that he was like a parse not like a typical Bene Israel person. The poet left no opportunity to jot down the record of life in the pages of a poem, "Background, Casually":

The song of my experience sung,

I knew that all was yet to sing.

My ancestors, among the castes,

Were aliens crushing seed for bread. (CP: 180)

Nissim's parents were not well-to-do. Diana went on teaching at a Marathi primary school and Moses at Wilson College as a lecturer. Moses would accompany Nissim to his educational trips that prompted Nissim's curiosity. In his own confession Nissim was more attached to his mother than to his father.

His first schooling was started at the convent of Jesus and Mary in 1930. Having completed standard one and two at the convent of Jesus and Mary, Nissim went to study at Antonio D ' Souza High school in 1934. He was a mediocre student and used to participate in all extra-mural activities of the school. During the years (1934

to 1940) Nissim had sweet bitter experiences with the Hindu, Muslim and Christian students. It was his school days that prompted him to ponder over:

I went to Roman Catholic School,
 A mugging Jew among the wolves.
 They told me I had killed the Christ,
 That year I won the scripture prize.
 A Muslim sportsman boxed my ears. (CP: 179)

Therefore, the image of the post-colonial India that Nissim freely delineates is due to his experience, observation and perceptive power. During his school days he was weak in subjects like science. At the age of seventeen he passed the matriculation examination (1941). From the very beginning of his life Ezekiel nurtured a socialistic attitude. He never led a luxurious life and would prefer to spend extra money on charity. He had a Shavian mental make-up.

Nissim's life was centred on Bombay and his poetry also revolves round Bombay life. How his "Psyche" was formed slowly, had been nicely stated by R. Raj Rao in *Nissim Ezekiel: The Authorised Biography*:

A sense of roots and belonging is perhaps essential to every poet, because in the last analysis, it gives him the terms of reference for his writing. Nissim's roots are in Bombay; Bombay is the city where he belongs. He was born in Bombay, has always lived here and always came back to Bombay, where he went. The longest time he was away from Bombay was between 1948 and 1952, when he was in England. But even before he went to England, he decided that Bombay was his home and once in England, he made up his mind to return to Bombay and spend the rest of his life here. Nissim's years in England coincided with the time the Jews in India started emigrating on a

large scale to the newly formed nation of Israel (from 1949 onwards). Though he took interest in this development, he rejected the Zionist notion that Israel was the Promised Land to which all the Jews of the world must return. This is because he thought of himself as an Indian. (Rao. 2000. 30.)

It was absolutely right that he was born in Bombay and belonged to the city:

I cannot leave the island,

I was born here and belong. (CP: 182)

His college years were really glorious. The poet was admitted to the Presbyterian Wilson College. He said that he applied his mind to studies seriously. He won a scholarship there throughout his four years and graduated in English literature with a first class. This inspired him somewhat for his master's degree.

In the early years of 1940s, the college magazine published the poems of Nissim Ezekiel. This prompted him to send poems to "The Thought" and other journals. During his college days he became well-acquainted with the works of T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound. Apart from literary pursuits he was interested in M.N. Roy's Radical Democratic party. Later on realizing his forte lies in poetry, he gave up politics at the cost of poetry.

Having graduated from the Wilson College, he joined the M.A. classes in English there. He started teaching at the Hansraj Morarji School for a while. He took keen interest in Eliot, Pound, Joyce and Yeats. That's why an Eliotian hangover was markedly present in the early poems of Ezekiel. Even his images at this stage were mimetic by nature.

In 1947 Nissim passed the M.A. Examination in English as a University topper and won the R.K. Lagu prize for his laudable feat. Thereafter he worked as a lecturer at Khalsa College during June 1947 to June 1948. He gave up his jobs and went on

freely contributing to *The Times of India*, *Free Press Journal*, *Bharatiya Vidya Bhawan Journal*. During this period Donne's echo is found in Ezekiel's "Nakedness I", "Nakedness II", "Two Nights of Love", "Description", "The Recluse", "Delighted by Love", "At the Party and Progress".

In November, 1948 Alkazi helped him financially to go to England for higher studies. A twenty-six days voyage in the *Jal Azad* took him to London. He got a clerical job in the Internal Affairs Department of the High Commission. Meanwhile Nissim enrolled himself in Chinese, Western Philosophy, Art Appreciation and other subjects. He went on studying B.A. course in philosophy at Birbeck college. Though he did not complete the course, he got acquainted with the legendary philosopher like C.E.M. Joad. Poetry and philosophy ran parallel to his life. He confessed the fact a number of times how he spent his London days. He admitted:

... my experience in England, studying, working, shutting myself up in an underground room for hours together and thinking and writing poems ...yes, that's when I take a drastic decision; I resign the job at India House and take to full-time writing, earning a pound here and a pound there. (Rao. 2000. 72.)

Here the Fortune Press published his first book of verse *A Time to Change* in 1952. The task was not easy because "In some senses I would discover that we had internalized some of the attitudes of our erstwhile rulers. The attitude of many editors and publishers towards poetry in English written by an Indian was one of disbelief and disorder. The word post-colonial had been coined and I could not use it either as a weapon or an excuse when I went with my manuscripts from publisher to publisher or looked in vain for review space" (Panday. 1994. 72.).

During the period Nissim was almost penniless. A certain ship carrying ammunition to Indo-China was desperately looking for new sailors. Nissim and his

friend Paigankar joined the staff. They had to “scrub desk and carry coal”. His experience at the ship was marvellous. He earned the certificate of an able seaman. Nissim could not forget the experience of his life as an able seaman. He remembered:

So in an English Cargo ship,
 Taking French guns and mortal shells.
 To Indo-China, scrubbed the decks,
 And learned to laugh again at home. (CP: 180)

Here the poet is *prima facie* talking about his self.

Nissim was on the wrong side of thirty when he passed through several experiences in his life. They left a lasting impression on the mind of the poet. The concrete experiences which made their inroads in the deep of his mind, found abstract shapes in the form of images. So Nissim’s direct experiences bear semblance with his biographical account and his images point out the growth of his poetic self. Having returned to India, Nissim started his career as a sub-editor of the Times of India. His life as a sub-editor was a sort of routine life. His association with the Illustrated weekly of India widened his scope of work experience. On 23rd November, 1952 Nissim and Daisy were married at a Synagogue called Magen David Synagogue. The poem *Jewish wedding in Bombay* gives a good account of Nissim’s wedding which was solemnized in terms of Hindu rituals and the traditional Bene Israel norms:

Her brothers hid a shoe of mine and made me pay
 To get it back...
 we are wed and truly married
 According to the Mosaic Law. (CP: 243)

Ezekiel went on leaving one job to join the other. Thus he joined an advertising agency as a copywriter and at the same time went on editing the magazine “Guest”.

During his job at the Shilpi, Nissim got an opportunity to visit America nearly for one and a half years. Nissim was emotionally inclined to an American Fulbright scholar Linda Hess. His career record at the Shilpi showed that Ezekiel was not at all serious about his job but he was nurturing his bohemian self. Poems written in this period fully expose the poet's mental make-up.

V.S. Shahane writes, "Ezekiel's earlier verse is marked by an awareness of physical passion, sexual impulse, intermingling of the corporeal and the spiritual and a sensitive reaction to objects of sensory pleasure or pain. The promptings of the spirit are audible through the limbs of the flesh and the consequential significance of intellectuality and abstraction are obtained and realized only through the emotive stimulation effect of the human body." (Shahane. 1989. 22)

The women to whom he desired most remained a distant illusion always. The poet felt pain to realize:

The pure invention or the perfect poem,

precise communication of a thought,

Love reciprocated to a quiver,

Flawless doctrines, certainty of God,

These are merely dreams. (CP: 5)

The poet presented finely tuned images, which are mostly sex-images during the period. Woman after woman had entered his life. That does not mean that he was a womanizer. Khorshed Wadia Ezekiel had observed the poet from a close angle. She had seen the vicissitudes in the life of Ezekiel; how Ezekiel was drawn to Daisy and Linda Hess. His daily bazaar trip to Grand Road from Marine Lines and up the hill to Daisy's house was a common man's riddle. Yet he had done that; his love, which remained always unrequited, enriched his poetic sensibility and perception to create or

compose better poems. Daisy out of her wounded pride regarded Nissim to be a monster who ruined her life and Linda always appreciated the poetic craft of Ezekiel in the supportive tone. Sandwiched between two extreme poles, Nissim was always mentally alienated. That's why his poems are mostly the songs of lamentation. In each of his images a nidus of pain is echoed powerfully:

Men are lost

Who wanted only quiet lives

And failed to count the growing cost

Of cushy job or unloved wives. (CP: 121)

Going through the vicissitudes of Nissim's life it seemed to the researcher that the poet had loved his poetry (creation) better than his life. In other words the poet started neglecting his self to nourish his soul (poetic). In Khorshed Wadia Ezekiel's view: "...he was very shabbily dressed, reluctant to bathe, reluctant to change his clothes, have them washed etc. I had to talk to him, trick him into getting all this done. Also Ezekiel men have a pathological fear of doctors and dentists. Hannan has managed to get himself out of this grip but Joe too was most reluctant to visit a medico. Nissim is even afraid of getting his nails cut and probably also frightened of the razor". (Rao. 2000. 374)

His poems are on the march as life shows on. They turn and twist following a mysterious circuit. No longer he looks at the sun as bringing light bug, he looks at it with a luminous halo: "White wings of morning" (CP: 20) and "Sunny boy" (CP: 284). Nissim's association with literary journals grew stronger as he joined the PEN and his literary pursuit became stronger. In 1953 he published his second collection of verse entitled *Sixty Poems* consisting of moral, metaphysical, religious, philosophical

poems. The business of common life becomes his forte: the study of hour becomes his poetic sustenance. He is, now, a mundane man, humanly balanced:

I don't want the Yogi's concentration,
 I do not want the perfect charity
 Of saints nor the tyrant's endless power,
 I want a human balance humanly
 Acquired, fruitful in the common hour. (CP: 40)

Subjective confession of self is a common feature with the other Indo-Anglian poets. Kamala Das also feels:

An empty cistern, waiting
 Through long hours, fills itself
 With coiling snakes of silence.²

The influence of the poetry of John Donne, W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot, W.H. Auden, Rilke and some other American poets become inaudible gradually in the poetry of Ezekiel. The Anglo-American influence is over and Ezekiel sings his own song. His own life becomes the nerve centre of his poetry. The texture of his verse is highly charged with the images of India, the reality of love and life. The world around him becomes his *spiritus mundi* from where he draws all his images – centripetal or centrifugal.

The "Sixty Poems" was published in 1958 followed by "The Third" in 1958. Ezekiel writes in the introduction to the collection (Sixty Poems), "There is in each line, a prose, an idea or image which helps to maintain some sort of continuity in my life" (Kurup. 1996. 35.). The poems "Question" and "Report" were composed in 1945-48 years. During the period (1950-51), "Speech and Silence", "A Short Story", "Penitence" were composed. Later on between the 1952-53 years "The portrait", "For

William Carlos Williams”, “The old Abyss” were composed. The “Sixty Poems” according to the scholars, is not so powerful collection of poems like his previous one i.e. “A Time to Change” which records the successive development of the poet as a creative writer as reflected in his autobiographical poems – “A short story”, “First Theme and Variations”, “Background, Casually”, “A visitor”, “The visitor” etc.

Prof. Indernath Kher observed that the volume hardly represents any major thematic development. The subjects mostly occupy Ezekiel’s mind are love and sex, poetry and existence, body and mind, flesh and spirit, private meditation, day to day affairs, self-identity and concern for others. However, a greater involvement in the theme of human passion and sexuality and a suggestion concerning the possible relationship between the female form and poetic creation are seen here. The “Sixty Poems” is inferior to “A Time To Change” in many respects. Many poems in the volume suffer from loose structure and confused imagery.

The poet led a turbulent life during the decade. The wedding ‘exploded well’ and landed them in Panchagani. But his professional life was really a stressful one. Nissim left the Illustrated Weekly of India to join Shilpi. In 1954 his one time political mentor M. N. Roy passed away leaving a void in his mental horizon. The poet developed a sort of gnawing doubts about the teachings of M. N. Roy, yet Roy’s death had some bearing on his mind due to his long association with Roy. Indeed Roy was a father figure in his life.

The poet’s attitude towards life is changed. He oscillates between the rules of morality and the force of temptation. He speaks in terms of simple images and the complex feelings of his heart:

I have learnt to reveal in the stone,
Hard, cold, heavy, shapeless, solid stone,

To turn away from all that seems to flow

Elusively: time, water, blood around the bone. (CP: 40)

The vicissitudes of Nissim's life in the decade are as follows:

Nissim joined the editorial staff of 'The Illustrated weekly of India' and worked there nearly for four years. He broadcast on AIR, Bombay for 10 years (1952-1962). In 1955 he became the editor of 'Quest' and in 1957 he had an American tour. He returned to college teaching in 1959.

In 1958 Nissim published his third collection of poems called *The Third*. It was published by Strand Book Shop Bombay and "The Unfinished Man" was also brought out in 1959. These poems record the moral acts and pains of an Indo-Anglian poet in an Indian city.

The poet asked about the irony in life with a sense of humour. Looking at his personal life in this decade (1960-1970), the poet seems to have encountered through failures in life. His matrimonial life is on the verge of ruin. He cannot form a matrimonial alliance with Linda Hess. He is also a failure in terms of profession.

At this stage Nissim's concern with animal life is seen as in the poems "Sparrows". In the "The Cur" Nissim Ezekiel does not follow the strain left by Ted Hughes. There is no fierce attitude in them. His animals are submissive and docile. His common animal images are "agile flick of grey" (CP: 62), "Sniffed at fish" (CP: 66), and "restless flight" (CP: 135).

Besides this the poet starts searching for the soul analysis. He hinges on the philosophy of life in such poems like "Case Study" and "Morning Prayer". There are flashes of travel and tour in his poems. His trip to Rangoon becomes highly productive in terms of poetic craft:

Saffron monks with heads clean shaved

Trishaw (cycle rickshaws)

Taxis are jeeps

Whole market for gewgaws.

Pavements unpaved.

And refuses in heaps. (CP: 108)

The erstwhile bohemian poet is, after this stage, somewhat regulated now. The poet joined Mithibai College in 1961. Nissim enjoyed teaching in close association with R. Parthasarathy, G.D. Antarkar, M.K. Kutty and Srinivas Rao. It was a sort of hereditary occupation for him. He rose to the post of Vice-Principal in Arts section. The creative poet found to his utter dismay that even M.phil students preferred readymade notes on Octovio Paz or Pablo Neruda. His life at Mithibai College has been described by his two colleagues (Pramod Kale and Victor Gikwad) in the following language:

Nissim was full of life and very encouraging. As far as teaching was concerned, he was very accommodating. Both *Romeo and Juliet* and the *History of Mr. Polly* were on the syllabus. At first Nissim taught the *History of Mr. Polly* and I taught *Romeo and Juliet*. After a few years Nissim suggested that we should exchange texts so that the students would have the benefit of both the teachers. Nissim encouraged me to write poetry and even published one of my poems in the *Illustrated Weekly of India* (Rao. 2000.148.).

One of his students (Dr. Ershad Ahmed, teaching at Govt. College, Darjeeling, W.B.) recalls that Ezekiel as a teacher was stimulating. He was highly conscious of being a poet. He repeatedly used to say to his students that he is a poet and he knows it well. Though he had good relationship with other colleagues, the popular Marathi poet Mangesh Padgaonkar bore grudge against him.

Nissim as a teacher was highly innovative. He explained the poems in terms of Indian surroundings and milieu. Other teachers used to explain the same in an orthodox way. But Ezekiel, in those days, explained poem in relation to India. The job at Mithibai College was not so time consuming. That's why he published reviews on four books in the Imprint and other leading magazines in India.

During this period a number of friends encircled him. Among them are ... Kamala Das, Kersy Katrak, Keki Daruwalla, Gieve Patel, Adil Jussawalla, Eunice De Souza. Nissim and Kamala shared a sort of love-hatred relationship. In 1964 professor Jeffares invited Nissim to the University of Leeds as a visiting lecturer. Accompanied by Daisy Nissim set sail for England. Nissim delivered fourteen lectures on the Indian writing in English in Leeds. Having completed the task, he returned home and resumed his normal duties at Mithibai College.

It was definitely true that all contemporary events did not affect the poet. Nissim left the issue of war consciously. So the China war 1962 and Pakistan war 1965 got a lukewarm response from him. He did not care to compose poems on such contemporary events.

"The Unfinished Man" (1960) and "The Exact Name" (1905) came to light. It is P.Lal who on behalf of the writers' workshop published "The Unfinished Man" and "The Exact Name". The former contained only ten poems while the latter contained only twenty poems. The first book contains seven philosophical poems – "Enterprise", "Love Sonnet", "Commitment", "Morning Prayer", "Event", "Marriage" and two poems centring on Bombay – "Urban" and "A Morning walk", an autobiographical poem – "Jamini Roy".

Raj Rao considers these poems to be veiled autobiographical poems. He writes, "Finally I argue that although the images in the two poems seem allegorical, the

poems are specially about Bombay if we take into account the manner in which Nissim stands in relation to the images weaving into them autobiographical facts from his life. To support my contention I refer to his use of the 'Barbaric' to describe Bombay (which of course), coincides with novelist Raja Rao's description of the city in *The Serpent and the Rope*, published in the same year as "The Unfinished Man" (Rao. 2000. 167).

The poet wears a third person mask in "Case Study". Now he writes the history of his unhappy married life, occasional quarrel with Daisy and Toni Patel's influence on his life. The following lines are indeed Nissim's autobiography in verse:

He came to me and this is what I said:

The pattern will remain, unless you break

It with a sudden jerk, but use your head.

Not all returned as heroes who had fled

In wanting both to have and eat the cake.

Not all who fail are counted with the fake. (CP: 125)

Linda Hess occupied a greater part of Nissim's life. Hess was emotionally drawn to Nissim. Ranjit Hoskote observes, "Linda Hess must have represented to Nissim everything that his own conservative wife was not: beauty, brains and liberation. She enabled him to live the way men in the '60s wanted to – with a dutiful wife at home and a liberated girl friend outside. Nissim has always oscillated between the conservative and the bohemian, and the presence of Linda Hess in his life would be considered a good example of his bohemianism. Besides, both of them would have seemed exotic to each other". (Rao. 2000. 171)

Linda sits in the hinter land of Ezekiel and as a result some of the finest images are born in this period like “Love reciprocated to quiver” (CP: 5), “drop your fear” (CP: 27), “Dream-window” (CP: 47) and “light of love” (CP: 153).

In the epi-centre of his mind Linda sits and arrests the attention of other women. That’s why women images are so frequent on the string of music. He perceives the women through his mind’s eye: “burnt out mothers”, “frightened virgins”, “Sacrificing mothers”, “women of semi bare bosom”, “wives of India”, “wooden wives sitting in disarray”, “women as object of study”, “nagging women”, “naked blazing animals”, “unhinging speech and bone”, “pregnant women”, “sensual movement”, “breast of sex”, etc. All the woman images do not necessarily focus on Linda but his woman images mostly centre on Linda Hess and Elizabeth, the basement girl. He refers to Toni Patel, Minakshi Raja, Gauri Deshpande in sublime way whereas Linda, Elizabeth and Daisy get a flowery treatment at the hands of Ezekiel.

Meanwhile his involvement with the P.E.N. was cemented. He took active part in the spread and promotion of the Indian PEN and at the same time he took LSD, which affected his creative horizon. Nissim heard a lot about LSD in America where writers and artists in general used to take LSD to expand their mind. After a lot of hesitations he became habituated to drug taking. Nissim confessed his own experience in the “DRUGS: A Personal Footnote”:

In a more limited way, I’ve found marijuana also immensely useful. My appreciation of music and art was broadened and intensified. I increased my capacity for concentration, my love of silence. I had glimpses of my true self, which I had never dreamt existed in such depth and complexity. My understanding of philosophical, metaphysical and religious questions became

keener and acquired greater immediacy. I also saw the limits of my abilities more clearly and developed a sense of destiny. I owe more to LSD and marijuana than to my reading, though perhaps without it I may have benefited less from them.⁵

Huxley's *Doors of Perception* influenced Ezekiel. In the post-LSD period Ezekiel was seen to have used conglomerate images like "promised land", "angelic wings", "parables of hell" etc.

That Ezekiel hinged on perception is reflected in a letter dated 15th April, 1984 to the present researcher, when asked about the influence of Tennyson and Wordsworth on the poem "Beauty", Ezekiel writes, "Thank you for your interest in my poem *Beauty*. Your interpretation of it seems to me to be on the right lines. I did not, though, have Wordsworth and Tennyson in mind only my own perceptions are expressed in the poem". In his professional life Nissim went on riding higher and higher. In 1972 he joined the Bombay University as a Reader in American Literature and later became a Professor of English till his retirement in 1985. Meanwhile he won the Sahitya Academy Award for "Latter Day Psalms" in 1983.

Vrinda Nabar observed Nissim Ezekiel closely as a colleague and said that Nissim inspired other would-be writers to write poems or creative composition. Nissim was, in her version, an innovative teacher and he always invited students to take part in the art of teaching poetry or drama.

Fortune smiled on him in the decade of seventy. The Oxford University Press came to publish his poems. He became a literary figure on the T.V. Screen. He wielded an impressive influence in the academic and cultural domain. Nissim made two short foreign trips on the Inter-cultural encounters and the cultural exchange programme of the Government of the United States.

So far Nissim remained surprisingly reticent about religious affairs with the publications of "Hymns in Darkness" (1976) and "Latter-day Psalms" (1986) Nissim changed his attitude to life to a great extent. Nissim came out of that philosophy. The Oxford University Press, New Delhi, published these books. He turned his inside out in eight hours and became a believer in God, religion, the metaphysical nature of the universe and life, ESP etc. The religious-cum-philosophical quest haunts the poet in the period that follows. Nissim's God is not a Jewish God. His God is not invariably a Hindu God. He is, according to Gieve Patel, a metropolitan *Bombay God* (CP:XVIII). His treatment towards God is not uniform. He remains always sceptic about the doctrines of religion and traditional religious credo. He writes:

The ungodly are in the same con
 dition, No more like the chaff
 Which the wind driveth away
 Than the godly. (CP: 253)

OR

humanises God:
 The vices I've always had
 I still have.
 The virtues I've never had
 I still do not have.
 From this Human way of Life.
 Who can rescue man
 If not His Maker?
 Do thy duty, Lord. (CP: 212)

Ezekiel was a moralist to the core. His social concern was too deep. He did not divorce Daisy for his deep moral concern. It is his deep social concern that prompts him to share everything with the people living in and around him. He is not a synagogue going bigot but a human being “humanly balanced”.

Ezekiel is set to test the religious codes of the Bible in the light of modern paradoxes and complexities in life. So religious theme predominates in “Hymns in Darkness” and “Latter-Day Psalms”. “The Sixteen”, “Hymns in Darkness”, “Guru”, “Rural Suite”, and “Tribute to the Upanishads” show his growing interest in religion. At the same time he realises his bond with his birthplace, society, country --- and the metaphoric city Bombay.

Like W.B. Yeats the poet wears a third person mask and goes on telling the story of his life in the poem, “Background, Casually”. He tells the story of his life in a sing-song way:

Twenty two : time to go abroad.

First, the decision, then a friend.

To pay the fare, philosophy, three

Companions shared my basement room. (CP: 179)

His biographical records show that he went to England at the age of twenty-five (Poetically twenty-two) and a friend Ibrahim Alkazi paid his sea-fare. The opening couplet in the poem proves the affinity with life and poetic art in a clear cut way.

An encircling gloom has wrapped the poet in 1978. Separation with Daisy has already taken place. His emotional gap has also surfaced with Linda Hess. But Ezekiel also needed a woman around him to look after him – be it his mother, daughter, lover or any woman admirer. Without their presence Nissim cannot stand and compose his verse properly. He beats in the void. Ezekiel tries to tackle the void

by wearing a mask but fails miserably to do so. Sitting in Bombay the poet through his mind's eye feels in a nostalgic vein the presence of California-based Linda Hess:

Ten thousand miles away,
 You become a shower of letters,
 A photograph, a newspaper cutting,
 Underlined, with penciled comments,
 And a smell at night. (CP: 195)

The images of "a shower of letters", "photographs", "newspaper cutting", "a smell", form the multidimensional entities of Linda Hess. Nissim himself vehemently correlated his life to poetry. Regarding the genesis of "Latter Day-Psalms" he says that the origin of the poem is the poetry festival in Rotterdam. At the hotel he reads the Guide on The Bible and the Old Testament. He completed the, "Latter-Day Psalms" in Rotterdam in June 1978.

In 1980s the poet made a lot of experimentations in the field of poetry. He deals with Poster Poems and invents Zen telegrams. He talks to his biographer Raj Rao, "In 1971-72 I was looking for new source of information in life and literature. I read a book of American Indian songs in translation. All of them were short, compressed, and highly poetic. There was a kind of communal feeling in them. The poet is a member of the tribe, capable of embodying its feelings. All these things came together in my mind with the idea of an exhibition of poster poems. One tends to stumble on the next development. It's a twin of events...you rely on the fact that you are talking listening, reacting. A recent unexpected development for me was Zen telegram. While recovering from a surgical operation, I read a book called as Therapeutic Experience. One of the articles described a therapist's use of Zen Telegram to help his patients. I took a ball point pen and paper and did nine telegrams in the spirit of the original Zen

telegram, as a spontaneous expression. The next day was a Sunday. I saw no reason to follow the traditional format of Zen telegram. So I lay in the bed the whole day, thinking about the form, completing each in my mind and wrote/drew a few in twenty four that day. I had both the visual and verbal very clearly in the mind when I did each. A number of them reflect the after- illness state of mind". (Rao. 2000. 247)

In 1988 Nissim was conferred on Padma Shri. Next year the Oxford University Press published: *Nissim Ezekiel: Collected Poems 1952-1988*. Recognition, award, and honour come in quick succession but, Nissim becomes an isolated individual on the front of family life. Elkana, his son, is far away from his life like his mother Daisy. Kavita is an occasional visitor. On this drama of life he becomes a painfully isolated individual catering to the mundane needs of Daisy who lives in a self-styled exile status. Nissim spends a greater part of his life in the PEN office—dusty, dingy PEN office praising some works, thereby earning life-long friends and criticizing bogus poems, there by earning life-long foes:

Do not be satisfied with the world
that God created. Create your own.
Be voracious with your eyes and appetites:
the will to see, the passion in the act of love
or learning lead to brighter prospect. (CP: 205)

After retirement (1985), Nissim went on a number of foreign trips. In 1985 he went to Salburg, Germany and next year he attended Frankfurt Book Fair. In 1987 he went to Hong Kong. He read his poems at the Adelaide Book Fair and the New Zealand International Festival of Arts in 1988.

He was an outright reviewer of books. He supported the ban on the *The Satanic Verses* in India because the book, according to him, crossed the limit of an artist's

freedom. A decade ago he was also highly critical about Indira Gandhi's imposition of emergency in India.

The poet has frankly expressed his view on the importance of images in poems. In his view the absence of imagery makes a poem weak. In 1989 he published a drama *Don't call It Suicide*. In 1990 he acted as a literary advisor to Rupa and Co. and a number of Indian and foreign publishers like Orient Longman, the Macmillan, and the Oxford University Press.

The decade following (1990-2000) is the most unproductive period in terms of poetry but it is a fertile period in terms of critical writings and book reviews. In 1992 he attended the international conference on the contemporary literature and language Studies at Jamaica. He got warm appreciation there. In the same year The Oxford University Press published Nissim's prose writings *Nissim Ezekiel: Selected Prose*. It was divided in four sections "On Poetry", "On Art and Culture", "On Life and Thought" and "On Books". In 1993 he witnessed with a heavy heart the riot in connection with the demolition of the Babri Masjid. Regarding Taslima Nassrin's *Lajja* he remarked: "All you have done is, provoked some extremists within the community to attack you". (Rao. 2000.331)

In 1994 Nissim was showing the signs of Alzheimer's diseases. His daily life was spent partly in the PEN and partly in The Retreat. Nissim cooperated R. Raj in writing his *Authorised Biography*. Having attained seventy years of age, Nissim's admirers celebrated the occasion. Gieve Patel, Adil Jussawalla, Imtiaz Dharker appreciated Nissim's rhythmic chant of "Night of the Scorpion". Nissim gave a number of interviews to newspapers also.

In 1995 Nissim decided to write the story of his life entitled *A Thousand Failures*, which never bore fruit. During his old years Nissim spent time by telling anecdote to

his close friends and associates like Gieve Patel, Adil Jussawalla. In 1996 the creative sun of Nissim Ezekiel was on the western horizon. The poet went on prostate operation. In 1997 Nissim published an article in the Sunday Times. It was an autobiographical writing and Nissim went on writing on contemporary national events.

The poet was seen in the vortex of family scrambles. Like a stoic he was indifferent to all the stresses and storms in life. The poet's health went on deteriorating in such a way that he collapsed at an AJJDC meeting and was admitted to the Shashrush Nursing Home at Dadar. The Doctors of the clinic revealed that he had been suffering from Alzheimer's disease. The ailing poet was shifted to A. J. Dias Nursing Home at Turner Road, Bandra for better treatment. Visitors went on visiting the Alzheimer's disease-ridden poet. He could partly recognize some of his friends like Jussawalla and Minakshi Raja.

In the month of December 1999 Nissim was put on Exelon, the American wonder drug but had no effect on the Poet-turned-patient. Nissim always preferred to remain reticent about his productive years. Even in his bed-ridden condition, he cherishes a wish:

I will read the book by and by. There is a lot to read. After I read them, the books are taken away. Otherwise there would be no space. There's an institution next door. There's something happening there all the time. I was there before you came. There's something going on all the time. (Jussawalla. 1999. 3)

Nissim Ezekiel is not in fine fettle now. Nowadays the poet stands as a Totem-pole. He is at the end of his tether — a static statue — “Hair: Close — Cropped, grey brown. Eyes: Spectacled, greyish. Smile: gentle... Shirt: Blue grey...”. (Rao.1999. 13)

As a poet he has read the pages of poetry and life, life and poetry in a better way.

His death-in-life state still haunts the lover of his biography:

My neighbour says, you are Parsi?

No, I say genially, acknowledging his interest, Zoroastrian.

He leaves the subject along.

The train has stopped between stations.⁶

Now the poet is physically no more. He left his earthly abode on 9th January 2004. Dom Moraes, a contemporary poet, has paid tribute to Nissim Ezekiel in the following few lines:

On January 10, one of the first mornings of a new year, *The Times of India* told me that Nissim Ezekiel was dead. He had survived nearly 80 mostly tranquil years. But in the last few of them he suffered from Alzheimer's disease. It was a savage way for him to die, for he had always treasured the real world, and for the last few years his illness took it away from him. I did not see him often in these years. The last few times we met, he knew my face but could not place me. I had known Nissim, when he died, for more than half century. (Moraes. 2004. 74)

Notes and References

1. Quoted in Lakshi Raghunandan's *Contemporary Indian Poetry In English*. New Delhi: Reliance Publishing House. 1990.63
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3. Quoted by Das in *The Horizon Of Nissim Ezekiel's Poetry*. 33.
4. Quoted by P.K.J. Kurup in *Contemporary Indian Poetry In English*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors. 1996. 120

5. Quoted by R Raj Rao in "Drugs: A Personal Foot Note" *Nissim Ezekiel The Authorised Biography*. New Delhi. Viking. 2000. 179.
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