

## **‘Resisting erasure and bearing witness’: Representation of the Indian Emergency in Select Poems of Nissim Ezekiel**

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### **Abstract**

Literary representations of the Emergency (c. 1975-1977), one of the controversial periods in independent India’s history, constitute a site of interpretation and negotiation of the Independence and the post-independence Indian polity. If Partition marks the incubation of incipient decay, the Emergency represents its peak contagion. Carolyn Forché in her anthology *Against Forgetting: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Poetry of Witness* (1993) has exhorted the poets to bear ‘witness’ to atrocities. Seamus Heaney said that a poem gives true peace only if ‘horror’ is satisfactorily rendered. Theodor Adorno wanted poetry to resist ‘erasure’. Ezekiel’s poetry resists an erasure of some of the aspects of ‘history’ which normally tend to be forgotten. Ezekiel was too conscious an artist to turn away from the contemporary events in the national life. For example, in the poem “Very Indian Poem in Indian English” one may catch clear echoes of the official slogan of the ‘20 Point Program’. Ezekiel’s volumes are replete with references to the ‘horrors’ of the Emergency that took the forms of violent displacements, arrests, forced ‘family planning’, all of which were done in the name of ‘progress’ and ‘modernization’. What we find in many of his poems is neither a picture of cohesion nor of historical continuity after the Independence but of crisis and exacerbation of the problems. Ezekiel in many ways questions the flagrant forms of institutionalized violence in ‘secular’ India. Nevertheless, the question of belonging to India remains an abiding concern and the feeling centre. This paper purports to explore some of these issues while focussing on how Ezekiel problematizes the question of ‘freedom’ vis-à-vis the Indian Emergency.

**Keywords:** Freedom, Emergency, witness, erasure, violence, resistance

‘I shake with intimations –  
not of immortality.’  
–Nissim Ezekiel

Literary representations of the Indian Emergency (June 1975-March 1977) and its aftermath constitute an intricate site of interpretation, negotiation and synthesis of the Indian Independence and post-independence Indian polity. The Indian Independence was

not an unmixed blessing. It straddled both the euphoria of newly-earned freedom and the unspeakable agony of Partition. If the days following the Partition mark the incubation period of incipient decay, the declaration of the Emergency, one of the controversial periods in independent India's history, represents its peak contagion. Salman Rushdie in his *Midnight's Children* (1981) gave an eloquent expression to this sense of decay and disillusionment. Did Ezekiel's poetry respond to such perturbations and critique the impositions of some policies upon the masses during the Emergency? Did he get down from the ivory tower and sample the real world? Did he contain himself within the hermetic realm of the personal and the esoteric? Did he face the political and the quotidian reality? This paper purports to explore some of these issues while focussing on the representation of the Indian Emergency in the select poems of Ezekiel.

In an interview with Rand Brandes, Seamus Heaney said that a poem "gives true peace only if horror is satisfactorily rendered. If the eyes are not averted from it" (18). After the Second World War attempts had been made by some poets to render the suffering of people around. There has been a general move from complicity to resistance in some poets who have felt solidarity with the doomed, the deprived, the victimized, and the underprivileged. Carolyn Forché in her ground-breaking anthology *Against Forgetting: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Poetry of Witness* has exhorted the poets to bear witness to the atrocities unleashed against a section in the society. This problematizes the question of the role of a poet in the public sphere and also the relation between poetry and history. Long ago Keats said that he hated poetry that had a 'palpable design' upon the readers (43). Shelley imbibed radical political thought. Tennyson and Arnold fled from the besetting problems. Pound and Eliot are held responsible for the alienation of poetry from the public sphere. It is after the First World War that we witness an altered poetic sensibility. Two things changed Owen—trench experience and meeting with Sassoon. Auden had unequivocal socio-political commitments. After the holocaust of the Second World War, the general feeling was that silencing the political history in poetry would be a grave crime. After witnessing the carnage of six million Jews at Auschwitz, German thinker Theodor Adorno made the infamous statement, 'To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric' (34). A 'conscious' artist as he was, Ezekiel was too concerned with the question of technical perfection to bear 'witness' to atrocities as well as to register the 'unpresentable loss'. This is evident in his early verse. But in his later poems there is a perceptible change. Ezekiel's poetry during the stormy 1970s does not abound in emotions arising out of the 'intimations of immortality'. The poems written in the 1970s bear 'witness' to some deeply 'disturbing' aspects of contemporary society. He is now more concerned with the underside of life. This does not mean that his early poems do not look at the atrocities unleashed against the masses caught in the throes of nationalism and 'progress'. There are continuities of the poet's preoccupations in this regard, but the only difference is that in his later volumes (especially *Hymns in Darkness* and *Latter-Day Psalms*) his critiquing and questioning of power is more articulate.

Carolyn Forché wanted poetry to resist the 'erasure' of cultural and political history. This resistance assumes greater significance in view of the fact that power tends to 'silence' and eventually 'erase' discursive and dissenting views. In India, the Emergency was 'mythologised' chiefly through two opposing narratives. The pro-Emergency narrative supported by the government in power claimed that Independent India could attain new levels of progress through putting a check on the population increase, through enhancing production in industry, through evicting slums and through some such 'welfare' works.

The official narrative preached that these steps would render the dreams of the nation-builders fruitful. The 'narrative' of the political opponents (e.g. of Jayaprakash) focussed on the 'dystopian' aspects of the Emergency and the government policies. This narrative was initially constructed through three 'overlapping genres: political exposé, aimed at making visible what was previously written; the prison memoir providing the intimate account of personal experience, and the public judgement aimed at interrogation of the guilty' (Tarlo 33-34). The usual fate of such 'narratives' is that they tend to be erased both from the public memory and 'history' when the political scenario is changed. The masses who suffer indignities and persecution 'forget' all about the indignities heaped upon them when they are offered new opportunities, promises, and doles. Here lies the importance of poetry—for that matter art and literature—which works against 'erasure' and preserves 'history'. In India, to come back to the point we were discussing, the Emergency was followed by Mrs. Gandhi's return to power. Public sentiment and love for Gandhi turned into mass hysteria when she was assassinated nearly four years after her political comeback. The majority of the mass media made volte face. Those who dared to raise voice were silenced. The anti-Emergency narratives sank into oblivion and the Emergency—a moment of mockery of the Independence—turned into a 'success myth'. Thus, 'facts' change colour when they become components of a different political 'discourse'. True events are erased from the annals. Even the masses who have suffered much tend to be oblivious of the atrocities; but the significance of literature is that it works against forgetting. Thus, poetry resists erasure. Much of Ezekiel's later poetry 'preserves' some of the unpleasant facts about the Indian Emergency. This paper purports to focus on Ezekiel's representation of some of those facts.

The Emergency is one of the most controversial periods of independent India's history. It refers to a 21-month period from 1975 to 1977 when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had a state of emergency declared across the country. It was officially issued by President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed under Article 352 of the Constitution because of the prevailing "internal disturbance" and imminent internal and external threats to the Indian state. The Order bestowed upon the Prime Minister the authority to rule by decree, allowing civil liberties to be suspended. Most of the political opponents were imprisoned and the press was censored. Several other human rights violations were reported from the time, including a forced mass sterilization campaign. Jayaprakash Narayan led the mid-1970s opposition to the Indian Emergency. The tendency of the Government of India to control the judiciary met with severe criticism. Due to the war with Pakistan – a war that took place after the Chinese war, after the additional challenges of drought and also after the 1973 oil crisis—the economy was in shambles. Apart from the official announcement of the '20-point' economic programme, another five-point programme promoting literacy was also declared. Later during the Emergency, the two projects merged into a 'Twenty-five-point Programme'. It was a massive crackdown on civil rights and political opposition. The Government used police forces across the country to place thousands of protestors and strike-leaders under preventive detention. Organisations like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and Jamaat-e-Islami, along with some political parties, were banned. Numerous Communist leaders were arrested. Cases like the Baroda dynamite case and the Rajan case became exceptional examples of atrocities committed against civilians in independent India. The 42<sup>nd</sup> Amendment, which brought about extensive changes to the letter and spirit of the Constitution, is one of the lasting legacies of the Emergency. In the Rajan case, P. Rajan of the Regional Engineering College, Calicut,

was arrested by the police in Kerala on 1 March 1976, tortured in custody until he died and then his body was disposed of and was never recovered. The facts of this incident came out owing to a *habeas corpus* suit filed in the Kerala High Court. In September 1976, compulsory sterilisation programme was introduced to limit population growth. The campaign primarily involved getting males to undergo vasectomy. Rukhsana Sultana was a socialite known for being one of Sanjay Gandhi's close associates and she gained a lot of notoriety in leading Sanjay Gandhi's sterilisation campaign in Muslim areas of old Delhi. There were allegations of coercion of unwilling candidates too. In 1976–1977, the programme led to 8.3 million sterilisations, most of them forced, up from 2.7 million the previous year. The bad publicity led every government since 1977 to stress that family planning was entirely voluntary. There were such events as detention of people by police without charge or notification, abuse and torture of detainees and political prisoners, use of public and private media institutions (like the national television network Doordarshan) for government propaganda etc. Popular singer Kishore Kumar refused to sing in favour of the government programme. As a result, an unofficial ban was put on playing Kishore Kumar songs. There was destruction of the slum and low-income housing in the Turkmen Gate and Jama Masjid area of old Delhi. Thus Indians endured conditions of historical and social extremities during the seventies— exile, state censorship, political persecution, house arrest, torture, student unrest, imprisonment, military occupation, warfare and assassination. Ezekiel's later poetry engages with some of these 'disturbing' national issues.

There is paucity of work regarding Ezekiel's poetic response to what was happening in India during the Emergency period. Ezekiel's truth-telling urge in his poetry has not been adequately documented. Some have focussed on the modernist and even postmodernist aspects of his poetry while others have dwelt upon the colonial and post-colonial aspects. For example, Surjit S. Dulai in his essay "Nissim Ezekiel: The Father of Contemporary Indian English Poetry" has assessed Ezekiel's place in contemporary Indian English poetry stating that he paved the 'way for modernity' in Indian English poetry (123). Michael Garman in his essay, "Nissim Ezekiel—Pilgrimage and Myth" praises Ezekiel's 'synthetic comprehension of traditions' (209). C. Paul Verghese in his essay "The Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel" writes that Ezekiel has 'no use for the mythological machinery' (63). He has analysed how his verse is sharp and shapely, taut and austere, aphoristic and epigrammatic. T. P. Sabitha in the essay "Home in Exile: "Hybridity" in A. K. Ramanujan and Nissim Ezekiel" focuses on the notions of 'home', 'identity' etc. in Ezekiel and Ramanujan. T.P. Sabitha finds in Ezekiel 'feelings of exile at home' while in A. K.Ramanujan she finds 'home in exile' (194). In their monograph Rajiv Taranath and Meena Beliappa explore the 'urban theme' in Ezekiel's poetry. According to Linda Hess, Ezekiel is a poet of the 'city', 'body', 'mind', 'ego', 'honesty' and 'love'. Inder Nath Kher in his essay "Introduction" writes that there is a tension in Ezekiel 'between the urban and the primal' (3). There are many other works on Ezekiel's poetry which I cannot cite here on account of space crunch, but it can be said that the role of Ezekiel in documenting the 'nation' and its 'history' in poetry during the Emergency demands a little more attention.

Nissim Ezekiel began his career under the influence of Pound-Eliot Modernism. Debtor to 'love', the budding poet, at the beginning of his journey towards an 'exact name', was too enmeshed in 'things imagined' to take into account the political reality. The poems were mostly 'private' and therapeutic - "an expression of life as a poet" (King 15). The

poet in the 1950s was a 'lone' traveller 'through the winter nights' and 'the leap' was not yet made towards 'the nakedness of truth' and towards 'a single decision' which is 'better than a hundred thoughts' ('Hymns in Darkness' Section III). In his early volumes Ezekiel seemed to do exactly the same things as Ezekiel's late contemporary in England, Seamus Heaney in an interview forbade poets to do i.e., not to turn eyes away from unpleasant things. He was interested in 'the singing voice', in uttering 'praise', 'A bit of land', 'A woman', 'Grapes and figs' and in fitting 'metaphors'. In the poem "Prelude" Ezekiel writes -

High endeavour with intensities  
Of feeling and thought,  
That I may see myself  
No longer unresolved  
But definite as morning,  
Moving to fruition  
When the season comes. ('Prelude')

Ezekiel was aware of his preoccupations during his early days as a poet, 'eyes turned away/ Incomplete absorption in the common scene' ("A Time to Change"). Ezekiel, a young poet then, was in a frame of mind to taste *jouissance*- 'The juice of life is in us still' ('A Time to Change'). The early Ezekiel was extremely conscious of craftsmanship and was inclined towards 'pure invention' and 'perfect poem' of 'precise communication of a thoughts' ("A Time to Change"). He was concerned with reciprocation of love to a quiver, 'flawless doctrines' and 'certainty of God'. Coming to the question of Ezekiel's wakefulness to the wrongs done to the people of India, it can be said that his early poems are too 'withdrawn' from the realities of life to bear witness to suffering of the masses in India (though times and again Ezekiel announces his belongingness to India). But in course of time the poet felt that these are 'merely dreams' and realized the needs of testifying to the fact that 'I am human' ("A Time to Change"). The word 'human' reminds us of the fact that Ezekiel during his youthful days deeply felt the influence of the Humanist M. N. Roy who was a leader of the Indian Communist Party. He imbibed Roy's radical thinking, though his early volumes reflect his tame and chastened conception of life. In the 1952 volume, *A Time to Change*, he searched for fulfilment of the self and tried to unify the fragmented bits of his life. According to Surjit S. Dulai, there was a concern for 'personal discipline and moral rectitude; the quest for wisdom and true happiness; and, most importantly, the nature and purpose of poetry and poetic vocation' (126). He was too busy with the 'self' and with the question of personal growth to confront the socio-political environment around him. In the next two volumes of poems, *Sixty Poems* (1953) and *The Third* (1955), Ezekiel is more or less concerned with 'the personal and the poetical' instead of 'the personal and the political'.

There is an increasing feeling of apprehension about being 'personal' and remaining 'alienated'. In the poem "Prelude" he gives memorable expression to that feeling of apprehension- 'the eagle when he soars is always alone'. The *Unfinished Man* (1955) marks a turning point in his career as a poet. In "A Morning Walk" one comes across a growing concern for the 'barbaric city sick with slums', 'hawkers' and 'beggars, iron-lunged'. The last poem in the volume, "Jamini Roy" is significant because it is suggestive of the poet's new involvement in the realities of life represented by the pictorial artist Jamini Roy. In 1955 Ezekiel assumed two roles which brought him out of

his private life and implanted him in the midst of issues of public interest - first, his becoming the editor of a journal named *PEN*, and second, his founding of *Quest*, a review associated with liberal democratic politics, sponsored by the Congress for cultural freedom. Even after resigning the editorship in 1957, Ezekiel continued to remain on the advisory till the Emergency (1975–1977) when the journal, like many of its kind, ceased publication and was replaced by *New Quest*. Ezekiel's association with *Quest* not only brought him in contact with such writers (some of them bilingual) as Dom Moraes, P. Lal, Adil Jussawalla, Kamala Das, R. Parthasarathy, A. K. Ramanujan, Dilip Chitre, Arun Kolatkar and others, but got him involved in the 'discussions' and 'issues' of his times also. Ezekiel was not carried away by the spirit of Independence and Nationalism at a time when poetry really needed to be with the oppressed and the dispossessed. Ezekiel did not turn away from the contemporary events in the national arena. During the Emergency many publishing agencies were either banned or were afraid of publishing freely. It is easily discernible how far it brought the ire of a leading poet and mentor like Ezekiel. Bruce King has mentioned that around 1973-74 poets led by Mehrotra and Jussawalla were meditating forming a publishing co-operative and they got too involved in the debates and discussions of the 70s to avoid social responsibility in their writing. Already an established poet and academician by that time, Ezekiel was not a person to remain aloof from the realities.

During the period 1975 to 1982 Ezekiel was in the middle stretch of his career as a poet when his vocation as a writer reached a pivotal point. He was at the crossroads. The excitement and enthusiasm of the beginning was on the wane and what he achieved instead was a more chastened voice and observant eyes. It was a time of redefinition. He seemed to bid farewell to the narcissistic preoccupation with lyrical expressivity. It is noticeable that his later poems are marked by more biographical and national attenuation and desiccation. He is now a much more 'reformed' artist. There is an altered relation between his spiritual mindset and the form and expression of his verse. The relation between the thinking mind and the things produced becomes more intimate. There is little 'distance' and more 'involvement'. There is a tendency to sacrifice beauty and strangeness to truth and meaning. Now the poet has found a space to 'belong' to. This belongingness to a space of one's own inspires confidence in the poet. He is now able to love and at the same time criticize. In his essay "Naipaul's India and Mine" Ezekiel says, "A writer needs a national or cultural identity, without that you become a series of imitations, echoes, responses, but you do not develop because there is nothing at the core to develop" (Ezekiel 89). The statement rings out with a note of solidarity. In his lifetime he had moved from his narrow Jewish background, from lonely life in London to a wider experience of what was happening all around. There is a movement from the consciousness of being Jewish to an awareness of possessing a more neutral Indian identity. The more he advances in his career the more he transcends the limits of his 'religious unconscious' and 'sub-cultural' recognitions. He now is more concerned with patterns beyond a poet's alienating self suffering exile. His poetry now does not belong to the privileged moment of intimations of immortality or joy. The poet is now lyrical as well as politically tough-minded. One finds a new tendency in his poetry - the truth-seeking and witness-bearing tendency.

Ezekiel's poems of the 1970s resonate with new notes of solidarity with 'brothers' caught in the throes of national politics. The poet's resolution to transcend the fleeting dreams and ensure his involvement with humanity comes to full fruition now. Ezekiel's

poems written in the 1970s are replete with veiled references to the horrors of the Emergency that took the forms of violent displacements, arrests, forced 'family planning' programme etc. which were done in the name of 'progress' of Independent India towards modernity. In this context the poems written in 1974 (*POEMS WRITTEN IN 1974*)<sup>1</sup> are particularly important. The opening poem, "The Truth about Dhanya" is about a man who 'does odd jobs for ten families' and 'collects a few coins everyday'. 'Given food he eats' otherwise, 'he goes without'. Then, as if to mock at the 'happiness' offered by the state, the poet writes, 'Quite a cheerful chap, really' (l. 16). The next two lines are more direct in the sense that they question the indifference to the suffering masses—'Nobody minds his presence/as he stumbles around the place' (ll. 17-18). The irony is supreme in the line that states that Dhanya is 'lucky, in a way' because he is not 'out in the streets, begging' – a pointer to the fact that there was an alarming increase of beggars in the 1970s owing to the economic depression and the wheat crisis. The name 'Dhanya', which means 'state of being blessed' is also tinged with irony. At the end of the poem the pronoun 'we' is significant because it is a representative 'we' and it stands for the government—'We look after him' (l. 19) and that is the 'truth about Dhanya' (l. 21). The lines about man's right to 'Language' in the poem "Talking" (*POEMS WRITTEN IN 1974*) is pertinent in the context of the bans and restrictions imposed on the mass media and public speech-making during the Emergency-

#### Language

Is our conspicuous gift: the Word,  
made flesh, is sought again.  
We make it as we make our lives'.

Talking is important because 'words' matter and it is 'words' that unite us to 'struggle'. The poem "Drawing Room" (*POEMS WRITTEN IN 1974*) is a kind of exhortation to come out of the drawing room because a poet in the drawing room is like a 'A grain in the wrong place' (l. 9). He questions a poet's choice of 'pretending to be nice' (l. 13) when 'a new idea burns the white / of my view to bloody red' (ll.15-16). The words 'burning' and 'bloody red' are reminiscent of some events in the national arena that led to the declaration of the Emergency in June the next year. In the month of January, 1974 the Dalit Panthers rioted in the Worli neighborhood of Bombay. The threat of *Navnirman Andolan* (especially in Gujarat by students and middle-class against economic crisis and corruption in public life) was still there. *Bihar Movement* started in March as a movement by students in Bihar led by the veteran Gandhian socialist Jayaprakash Narayan, against misrule and corruption in the Government of Bihar. Unable to control food crisis the Minister of Food and Agriculture Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed announced that Government of India has decided to scrap the takeover of wholesale wheat distribution – a decision that caused starvation of people. A railway strike started by 1.7 million workers of Indian Railways. The strike lasted for 20 days till 27 May 1974 and was the largest recorded industrial action in the world. The disturbance peaked in the month of March and in the poem "Notes" Ezekiel writes –

Mid-March, 1974:  
I search for my talents,  
Scattered with my kisses  
All over the barren city.  
The pity of dissipation

Sprouts in my mood.

(‘Notes’ in *POEMS WRITTEN IN 1974*)

The volume fittingly ends with a significant poem that announces Ezekiel’s new poetic credo. The title is direct enough, “The poet Contemplates his Inaction”. The poet tries to understand a poet’s vocation in terms of the right to exercise one’s ‘vote’. A poet should either ‘vote’ or ‘withdraw support’. Mere contemplation and feigned neutrality is of no use to a poet. Perhaps nowhere has the poet been so explicit about his course of action. The poet advises,

Speak out  
Every time and lose  
your life to gain it. (ll. 10-12)

There is no other way except to ‘burn your bridges’ and ‘bury your dead’. The volume ends with the poet’s realization of the need to ‘speak out’.

The title Ezekiel chooses for his volume, *Hymns in Darkness* (1976) is suggestive of two things among others—first, that there is darkness around, second, that the poet, like Thomas Hardy’s ‘blast-beruffled’ thrush, has chosen to fling his ‘hymns’ in the midst of darkness. The following lines from the title poem of the volume would be pertinent –

Don’t curse the darkness  
Since you’re told not to,  
But don’t be in a hurry  
To light a candle either  
The darkness has its secrets  
Which light does not know.

(“Hymns in Darkness”, XII)

One must not be carried away by the praises of darkness of an ironic poet. It is not an unqualified praise and one must note the dictates and prohibitions conveyed through ‘don’t’, ‘you’re told not to’ etc. The dedication of the volume to Keku and Khorshed Gandhi speaks volumes because “both Kekoo and Khorshed Gandhi spoke up for the freedom of expression at different times, defending M. F. Husain, in particular, as well as upbraiding him when he paid tribute to Indira Gandhi for having imposed the Emergency and suspended democratic rights in 1975.” (Ramnath n.p.) In the opening poem of the volume, “Subject to Change” the poet says that his ‘evening walk’ is no longer along ‘the shore of memory’; rather now he edges ‘towards a different light’: ‘The fevers of future night’. He now looks around—‘And felt, for all the shaking ground’. He is incensed by a different rage and the poet now responds to a new place—

Everything calls for a new place,  
A different rage behind my face.

(“Subject of Change” ll. 11-12)

He is aware of his myopic vision in the preceding days of his career as a poet and has the temerity to say now that the sky is ‘smaller than this open eye’. The ironic poet writes with an apparently Arnoldian echo - ‘The sea is calm’ (“Subject to Change”), and instead of ‘confused alarms of struggle and flight’ (“Dover Beach”) one comes across



here the expression 'million words' which fill the sky – a clear suggestion of the vehement protests followed by arrests across India, the first of its kind after Independence. The line 'Evil enough unto the day' along with the expressions 'people walk, and eat', 'the waves rise and fall', 'nightmare graves' etc is suggestive of the poet's awareness of the 'darkness' that has descended upon the 'progressive nation'. In the poem "Island" which follows "Background, Casually" the 'island slums' are 'unsuitable' for 'song' and 'sense'. The clear line of demarcation within the nation between the poor and the rich has been given memorable expression here—'the island flowers into slums and skyscrapers'—clear indication of the poet's disapproval of the vertical divide in the nation (against which the Communists were so vocal). Censorship imposed upon media and the masses and an individual's compulsion to keep mum has been conveyed in the lines –'Sometimes I cry for help/but mostly keep my own counsel.' The poet hears 'distorted echoes' of his own 'ambiguous voice' and finds 'dragons claiming to be human'. The hiatus between the hopeful past and the uncertain future of the nation is clear when the poet says that 'tempting breezes' are 'separating past from future'. Inaction and silence on the part of the 'wise and the conscious islanders' has been satirized in this line – 'I sleep the sleep of ignorance.' But as in many of his poems so also here Ezekiel is critiquing as an insider –

I cannot leave the island,  
I was born here and belong. (Island, ll. 19-20)

He accepts the bouquets and the burns, 'the calm and the clamour' in his 'stride' as 'a good native should'. Behind the surface hilarity of the poem, "The Railway Clerk" one may catch uneasy echoes of what was going on then. 'I do what I'm told/but still I am blamed' complains the railway clerk. The mention of 'this year' in the line 'This year, my leave application/was twice refused' is not fortuitous. It has something to do with the references to 'overtime', 'bribe', 'promotion' and 'duty' in the succeeding lines. As usual the poem ends with the speaker's decision to stay in the country despite such besetting problems-

We are discussing country's problems,  
Some are thinking of foreign  
But due to circumstances, I cannot think.

(“The Railway Clerk”)

In the poem, "The Truth about the Floods" Ezekiel reminds himself of the 'job to get at the truth.' As a journalist-visitor to the flood affected areas of Orissa, the poet received commandment from the masses, 'Write the truth in your report'. This is significant in view of the fact that the Government during the Emergency 'silenced' those who dared to call a spade a spade and the voice of the media was strangled. The hilarious poem "Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S." is something more than 'meandering spoofs intended to excite laughter' (Ahmed 166). The poem is an ironic commentary on some of the deep-seated problems faced by the masses in independent India. The poem's apparent hilarity hides the poet's scathing attack upon some of the aspects of national policies during the Emergency period. The political subtext is as much important as the poem's surface meaning. For example, "Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S." exposes the concept of 'progressive' India where citizens believe that a trip to a foreign country is the ultimate test of 'excellence' of an 'independent' intellectual. Miss Pushpa is naïve

as an individual. She is servile in nature. Her popularity is not beyond question. The praises heaped upon her are not without their irony. The irony lies in the fact that even such individuals must 'depart for foreign' because a trip abroad is their 'ultimate dream.' Ezekiel wants to say that the psyche of the Indians needs to be decolonized. Thus, at a time when India was flaunting its progressive national policies (for example, on 18<sup>th</sup> May, 1974 under project 'Smiling Buddha', India successfully detonates its first nuclear weapon in the Thar Desert, and becomes the sixth nation to do so. On 19 April, 1975 – the first Indian satellite, *Aryabhata*, goes into Earth's orbit), Ezekiel critiqued the idea of nationalism that thrived on servile colonial mentality. Equally significant is the ending of the poem, "Poem of the Separation" (*Hymns in Darkness*) - 'I want to play with fire. / Let me get burnt'. When Ezekiel writes in the poem "Guru" (*Hymns in Darkness*) – 'Witnessing the spectacle/ we no longer smile' the irony is directed not only against the spiritual guru but also against the policy makers and leaders dominating contemporary national politics. Their unscrupulousness has been stressed in the line- 'If saints are like this,/what hope is there then for us'. This loss of hope is not without its connection with the turbulent year 1976 when *Hymns in Darkness* was published. In the poem "Distance" the poet says that now he makes things simpler and more direct. In the poem "Satish Gujral" Ezekiel declares what a poet's credo should be in the years of 'drunken creed' – one should not 'martyr the meaning' to 'lonely' and 'heated visions'.

Analysis of some of the poems enshrined in *Latterday-Psalms* (1982) may help us apprehend the poet's 'political unconscious'. There are a few poems in the volume which bear witness to the poet's concern for people's suffering during a terrible period in Indian history. There are poems in which the explicit content is the faulty use of the English language by the Indians, but the poem's exterior is a ploy to critique contemporary events. An analysis of "A Very Indian Poem in Indian English" would be relevant in this context. Ezekiel is not forgetful of the political history to which he makes veiled references. Composed during one of the momentous periods in Indian history, "A Very Indian Poem in Indian English" subtitled "The Patriot" is extremely critical of the 'idea of India' and nationalism. Instead of glorifying India, Ezekiel exposes some of the contradictions inherent in the concept of Indianness. 'It embodies a diatribe against the prevalent corruption, injustice and oppression in the name of the '20-point programme' for regeneration, the forced sterilization of people' says Irshad Gulam Ahmed (Ahmed 167). All of these are evident in the line, 'Everything is coming/Regeneration, Remuneration, Contraception'.<sup>2</sup> Instead of directly attacking the policies of the Government of India, Ezekiel adopts the method of indirection (because if Ezekiel had been explicit in his attack he too could have been booked under NSA!). The grim realities of the time lurk behind the comic use of 'Indian English' in a 'very Indian Poem'. The poem resonates with new notes of solidarity with 'brothers' caught in the throes of the much hyped 'national' programmes. The poem has been subtitled "The Patriot". The speaker of the poem presents himself as a patriot—a lover and a dogmatic supporter of India. He voices national and patriotic sentiments. But Ezekiel questions his patriotism. At the beginning of the poem 'the patriot' exhibits his enthusiasm for Gandhian principles –

Why world is fighting fighting  
Why all people of world  
Are not following Mahatma Gandhi,

("A Very Indian Poem in Indian English")

The hyperbole undercuts the tall claim. Ezekiel questions the tendency to showcase Indian idols. Acceptance comes from within; it is not a matter of imposition or assertion. The poet takes a dig at fundamentalism in the following lines–

Ancient Indian Wisdom is 100% correct.  
I should say even 200% correct.

(“A Very Indian Poem in Indian English”)

Fundamentalism is total disregard for the opinion of others; but structure of truth is like an isosceles triangle. We tend to think that the lateral arm we belong to is the only arm; we forget that there may be another arm on the opposite side. The irony is that the speaker fails to recognize his limitations as a ‘patriot’. He is against hankering after ‘fashion and foreign thing’. He assumes an air of opposition to westernization. But, ironically enough, he himself reads ‘The Times of India’, an English daily, to ‘improve’ his English–

Every day I’m reading Times of India  
To improve my English language.

(“A Very Indian Poem in Indian English”)

Thus, the patriot is a hypocrite who preaches one thing in public but practices another in private life. Then the poem alludes to some incidents in the political arena which allude to ‘student unrest’ and mass protest against the unprecedented decisions by the then ruling Government –

How one goonda fellow  
Throw stone at Indira behn.  
Must be student unrest fellow, I am thinking.

(“A Very Indian Poem in Indian English”)

Taking a clue from Mark Antony’s speech in *Julius Caesar* by William Shakespeare, Ezekiel exposes the hypocrisy of Indian leaders who make false speeches –

Friends, Romans, countrymen, I am saying  
Lend me the ears.  
Everything is coming -  
Regeneration, Remuneration, Contraception.

(“A Very Indian Poem in Indian English”)

The following lines in the same poem under question allude to India’s much hyped propaganda of ‘brotherhood’ which reached funny heights-

In India also  
Gujaraties, Maharashtrians, Hindiwallahs  
All brothers  
Though some are having funny habits.

(“A Very Indian Poem in Indian English”)

It contains clear echoes of the *Navnirman Andolan*<sup>3</sup> (re-invention or re-construction movement) in Gujrat. Ezekiel makes fun of India’s clichéd concept of the principle of unity in diversity in the following lines-

Still you tolerate me,  
I tolerate you,'

(“A Very Indian Poem in Indian English”)

Thus the poem bears proof to Ezekiel’s awareness of what was happening around and his concern for the victims of atrocities. He is not afraid of critiquing power. Atrocities had taken place on an unprecedented scale during the 1970s. Monstrous acts had been trumpeted to be normal. Ezekiel recorded these aspects in poetry without complicity. Ezekiel’s poetry proves that he was against the oppressive tyrannical forces and was not oblivious of the realities around. The poem jolts us out of our complacency. The following line which occurs towards the end of the poem presents the dreams of the nation-builders which remained unfulfilled in independent India –

One day, *Ram Rajya* is surely coming.

(“A Very Indian Poem in Indian English”)

There are some other poems in *Latterday-Psalms*, composed mostly during his stay in Rotterdam for participation in the Rotterdam International Poetry Festival from 11-17 June 1978, which reflect the poet’s engagement with and concern for the suspension of civil liberties during 1975 to 1977. The poem “Hangover” is reminiscent of the poem “Island” (in *Hymns in Darkness*) in its juxtaposing of the incongruous details which remind us of a great ‘divide’ in the nation- ‘The expensive menu’ and ‘the shadow of Marx’, ‘The Biryani Hyderabad’ and ‘the sigh of Bangla Desh’, ‘The see-through dress’ and ‘the show-nothing sari’, ‘five-children local family’ and ‘the one-child American family’, ‘Long walk to church-gate’ and ‘the pavement sleepers’, ‘the blind beggars’ and the ‘husband and wife , in the first class compartment’ and so on. The poem also alludes to ‘taxi strike’ and ‘George Fernandes’, the trade-union leader who led the strike. The ‘warning’ is sounded as much for the masses as for the poets of his generation in another poem entitled, “Warning: Two Sonnets”. The opening lines of the poem are tacitly critical of ‘promises’–

He walks among the dying rumours  
Of a special gift, a promise,  
Like a falsehood whispered to a child.

(“Warning: Two Sonnets”)

The expression ‘dying rumours’ is reminiscent of a riot-torn country. There is a scathing attack upon the tendency of poets to ‘cheat with words instead of money’. At the end of ‘Minority Poem’, the poet questions the tendency of ‘poets’ to avert the eyes from reality. He questions the efficacy of merely polishing up ‘alien techniques of observation’ –‘while the city burns’. The poem, ‘Undertrial Prisoners’ is directed against the judiciary in India. Citing the plight of a prisoner who is too poor to obtain bail, the poet concludes-

I’ve shown you, friends,  
How justice meets its ends.  
A crime is a crime:  
The Law must take its time.

(“Undertrial Prisoners”)

In one of his Postcard Poems, “Credo” Ezekiel voices his new poetic creed—‘to know beneath the depth of life’. He is now aware of the ‘human need’ and is ready to ‘hear new messages’ and –

to describe anguish  
in a soft voice,  
in the simplest statements  
to body forth the passions.

In the title poem of the volume, “Latter-Day Psalms”, the poet says that his ‘delight is now in action’. In this poem there are references to ‘Holocaust’ and ‘Nazi’. These details along with his tendency of bearing witness and resisting erasure of ‘history’ align him with W. H. Auden, Seamus Heaney, Paul Celan, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Maya Angelou, Choman Hardi, Carolyn Forché, Jerome Rothenberg and Eliot Weinberger who wrote poetry of witness and social resistance, among other things. What Ezekiel says in response to Frank Birbalsingh’s question at an interview is a pointer to Ezekiel’s awareness of politics (133) -

FB: I was really asking about your feeling about politics. You do not write poems about the suffering of the proletariat and call for political reforms?

NE: There are references or allusions to such suffering, or politics may be mentioned; ...

The word ‘politics’ is often applied pejoratively as a contaminant of a serious literary work. The poets are usually relegated to hermetic sphere of lyric expressivity and linguistic art. They are expected to remain untarnished by historical, political and social forces. But poetry is not always without political agency. The state of the society calls out for poets to save it and Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s manifesto poem “Insurgent Art” offers a belief that words can save us where guns cannot. Poetry in its own artistic way is an instrument of social change. A reading of the select poems of Ezekiel makes us feel that poetry can give a check on power. In *Latterday-Psalms* lyric utterance becomes radical witness. His lyric is now his means of resistance - a stand against coercions. Pitted against the background of the 1970s, Ezekiel hardly remained confined to the hermeneutic region of art. Given the hard material context, the poet could hardly remain unperturbed. Ezekiel’s poetry of the 70s becomes an image of the times. There is an attempt to transmute and render in poetry the horrors witnessed. Indeed, his ‘eyes are not averted from’ reality.

Thus, Ezekiel’s poetry is a site of synthesis of the tensions suffered by the Indian nation during the period of Emergency. Ezekiel is concerned with the question of muddledness of being an Indian. Ezekiel’s poetry bears vivid witness to the realities of the 1970s. Carolyn Forché in her introduction to *Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness* says,

We are accustomed to rather easy categories: we distinguish between personal and political poems – the former calling to mind the lyrics of love and emotional loss and the latter indicating a public partisanship that is considered divisive, even when necessary. The distinction between the personal and the political gives the political realm too much and too little scope. At the same time it renders the personal too important and not important enough. If we give up the

dimension of the personal, we risk relinquishing on of the most powerful sites of resistance. The celebration of the personal however, may indicate a myopia, an inability to see how larger structures of the economy and the state circumscribe, if not determine the fragile realm of individuality. (31)

Ezekiel's poems bear the traces of extremities and evidence of what happened in India during a period of crisis and suppression. The poems are evidentiary in nature. It is discernible from his poems that he personally endured such conditions of extremities. A poet's experience of extremity is important. Ezekiel's poems bear the stamp of the poet's experience of extremity. He translates trauma and extremity in poetry. But despite all these he loves to belong to India. His is an insider's view. According to T. P. Sabitha, 'The important thing is that by consciously making the choice to belong to India, Ezekiel broadens the horizon of "India" to include postcolonial Jews to its long list of immigrants who found a home in India from the pre colonial times onwards.' (200)

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>The book entitled *Collected Poems: Nissim Ezekiel* with a Preface by Leela Gandhi and an introduction by John Thieme, New Delhi: OUP, 2005 (second edition) has been mostly used for textual references.

<sup>2</sup>The slogan 'Regeneration, Remuneration, Contraception' formed part of the '20 Point Program' introduced during the Emergency which lasted for 21-month (from 25 June 1975 until its withdrawal on 21 March 1977).

<sup>3</sup>'*Navnirman*' was a socio-political movement in 1974 in Gujarat by students and middle-class people against economic crisis and corruption in public life. It is the only successful agitation in the history of post-independence India that resulted in dissolution of an elected government of the state. The *Navnirman* movement reflected the anger of middle-class people and students at the prevalent economic crisis and corruption in government. It also showed the people's power to change the government by forcing it to resign by protesting. In Bihar Jayaprakash Narayan, the leader of the dissenting view was beaten by Police and was jailed.

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