

Identity Crisis vis-à-vis Quest for Identity: Nissim Ezekiel's Preoccupations and Pursuits

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Abstract

This article analyzes a selection of Nissim Ezekiel's poems to locate the poet's reflections on identity crisis and his lifelong pursuit of identity. Ezekiel has been engrossed in the issue of identity throughout his life as the people of the Indian subcontinent have gone through critical phases fraught with violence, struggle, and suffering emanated mostly out of intolerance of differences in identity. Most of the people in this region were affected by the blurred line drawn by colonizers through the Partition of 1947, culminating in a sea of blood, as they identified themselves with a narrow category of identity. Ezekiel, a post-Independence Indian poet writing in English, has felt an acute identity crisis since his early life, so identity crisis and quest for identity have appeared repeatedly in his work. The article therefore focuses on Ezekiel's preoccupations with the crisis of and continuous search for identity that dominate his vast oeuvre of poetic world.

Keywords: Nissim Ezekiel, identity crisis, search for identity, sense of belonging, India

Ezekiel, a pioneering figure of poetry in the Indian subcontinent and beyond, is well-known to have brought a marked change to Indian poetry in English. Among many other themes, identity prevails throughout his rich oeuvre of poetry. For various reasons, the poet has been engrossed in the issue of identity, and the most important reason is that he, along with others in his community, has suffered the crisis of identity. Belonging to a community with a Jewish background in a country like India, where Hindus and Muslims dominate, Ezekiel has gone through critical phases at different times in his life. Shipwrecked, the Jews had settled in northern India much earlier, but through Partition, many of them went back to Israel. Others, including Ezekiel's family, took India as their own land—hence the history of the emergence of the Jews in the subcontinent. His background as belonging to Judaism, the fact that brought a sense of identity crisis into his mind, had an immense effect on his poetry, and he realized the crisis since his childhood. His poetry and other

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writings reflect his absorption in pursuing the realm of identity and, therefore, defining himself meaningfully.

Ezekiel seeks to make himself defined in his poetry, but it is not an easy task for him, as several of his poems reveal his acute sense of identity crisis. While searching for an identity, the poet adopts an artistic means, which is poetry. Although his poems speak of everyday details, everyday experiences of human beings, including their concerns for identity, he does not sacrifice the aesthetic standard in his poetic world. The presentation, he always believes, should be artistic as he writes, “The gentle, familiar, / Are all dissolved . . .” (Ezekiel 2005, 13). Ezekiel is a kind of poet who has never compromised with the artistic or aesthetic standard of poetry – that means, he has always taken the artistic value and presentation to be prior to other aspects of poetry. He describes familiar things and addresses everyday experiences in his poetry, but he likes to dissolve familiarity through his deft presentation. Aware of the abundance of pretension, artificiality, or false representations of individuals or institutions, the poet progresses with his prime object of knowing more about the world and self, discovering himself. As he offers his outlook on the search for identity in “In the Theatre”:

I act to end the acting,
not to be known but to know,
to be new, to become a form and find
my relevance. (Ezekiel 151)

Throughout his whole life, Ezekiel strives to clarify his position on various aspects in his work, and this poem demonstrates that he does not like to represent artificially or does not dream of being saint-like, but knowing new things or discovering his own self in a new way remains his life’s driving force. “To become a form” suggests that Ezekiel has an identity crisis, so he desperately strives to have a form, but the form should ensure his “relevance” to the world; the form should conform to what he is actually looking for. In his poems, he makes it clear that he wants to be identified with the world of humanity.

Identity is what introduces a person with some specific traits and qualities, and it straightforwardly answers the question of who a person is. Identity also refers to a sense that ensures a person’s placement in the world – the sense with which the person feels attached to others in society. Zygmunt Bauman (2004) argues, “After all, asking ‘who you are’ makes sense to you only once you believe that you can be someone other than you are; only if you have a choice, and only if it depends on you what you choose; only if you have

to do something, that is, for the choice to be 'real' and to hold" (19). To have an identity requires an answer to the question 'who you are' – if a person is confident in saying who he is, he is identified as someone that he has aspired to be. Choice, in this respect, plays an important role because without making a choice of what one wants to be, one may not be happy by holding a forced or impulsive identity category. An individual constantly reproduces different images of self in various phases of life. People face various kinds of crises in the development stages of their lives, and the severe crisis that they face is related to identity. It is also argued that identity formation is a natural process in which people experiment with different images, resolve crises, determine who they are, and how they wish to be perceived by others.

There are two kinds of identity: personal identity and social identity. When a person is identified individually as a teacher, a doctor, or an architect, they establish a personal identity. Erik H. Erikson (1994), a German-born American developmental psychologist and psychoanalyst, defines personal identity thus, "The conscious feeling of having a personal identity is based on two simultaneous observations: the perception of the selfsameness and continuity of one's existence in time and space and the perception of the fact that others recognize one's sameness and continuity" (50). Erikson's characterization of personal identity is interesting: he articulates that a person has to have consciousness of living on earth, maintaining communications with others. He also needs to have a perception of an image of the self. To have a personal identity also means, according to Erikson, to have recognition from others. Social identity, on the other hand, refers to a person's identity that associates him with a society – the social identity of a person impacts others. Erikson proposes eight stages of development, among which the adolescent period, according to him, is the most significant, because in this stage, individuals develop their sense of identity.

The people of South Asia went through a deep crisis of identity throughout the twentieth century – they desperately looked for a solution to the crisis of and confusion about identity, because they intensely suffered an identity crisis. Their search for identity – to have names, traits, qualities, and representations – continued as part of one of life's great objectives. Because of the crisis of identity, a whole community or an individual may suffer to an extreme level. We may take a look at how identity is intrinsically related to human life. Identity, so to speak, is understood in terms of two related senses:

I argue that 'identity' is presently used in two linked senses, which may be termed 'social' and 'personal'. In the former sense, an 'identity' refers simply to a *social category*, a set of persons marked

by a label and distinguished by rules deciding membership and (alleged) characteristic features or attributes. In the second sense of personal identity, an identity is some distinguishing characteristic (or characteristics) that a person takes a special pride in or views as socially consequential but more-or-less unchangeable. (Fearon 2)

Society sets some rules that people follow and so receive some distinguishing attributes, which identify them as part of the society. An individual feels happy about some characteristics that impact their social life as well. In the face of numerous varieties in different layers of society, people strive to establish their personal and social identity, because without an identity, human beings are considered part of nowhere. Erikson stresses the significance of identity in human life as he puts forward his argument, “. . . in the social jungle of human existence there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity” (1994, 130). As far as the statement is concerned, individuals should have a sense of identity to exist as social beings. Without being identified with a category, a person’s existence as a social being is almost impossible. When people experience an identity crisis, they suffer both psychologically and socially.

Identity crisis gets extremely acute if a person is treated badly by others who consider themselves superior and foster a dominating mindset. There is a time when individuals deeply explore the different ways of looking at themselves to commit to at least one category of identity. They fall into confusion about who they should be identified with, what they should belong to, and how they need to be perceived. Actually, this is the stage of an identity crisis in human life. In each stage of their development, individuals happen to meet crises, which are, as far as Erikson’s theory is concerned, psychosocial. Their personal needs conflict with the ongoing trends and needs of society, so they feel crises in every phase of their development. In these circumstances, the victims suffer agonies of being identified in a narrow line – a fixed identity indeed creates anarchy in the modern world. People in different stages of their development, from childhood to adulthood, experience the crisis of identity. But identity, social or personal, makes people feel part of the world they live in. Ezekiel likes to be identified as part of his society, represented by people of different strata, as he writes in “One Meeting a Pedant”:

Forgive me, stranger, grant me but a strip
Of silence for the taking off, a patch
Of grass and not of words to roll upon.
Give me touch of men and give me smell of
Fornication, pregnancy and spices.
But spare me words as cold as print, insidious

Words, dressed in evening clothes for drawing rooms.

I swear I will not argue any more.
Do not be combative, my heart; rest or ride
Superbly with the senses. Send out songs. (9)

The stark reality sometimes makes the poet sad, so he seeks quiet somewhere else, far away from the humdrum of city life, where he will not experience betrayal or corruption. He looks for some respite on a square of grass, wishes to have love, feelings, emotion, and also sensuality in his life. As a social being, he wants to live a kind of life that is not odd, a life that resonates with the lives of other people around him, maintaining all sorts of communications with men and women, and so on. Only cold words in print do not give him all the pleasure that he seeks. The last three lines of the poem suggest that the poet is conversing with himself, his heart, and he clearly mentions that he does not want to argue anymore. His final words demonstrate that he wants to live with the freedom of his senses. The lines in the poem exhibit that Ezekiel is a modern poet who wants to live among other fellow human beings in society. His identity as a modern poet is markedly reflected in the poem.

Loss of identity is as extreme as death, as Michael B. Green and Daniel Wikler argue in "Brain Death and Personal Identity," "*You die if and only if your identity is destroyed. Hence we can clarify what it is for a person to die only if we clarify what is essential to a person's identity*" (as quoted in Luper 2009). There might be different interpretations of losing identity and dying, but we may ascribe the psychological death of a person who strongly feels the crisis of identity in a world of so many people with definite identity categories. The above statement strongly emphasizes the necessity of identity in human life. K. D. Verma (1976) observes, "Much of the problem concerning the loss of individual identity, we have seen, arises from the devouring character of the modern urban society" (236). Urban society in modern times is responsible, as Verma's observation highlights, for the loss of individual identity. In urban society, the identity of an individual is shadowed by so many complexities existing among city people. City-dwellers, in general, go through surreal experiences, remaining in a constant fear of losing their identities. With the passage of time and with the advancement of human civilization, intellectuals have focused on identity in various ways. They also relate identity with people's inner world, "...modern identity is characterized by an emphasis on its inner voice and capacity for authenticity – that is, the ability to find a way of being that is somehow true to oneself (as quoted in Heyes 2007). Personal identity consists of a great many attributes that a person takes pride in, and the

identity of a person is rooted in their inner voice as well. Truth and beauty lie in people's hearts, and a true self represents the best in society.

Erikson, who coined the term 'Identity Crisis,' delves deep into identity and identity crisis in his seminal work entitled *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. The comment that "Erik Erikson...is chiefly responsible for the popularity of the words 'identity' and 'identity crisis' in contemporary thought," (Nisbet 1968) is justified as the terms are well-known to world readers for him. Both identity and identity crisis are now the focused concepts in different areas of study, including literature. Erikson has studied and researched extensively on identity and described various factors constituting the identity of individuals in many of his essays, including his famous book *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. Erikson (1994) defines identity:

...in psychological terms, identity formation employs a process of simultaneous reflection and observation, a process taking place on all levels of mental functioning, by which the individual judges himself in the light of what he perceives to be the way in which others judge him in comparison to themselves and to a typology significant to them; while he judges their way of judging him in the light of how he perceives himself in comparison to them and to types that have become relevant to him. This process is, luckily, and necessarily, for the most part unconscious except where inner conditions and outer circumstances combine to aggravate a painful, or elated, 'identity consciousness'. (22-23)

Erikson casts light on the psychological aspects of people's identity formation process. They reflect on others' attributes, compare, and then judge themselves. The other people also do the same, and finally form an identity, and all this occurs in a reflexive state of mind. Here, William James's reflection that Erikson has quoted in the book is relevant: "A man's character is discernible in the mental or moral attitude in which, when it came upon him, he felt himself most deeply and intensely active and alive. At such moments, there is a voice inside which speaks and says: 'This is the real me!'" (as quoted in Erikson 1994, 19). People reach a mental state when they feel deeply and intensely, and then come up with the inner voice to identify the real image of the self. Erikson takes the liberty and claims that James means identity by the word character in his statement. When a person identifies himself, declares that he is someone, he tends to celebrate the moment as he considers it to be an achievement in his life.

Erikson gives a background to how the issue of identity comes into being, that is to say, its genesis. He also refers to Sigmund Freud, well-known as the founder of psychoanalysis, and William James, American philosopher and psychologist, who have made major contributions to the interpretation of the human psyche. Erikson calls identity a “problem” and then “a process” that is, he (1994) argues, “located in the core of the individual and yet also in the core of his communal culture” (22). Erikson’s argument fits in the existence of two identity categories: personal and social. People’s real self, hence their personal identity, emerges when they reveal moral and mental attitudes through intense engagement. The people, on the other hand, are connected to a culture or society that gives them a collective consciousness, and it is their social identity. People’s personal growth and collective identity are interlinked, and they cannot be separated from each other. Identity does not relate to anything static or unchangeable; rather, it changes with the flux of time and place.

Jacques Lacan, a major figure of psychoanalysis, slates the concept of stable or fixed identity. In pre-modern societies where identity was fixed, little thought was given to the issue because one would be born with a particular identity and die with the same, but changes have taken place over time as modern individuals undergo identity crises. Amartya Sen, an Indian philosopher, social critic, and Nobel laureate in Economics, also holds the view that a society should recognize multiple identities. “The illusion of unique identity,” claims Sen, “is much more divisive than the universe of plural and diverse classifications that characterize the world in which we actually live” (2007a, 17). In the present world of multiple identities, a sense of limited identity, Sen believes, is merely an illusion. To get away from this kind of elusive stance on identity is necessary for a better human society. He (2007a) further asserts that “identities are robustly plural” (19). There is a marked similarity in the views of both Lacan and Sen when they reprove the fixity of identity. Ezekiel’s position on identity, interestingly, is analogous to Lacan's and Sen’s as well.

To explore the literary works of the writers in the South Asian region, Sen’s views and ideas on identity, identity crisis, and identity formation process are ad rem, as he has in-depth knowledge about and an investigation into the outlook of the people of this region. From among a number of concepts Sen has developed and has been widely discussed, the most significant and relevant one is the issue of identity. While focusing on identity in world perspectives in general and South Asian perspectives in particular, he discards the concept of unique identity and advocates multiplicity or plurality of identity. As Sen (2007b) observes, “The hope of harmony in the contemporary

world lies to a great extent in a clearer understanding of the pluralities of human identity, and in the appreciation that they cut across each other and work against a sharp separation along one single hardened line of impenetrable division” (xiv). Sen thinks about global peace and harmony, in which case, he clearly takes a stand against the disunion of human beings along a rigid stance on a singular or solitary identity category. He believes that without a positive attitude to the pluralities of identity, harmony and peace in the contemporary world are at stake, because the opposite outlook, that is to say the tendencies of partitioning along the line of differences, create chaos and violence in society.

Identity issue is considered problematic as people remain in confusion about their identity, seek one, and then look for changes. On this note, Lacan (2006) observes that “a man’s character can include an identification with a parental feature that disappeared before the time of his earliest memories. What is transmitted by the psychical pathway are traits that give the individual the particular form of his human relations, in other words, his *personality*” (72). An individual’s identity is constituted in his relation to others, and it changes during different phases of socialization. The primary identity is formed by the features of parents, but people associate themselves with other categories as they develop relations with other people in society. In this regard, a person’s intent to feel an affinity with others impacts their psychology. Lacan (2006) further argues, “All the ‘primitive mind’ sociologists scurry about trying to fathom this profession of identity, which is no more surprising upon reflection than declaring, ‘I’m a doctor’ or ‘I’m a citizen of the French Republic,’ and certainly presents fewer logical difficulties than claiming, ‘I’m a man’” (96). The process of identification in primitive times was very constricted as we find in the statement ‘I’m a doctor,’ but there is a deep and broad perception in the articulation ‘I’m a man,’ and a modern individual accepts the latter. Identity of individuals should be, as far as Lacan’s views are concerned, more comprehensive and liberal. Homi K. Bhabha has outstanding contributions to the existing discourses on identity. Bhabha (1994) claims that there are:

...two familiar traditions in the discourse of identity: the philosophical tradition of identity as the process of self-reflection in the mirror of (human) nature; and the anthropological view of the difference of human identity as located in the division of Nature/ Culture. In the postcolonial text, the problem of identity returns as a persistent questioning of the frame, the space of representation, where the image – missing person, invisible eye, Oriental stereotype – is confronted with its difference, its Other. (66)

It is a valuable reflection on how a sense of identity grows in people's minds in different stages of their lives. Bhabha writes about two traditions of identity – one is the philosophical tradition, and the other is anthropological. This tradition of identity, however, is deep-rooted in the natural process of receiving the traits of identity. The process is beyond the grasp of common people; hence is the justification of terming this tradition as philosophical. To understand the anthropological tradition of identity, it is important to know the difference between the binary opposition of nature and culture. In postcolonial perspectives, people try to understand the identity crisis, posing questions about how much space they have to speak, to enjoy rights, and to live with peace of mind, but they concurrently confront various images existing around them.

I explore Ezekiel's poetic world, fraught with the poet's pursuit for identity, drawing on Erikson, Lacan, Bhabha, and Sen's arguments and observations about identity, identity crisis, and identity formation. Despite the crisis Ezekiel undergoes in India, where he is treated as a minor in terms of religious background, he does not turn away from his commitment to the land. Since his childhood, he has acutely observes his surroundings and his experiences, both sweet and bitter, impact on his work. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra (2006b) points out that Ezekiel, "possessed a quick, observant eye and could encompass a life in the space of a line" (9). Only great poets are able to display this quality in their work. Expressing something grandiose in a few words, or speaking of a big area in a small space, is not easy, but the great poets execute the task with ease – Ezekiel has this poise, as Mehrotra claims. Besides, he has a strong desire to see a better state of the country as well as its citizens. His poetry reveals his strong sense of belonging and patriotism, but it is a fact that the poet undergoes an identity crisis during his school life as his classmates from different backgrounds assault him, and he suffers the agony of being 'other'. Ezekiel (2005) recounts:

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. (179)

A biased sense of identity dominated by awareness of a religious connection leads the school children to violent acts, and the sentience of being identified with a particular community causes tension to the child. This picture shows how agonized an individual remains in a society where the differences of identity create illogical fissures. But the poet discards narrow identity

categories like ‘I’m a doctor,’ and expresses his will in “A Time to Change,” “These are merely dreams; but I am human / And must testify to what they mean” (Ezekiel 2005, 5). He refers to many entities with which individuals feel proud to have an affinity, but they need, as the poet suggests, to be testified to glean the meanings. When the poet states “I am human,” we discover that he negates the process of identity formation through a narrow observation. Here Lacanian statement “I am a man” resonates with Ezekiel’s pronouncement “I am human”. In “Prayer II,” Ezekiel (2005) writes “Let me dream the dream of Man” (55). Here, again, we discover the poet’s assertion on a holistic approach to identity – if he dreams of anything, it is of the welfare of human beings. He does not want to be isolated from the society he inhabits.

As far as his Jewish background is concerned, Ezekiel is asked numerous questions about this on various occasions, and he focuses on this category of identity in both his writings and speech. As he describes in the poem “Background, Casually” how even the school children having different religious backgrounds are critical about the followers of other religions, he extends an elaborate discussion about this. In one of his interviews with Nilufer E. Bharucha, Professor of English literature and critic, in 1996, Ezekiel elaborates on his attachment with Judaism as well as his reference to religiosity in the poem “Background, Casually”:

I at any rate could not ignore the fact that some of my friends were Muslims, some were Christians, some were Parsis, and that I was Jewish. When we discussed this we came to the conclusion that we should remain what we were, without necessarily claiming to understand the other’s religion. So I think I was very serious about this even in my school days. However, a deeper understanding of religions came much later when I was in college, when I read more and more about religions. (Ezekiel 12)

The above comment is insightful, and it suggests that his friends’ belief in different religions makes Ezekiel contemplate the power of religions in society. The behavioural pattern of his friends, as per the dominance of religions, makes him think that religions play an important role in human life, but he realizes, as he grows up, that humanism should be the best platform for unity among all the people in the world. Inspired by the ideals of humanism, he shows respect to all religions. To him, every person should enjoy freedom to practise their religion, and no one has any right to interfere with others’ religious practices. He explores religions in his later life in order to understand the key areas of different religions and their importance in human life. The

teachings and insights of religions have an impact on his work, but he promotes humanism through his poetry.

In modern city life, Ezekiel is confused about a web of complexities among people, institutions, ideas, and social structures – the poet cannot decipher why everything is turning complex. The overflow of information, proliferation of propaganda, people's excessive concerns about money and fame, and disintegration in human relationships enkindle discontent in the poet's mind. He, then, begins to feel an identity crisis intensely, because he tries to figure out how or in what form he should represent. In "Commitment," Ezekiel (2005) writes:

...I wear
A human face but prowl about the streets
Of towns with murderous claws and anxious ears,
Recognising all the jungle sounds of fear
And hunger, wise in tracking down my prey
And wise in taking refuge when the stronger roam.

Truly, I wish to be a man. Alone
Or in the crowd this is my only guide. (26)

As the above lines suggest, the poet is so disgruntled about the city reality – the artificiality of the people living in the city, their proclivity towards money and reputation, as well as their lust and crimes – that he searches his own identity as a human. To him, the world has turned into a jungle where people wearing human faces hang around, make strange sounds, and scare other people taking brutal looks. In such a state of imbroglia, the poet looks for his real image as a human being as he asserts that "I wish to be a man". By saying this, the poet actually gives an important message to the world that most of the people on earth have animalistic instincts deep within their hearts and thought processes – as far as the poet's reference to "jungle" is concerned – but they expose completely different images wearing "human face". Concealing the brutish shapes, the real natures, under the garb of civilization, with the masks of education, they act as humans – Ezekiel has also written about these masks in society, around him. Here arises a confusion to identify real images from the fakes, but Ezekiel continues his sincere efforts to search for a human identity through his poetry.

The poet's search for identity as a human being is deep as many of his poems reveal his concern, but we also find ambivalence in his poetry in defining a specific identity category. Examining his life in a number of ways,

the poet realizes that there is only one instance of certainty about identity, which is death. Edgington's (1987) observation about this realization is relevant here: "...to examine oneself, one must encounter one's own death and realize that its identity is definite, but the meaning of the knowledge...is uncertain" (140). Every person goes through, more or less, various phases of examination in life, but poets examine their lives, no doubt, more deeply and more subtly. In their poetic journey, they seek the meaning of life and a definite identity, but everything else, except the fact of encountering death, remains elusive to them. It may be argued that Ezekiel does not seem to come to a certainty about identity, but there is no doubt that he continues his search for meaning in life and having a definite identity.

Ezekiel does not stop his search for meaning in life, enriched with varied experiences and a passion for creativity. Evocative in nature, the poet contemplates, most of the time, about human life, nature, poetry, and society – he finds a wonderful connection between the greatness of poetry and the greatness of life. "Ezekiel's poetry should be viewed," Inder Nath Kher (1976) observes, "as a metaphoric journey into the heart of existence; into the roots of one's self or being which embodies both mythic and existential dimensions of life. This endless quest for meaning and identity, intertwined with the search for a poetics, provides Ezekiel with the sense of creative continuity" (4). Ezekiel launches "a metaphoric journey" through his poetics to locate what lies at the centre of existence, why humans struggle to achieve meaning in life, how they want to meet the end, and, above all, he wishes to discover his own self with an attempt to know the purpose of being born as well as the mystery of dying.

The poet, however, strives to form an identity that every human needs to exist meaningfully on earth. It is indeed Ezekiel's lifelong contention to establish a trend of poetics of his own and find an identity along with meaning in life. This search is linked to his passion for creativity. Verma (1976) asserts that "...it is only by existing in the *moment, the now*, that the imagination experiences eternity and identity" (235). Ezekiel puts emphasis on, as his poetics suggests, the present reality more than what might happen in the future – he discards the traditional trends of poetics, but highly values the legacy of his land and culture. Existing in the present moment meaningfully, the poet believes, leads the way to creativity and eternal identity. Ezekiel (2005) expresses his views on creativity, "Asked about his critics, / The poet moaned: They crucify me / Because I am creative" (274). The lines reveal an interesting position that Ezekiel holds – he values creativity above everything else for an artistic life. In defective societies, creative people are underestimated and

derided, but they are the true assets for any nation. Ezekiel seems to feel crucified when poets have to endure oblique looks for their creativity.

In his search for identity, Ezekiel launches a journey that is not smooth for him – he observes numerous incongruities existing in society, institutions, and individuals. He also addresses the incongruities in many of his poems, employing irony, satire, as well as various images. Introspective in nature, the poet gives a hint at disorder and chaos in society through his poems. He, therefore, becomes engrossed in the self, thinking whether he has examined his own life. Ezekiel (2005) writes in the poem titled “What Frightens Me”:

I have long watched myself
Remotely doing what I had to do,
At times a shamed but always
Rationalizing all I do.
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. (106)

The poet has watched himself, as the above lines suggest, over a long time, but it is not clear if he has been able to examine himself fully, as he mentions here that he feels ashamed for what he has done, and at the same time, he justifies his acts and thoughts. It is the poet's ambivalent state of mind that has been active. As a powerful voice of modern poetry in the history of Indian poetry in English, Ezekiel's ambivalence is widespread in his work. In his personal life, the poet goes through sweet as well as trying times, earning varied experiences about India and its people. He initiates dialogue with himself, both “protective” self and “naked” self, finds innumerable masks around him, among the people, known and half-known. The poet seems to remain in exile from his self because of the masks he encounters. Even if he is shocked by the artificialities around, the poet has some inspirational resources that he locates in his poetry. The objects of passion that Ezekiel aspires after are well placed in the poem “A Different Way”:

Whatever my theories,
in practice I behave like a drug-addict
whose drugs are work, sensuality,
poetry, and the dance of the self
in suitable as well as unsuitable company. (2005, 272)

It is an exceptional metaphor when the poet compares himself to a drug addict, but his addictions are not harmful as they are “work, sensuality and poetry”. His passion for poetry, engagements with literary activities, writing, love, and responding to the demands of the senses are well reflected in his poems. Ezekiel has varied experiences in life, so he tries to incorporate them in his work. He meets many people in his life, but does not feel happy with all of them, as the last lines indicate, still he corresponds with both “suitable” and “unsuitable company”. Instead of feigning, the poet reveals his inner thoughts in the poem.

Exploring twentieth-century India, Ezekiel draws on the identity crisis of modern human beings in general, and Indian people in particular. Loss of identity of men and women in the present commercial world is a concern for many poets around the world, and Ezekiel addresses the loss of identity of South Asian people. The poet observes the display of riches as well as the claustrophobic growth of slums, the nonchalance of elites to the suffering of the street people, and the pollution of the environment because of people’s mindless activities. In the maze of such chaotic city life, many people experience the loss of identity, a fact that Ezekiel deeply feels. Post-Independence India goes through a transition, and post-Independence Indian people are in a dilemma about the past and the change. Ezekiel deftly explores the minds of the Indian people in this time, treats the diverse issues, including the issue of identity, emanated from the trying times, and shows his objective stance on humanity. The post-Independence period is crucial for Indian literature in English. There is a huge change in the English poetry scene in India during the latter half of the twentieth century. Rosinka Chaudhuri (2016) observes:

This is a period in which some of the finest – as well as the most formative – English poetry was written in India. If, for Larkin, the ‘Annus Mirabilis’ was 1963...for Indian poetry in English that *annus mirabilis* was 1952, when Nissim Ezekiel published his first volume of poetry, called, appropriately, *A Time to Change* – an event that, like a pebble that created an avalanche, set in motion a train of publications of astounding quality in the succeeding years. (13)

The period that Chaudhuri refers to in her remarks is 1950-2000 when Indian poetry in English flourishes to an amazing height. Here the word “formative” used by Chaudhuri is justified – pioneering as well as internationally acclaimed poets emerge in India during this time as far as the legacy of Indian poetry in English is concerned. Ezekiel, in

this respect, is a key figure to change the direction as he propounds that a change in the English poetry scene in India is a compelling need.

A sense of being an Indian poet in English is acute in Ezekiel's poetic career. He is well aware of the crises existing in the country, but does not think about turning a blind eye to Indian reality, so he continues to write poetry, keeping his commitment to the land intact. Amar Nath Prasad (2008) argues that Ezekiel's poems "present a very realistic picture of the city life with his urban background," and he "deals with urban sensibilities, a sense of alienation, and man's struggle to survive in an urban atmosphere" (13). The actual events that take place in his land, the actual picture of his landscape, and the people inhabiting around him are featured in his poetry. As a modern poet, Ezekiel deals with alienation, crisis, tension, and skepticism. But the poet shows his aversion too to the cruelties, corruptions, conflicts and discriminations existing in Indian societies. The poet wishes to have a deep affinity with reality:

When eyes are open let me see,
Let words be intimate with brain,
And let the road, the house or tree
Not sprawl across my life in vain. (Ezekiel 2005, 55)

There is nothing mystic or idealist in Ezekiel as far as the above lines, like those in most other poems, are concerned. The poet intends to see clearly what happens around him and respond with his conscious state of mind or with the words of logic. He does not want to deprive himself of the joys of living, so he searches for meaning in everything in life. Indianness is indeed a major theme for Ezekiel as he is deeply rooted in the Indian landscapes and culture. Through poetry, he launches an intense exploration into what makes someone an Indian. Indianness in Indian writing in English in general and Indian poetry in English in particular refers to social, cultural, political, economic, and spiritual identities of the Indians – there are many entities in Indianness. Ezekiel values the sense of Indianness in his writing as he thinks that India as a whole makes him what he has aspired to become – he has dreamt to be a poet, and he is happy that he is one, and to the lovers of poetry, a great one.

A sense of being an Indian influences the writers and poets, writing in English, of the country in various ways. They take liberty in using the language, incorporating the terms of their own culture. Ezekiel, in this respect, forms his own base in Indian poetry in English. Another acclaimed Anglophone poet from India, Agha Shahid Ali comments on the freedom in using English that the poets from India enjoy:

We can do things with the syntax that will bring the language alive in rich and strange ways, and though poetry should have led the way, it is a novelist, Salman Rushdie, who has shown the poets *a way*: he has, to quote an essay I read somewhere, chutnified English. And the confidence to do this could only have come in the post-Independence generation. The earlier generations followed the rules inflicted by the rulers so strictly that it is almost embarrassing. They also followed models, especially the models of realism, in ways that imprisoned them. I think we can do a lot more. What I am looking forward to – to borrow another metaphor from food – is the biryanization (I’m chutnifying) of English. (as quoted in Mehrotra 2006a, 4)

Ali refers to the distinctive features of Anglophone poetry in various locations in India. Poets and writers in countries such as Australia, Canada, or even America and England cannot contribute the kind of syntax, phrases, or words that the Indian poets spontaneously do to their poetry, employing culturally-nuanced words or phrases. Salman Rushdie, in this regard, has shown the way how postcolonial writers or poets “chutnify” and “biryanise” English. According to Ali, the earlier generations of poets imitated the West, sometimes blindly, to write their own poems, but post-Independence poets are confident about their resources, knowledge, and capabilities to innovate and experiment. A post-Independence poet, Ezekiel writes poetry with his strong sense of Indianness, bringing in innovation in the language of his poetry.

Ezekiel is undoubtedly the monarch of modernity in Indian poetry in English. His ironic stance, self-deprecating voice and his special attention to the tinges of the city of Bombay and Indian landscapes make him an iconic figure in the history of Indian poetry in English. We find the poet speaking about what a person, including himself, has to aspire after in modern society:

He has to silence no one but himself
And walk occasionally on alien land
To know the various lives and dreams of men,
And show his deep affection for the world
With words emerging from a contrite heart. (Ezekiel 4)

The above lines mark Ezekiel’s modern outlook as the poet thinks that modern people live their everyday life in fear and anxiety, so they take recourse to silence most of the time. Silent observation of things happening in the world is more intense than the lines suggest. The poet also emphasizes exploring other places and knowing people, their lifestyle, and their dreams and aspirations, along with showing empathy to them during their distress –

Ezekiel shows his humanist position here. Modern people feel to atone for what they have done to themselves as well as to others, so they suffer privately. Ezekiel is a realist, and his realist position is revealed, along with many other poems, in the following lines:

The stubborn workman breaks the stone, loosens
Soil, allows the seed to die in it, waits
Patiently for grapes or figs and even
Finds, on a lucky day, a metaphor
Leaping from the sod.
If this is not a miracle
Then I am God. (Ezekiel 5)

The poet gives a description of a life that a person, a representative of the common people in India, leads every day. A worker toils hard, breaking even stones to prepare land to grow crops – in the long process, he sows seeds in fertile fields, waits eagerly to have the best outcome. On one fine day, he discovers magic in his fields, the magic of luck that gives him a distinct sense of happiness. The poet explains this as a miracle, as a person achieves something valuable through the whole process. Ezekiel's identity as a realist is confirmed as far as the lines of the poem are concerned. Concrete particulars and real-life activities are more important to Ezekiel than other aspects of human life. In another poem titled "Tonight," the poet asserts that "The world is for the living, is there more?" (Ezekiel 2005, 94). Ezekiel casts emphasis on what he experiences from real life – concrete particulars are the raw material for his poetry. Nothing beyond "the living" is significant to the poet. In the poem "Conclusion," Ezekiel (2005) writes:

That women, trees, tables, waves and birds,
Buildings, stones, steamrollers,
Cats and clocks
Are here to be enjoyed.
They remain and reflect
The oblique light of mind,
Directly, not from a distance,
But like a mirror on the kitchen wall.
To see things as they are is a habit,
An acquisition in the blood
That will not let the eye grow old. (96-97)

Ezekiel's position as a modern poet reflecting on the concrete particulars is secure as far as the above lines, along with those of many other poems, are

concerned. The poet does not want to leave anything from real life insignificant to treat in his poetry. He likes to deal with everything that he can see or experience in real life. We see him treat entities from tree to table, from bird to building, or from cat to clock in his poetry. He believes that they are the sources of light for him, and he likes to see the real world through these concrete particulars. Seeing the elements of day-to-day life, turning them into raw material for poetry, and treating them seriously are what poets should, Ezekiel believes, sincerely think of. Seeing things around and watching everyday life soothe the eyes, and having inspiration from the real-life incidents is always an enriching experience for Ezekiel. We discover Ezekiel as a distinct modern and realist voice as the following lines suggest:

Bitten by bugs in her friendly bed,
He sent her the next morning
Instead of a bouquet of flowers
A packet of the New Tik – 20,
Which was the more practical gift
And less expensive. (Ezekiel 2005, 275)

A strong realist poet, Ezekiel justifies his position in a great many ways, and the above lines are exceptionally powerful to demonstrate how avowedly the poet sides with reality instead of giving importance to emotion. A lover who is bitten by bugs in his beloved's house does a wiser act, according to Ezekiel, by sending her insect killers instead of flowers. The poet clearly mentions that the insect killer is indeed "the more practical gift". A romantic or a foolish lover puts up with the biting of bugs and meets her with a smile and a bouquet of flowers the next morning. Needs in real life, crises in practical life, and everyday necessities in human life are more important to the poet than artificial emotion. We find a more practical and realistic poet in Ezekiel as far as the above lines are concerned.

Ezekiel pursues identity throughout his whole life, exploring different strata of society and the psyche of the people. He observes deeply, finds peculiarities, comments on them, and keeps on searching the ways that may ensure that he is, above all identities, a poet. He expresses this desire in many of his poems. The poet goes through a number of phases of shock in his life because of the fact that he holds a different identity. He also observes that people living as part of the same nation face hurdles for their differences, but his concern for identity continues. The poet wants people to come out of narrow positions and overcome challenges so that they can live in society peacefully with their individual identities. Identity is sometimes dependent on cultural conditions, because people, as part of a culture, grow up observing and

practicing the distinct culture-specific rituals. His concern for identity is beautifully reflected in the poem titled "Tribute to the *Upanishads*":

To feel that one is Somebody
is to drive oneself
in a kind of hearsay –
the destination is obvious.
I don't want to be
the skin of the fruit
or the flesh
or even the seed,
which only grows into another
wholesome fruit. (Ezekiel 2005, 205)

To feel like somebody, according to the poet, is to have a sense of pride or ego about identity. The person who feels that he is "Somebody" – it is important to mark that the letter 's' is capital here – takes pride in what he is as he comes to know where his journey ends. In his life, Ezekiel does not like to restrict himself to any narrow category. Conscious of the complexities in the world, he strives to associate himself with a broader entity. To him, to become "Somebody," avoiding the greater platform of humanity, is an act of selfishness. It is clear, as the above lines suggest, that Ezekiel never wants to be a "wholesome fruit" – rather, he wishes to be a human being discarding the narrow lines of identity. The poet's vision is humanist and wide-ranging. In the same poem, a few lines later, Ezekiel (2005) makes it clearer:

For the present, this is enough,
that I am free
to be the Self in me,
which is not Somebody –
not, at any rate,
the mortal me,
but the Eye of the eye
that is trying to see. (206)

An advocate of multiplicity of identities, Ezekiel emphasizes on wide-ranging categories existing in society – he intends to inhabit the society that hails people's freedom, including the freedom of choosing an identity category. The poet suggests that one needs to see, judge, and make a decision about how he should represent in his society. To strive to be "Somebody," or to strive to form a kinship with a particular community or group, or institution thoughtlessly is what Ezekiel likes to cast away. He, rather, gives importance

to searching his own self, knowing the self better, and identifying the self with the world of humanity.

In his poetic journey, Ezekiel has experiences that are both pleasing and shocking, but nothing stops his indomitable spirit from seeking a true self. He is concerned neither with failure nor with success – fear of failure does not deter him from his resolve. He has made a sincere attempt to continue his journey through his poetry. Edgington (1987) evaluates his poetic achievement:

Nissim Ezekiel says through his poetry that his entire soul is alive, and all his work is a commentary on that life. There is no question of success or failure in Ezekiel's philosophy of life and death because the result is the same either way: we live and then we die. It does not matter. What does matter is whether or not we choose to accept the thought. (143)

These are fitting remarks about a great poet like Ezekiel, who depicts life as he observes in reality – each and every incident, small or big, about life has found home in his poetry. The poet reveals his own position in his work, that he has tried to remain conscious of his surroundings and used his experiences as raw material for poetry. He does not care about success or failure because he has learnt to accept whatever comes to life. To him, it is easy to understand the simple truth about life: to be born is to die. Belonging to the milieu of multicultural India, the poet undertakes a perilous poetic journey in search of a solution to or deliverance from identity crisis and strives to possess plural identities from an array of categories, but again Ezekiel (2005) emphatically poses a question in "Happening," "Is it enough for us to be what we are?" (163). The poet believes that to have an identity is not enough; rather, a person has to do justice to his identity that he belongs to and feels proud of. The poet indicates the responsibilities of the people for the well-being of others, for the welfare of the society they live in, and for the world they are part of. The thought-provoking question asked in the above line suggests that the concept of identity is deep and wide-ranging, and the quest for identity continues.

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