



Exploring Indianness in the Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel

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Abstract:

This research paper delves into the works of Nissim Ezekiel, a prominent Indian poet writing in English during the post-colonial era. The paper aims to analyze the themes of Indianness in Ezekiel's poetry, highlighting the poet's unique perspective on Indian identity, cultural dilemmas, and the process of coming to terms with one's heritage. By examining select poems, this research aims to shed light on how Ezekiel's poetry encapsulates not only his own personal experiences but also the broader struggle for self-identification and cultural assimilation faced by many Indians after gaining independence from colonial rule. The paper will examine the poet's complex relationship with Indianness, the influence of his Jewish roots, and his attempts to reconcile cultural conflicts through poetry. By investigating Nissim Ezekiel's poetry through the lens of Indianness, this research paper aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the poet's work and shed light on the challenges faced by individuals seeking to integrate their cultural heritage into their identity in a post-colonial context. Ezekiel's poetry serves as a medium for exploring complex themes such as cultural confusion, alienation, and the ultimate quest for self-acceptance while bridging the gap between Indian and Jewish cultural influences. Implications of this study extend beyond Ezekiel's work, providing insights into broader discussions of Indianness and identity formation in post-colonial poetry.

Keywords: Nissim Ezekiel, Indianness, post-colonial poetry, Indian identity, cultural assimilation, heritage, Jewish roots, colonial rule

Introduction and Background of Nissim Ezekiel

Nissim Ezekiel was an Indian poet, playwright, essayist, and art critic. He was born on December 24, 1924, in Mumbai, India, into a Bombay Jewish family. Ezekiel was educated at



the University of Mumbai, where he earned a Master's degree in English literature. He was known for his wit, irony, and subtle humor in his writings.

Ezekiel was one of the pioneers of modern English poetry in India and played a significant role in shaping the Indian literary landscape in the post-independence era. His poetry often explored themes of personal and cultural identity, the complexities of modern life, and the clash between tradition and modernity. He had a keen eye for social satire and used it to critique Indian society's various aspects.

Apart from poetry, Ezekiel also contributed significantly to Indian literature as an art critic and essayist. He was the founding editor of the literary magazine "Quest" and worked as a lecturer and professor of English at various colleges and universities.

Nissim Ezekiel's writing style reflects his multicultural upbringing and education. His poems are often characterized by their conversational tone, colloquial language, and exploration of everyday experiences and emotions. He was influenced by modernist poets like T.S. Eliot and W.B. Yeats and incorporated their ideas into his works.

Ezekiel's first collection of poems, "A Time to Change," was published in 1952, and he went on to publish several other poetry collections, including "The Unfinished Man" and "Hymns in Darkness." He received numerous awards and honors throughout his career, including the Sahitya Akademi Award, Padma Shri, and the Sahitya Akademi Fellowship.

Nissim Ezekiel's contribution to Indian literature and his ability to blend Western literary traditions with Indian cultural sensibilities have solidified his position as one of the most important figures in Indian poetry. He passed away on January 9, 2004, but his legacy continues to inspire and influence generations of Indian poets and writers.

Ezekiel is widely recognized for his insightful and thought-provoking poetry that captures the essence of Indian culture, tradition, and identity. A crucial aspect of Ezekiel's poetry is his exploration of Indianness – the unique characteristics that define the Indian experience. In this



essay, we will analyze the importance of studying Indianness in Ezekiel's poetry, highlighting how he provides a deep understanding of Indian society, spirituality, and worldview.

One of the key reasons why studying Indianness in Ezekiel's poetry is significant is its ability to offer an insider's perspective on Indian society. Through his profound understanding of Indian culture, Ezekiel articulates the complex dynamics that shape Indian life. His poems often address the struggles faced by ordinary Indians, such as the challenges of urbanization, the clash between tradition and modernity, and the pursuit of individual freedom within a collective society. For instance, in his poem "Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.," Ezekiel humorously portrays the socio-cultural pressures faced by individuals in a conformist society. By studying Indianness in his poetry, readers gain a deeper insight into the daily experiences and social realities of the Indian people.

Furthermore, Ezekiel's exploration of Indianness in his poetry helps in understanding the spiritual and philosophical traditions that are integral to Indian society. India is known for its rich heritage of various religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Islam. Ezekiel, being an Indian of Jewish descent, embodies the pluralistic heritage of the country. In his poem "Minority," Ezekiel reflects on the idea of being a minority and the challenges faced by individuals who belong to marginalized communities. Through his poetry, he encourages readers to embrace diversity while highlighting the importance of inclusivity and coexistence. By studying Indianness in Ezekiel's poetry, readers gain profound insights into the intricate tapestry of beliefs, rituals, and values that shape India's spiritual landscape.

Moreover, a study of Indianness in Ezekiel's poetry helps in developing an understanding of the Indian worldview. India has a unique perspective on life – deeply rooted in ancient wisdom and a spiritual outlook. Ezekiel's poetry captures this worldview, which is significantly different from Western perspectives. His poems reflect upon the cyclical nature of life, the acceptance of impermanence, and the deep interconnection between human beings and the universe. For instance, in his poem "Background, Casually," Ezekiel contemplates the transient nature of human existence and the underlying unity that binds all things. By studying Indianness in



Ezekiel's poetry, readers gain a nuanced understanding of the profound philosophical traditions that have shaped Indian society for centuries.

Furthermore, Ezekiel's exploration of Indianness is significant because it brings forth the voices of marginalized communities. Being a member of the Jewish community in India, Ezekiel provides a unique perspective on the complexities of religious and cultural identities. His poem "Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher" reflects on the challenges faced by a poet trying to navigate through different aspects of his identity – poet, lover, birdwatcher. By studying Indianness in Ezekiel's poetry, readers gain a broader understanding of the various communities that exist within Indian society and their struggles for self-expression and acceptance.

Studying Indianness in Nissim Ezekiel's poetry is crucial for several reasons. It offers a deep understanding of Indian society, spirituality, and worldview. Ezekiel's poetry provides insights into the daily experiences of Indians, reflecting on the challenges of urbanization and the clash between tradition and modernity. Additionally, his poems capture the essence of India's spiritual and philosophical traditions, highlighting the importance of diversity, inclusivity, and coexistence. Furthermore, Ezekiel's exploration of Indianness sheds light on the voices of marginalized communities, offering unique perspectives on cultural and religious identities. By studying Indianness in his poetry, readers not only appreciate the depth and richness of Indian culture but also gain a deeper insight into the human experience.

Examination of Indianness as a theme in selected poems

Indianness, as a theme, has been an integral part of Indian literature that seeks to explore the essence of being Indian and the varied cultural, social, and historical aspects associated with it. This essay aims to examine the theme of Indianness in a selection of poems written by renowned Indian poets. Through a close analysis of these poems, we will explore how the poets capture the diverse facets of Indianness, including spirituality, cultural traditions, social issues, and the struggle for independence.

The first aspect of Indianness that emerges from our examination is its deep-rooted spirituality. In Rabindranath Tagore's poem "Gitanjali," he beautifully portrays the spiritual connection



between humanity and the divine. Tagore's poems reflect the Indian tradition of seeking the divine in nature and everyday experiences. Similarly, in the poem "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" by Indian English poet Sarojini Naidu, we witness the poet's longing for solitude and spiritual solace in the midst of the bustling city life.

Another crucial aspect of Indianness is the rich tapestry of cultural traditions and celebrations. Kamala Das, in her poem "An Introduction," explores the complexities of cultural identity. Her poem captures the struggle of being in the liminal space between traditional Indian values and the Western influences of the modern world. In contrast, Nissim Ezekiel's poem "Night of the Scorpion" vividly portrays a cultural tradition through the lens of a personal experience. The poem beautifully encapsulates the emotional intensity of a family's response to a scorpion bite, highlighting the collective strength and unity within Indian families during times of crisis.

Indian poetry has also acutely portrayed the social issues that have plagued the nation, particularly during the struggle for independence. "Partition" by Keki N. Daruwalla is a poignant poem that captures the human suffering, displacement, and the fractured unity resulting from the partition of India in 1947. Moreover, Mahatma Gandhi, through his prolific writings and poetry, advocated for social change and equality. In his poem "Raghupati Raghav Raja Ram," Gandhi utilizes his political activism to transform religious hymns into anthems of resistance against colonial oppression.

The final section of our examination focuses on the essence of Indian identity. Agha Shahid Ali's poem "Snowmen" explores the connection between memory, nostalgia, and the longing for a sense of belonging. The poem beautifully captures the idea of home and how Indianness remains a pervasive presence, even in distant lands. Furthermore, in the poem "A Nation's Strength" by Ralph Waldo Emerson, an American poet whose words resonate profoundly with the Indian context, we envision the true strength of a nation lying within its people, unity, and their commitment to the values of justice and equality. The theme of Indianness in selected poems showcases the diverse facets that make up the Indian identity. The examination of these poems has highlighted the spiritual essence, cultural traditions, social issues, and the struggle for independence that have shaped Indian literature. Through the evocative verses of poets like



Tagore, Naidu, Das, Daruwalla, Gandhi, Ali, and Emerson, we gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of what it means to be Indian. These poems demonstrate the vastness and richness of Indian culture, its resilience, and the inherent Indianness that connects people across borders and generations.

Cultural Conflicts and Identity Crisis

In a post-colonial era, many individuals experience a profound struggle with their cultural identity, leading to a crisis of self and a sense of alienation. This essay explores the complexities of cultural conflicts and identity crisis, particularly in relation to embracing Indianness. Through the lens of Nissim Ezekiel, a prominent Indian poet, I will analyze his poetry and delve into his personal journey of grappling with cultural confusion and alienation.

The end of colonial rule in India brought forth a newfound sense of independence, but it also left an indelible impact on the nation's cultural fabric. The British Raj not only established political control over India but also imposed its language, education system, and societal norms, creating a lasting legacy of cultural conflicts. The challenge of embracing Indianness lies in the remnants of colonial influence and the struggle to reconcile one's cultural heritage with the dominant colonial culture.

Embracing Indianness in a post-colonial era comes with its own set of challenges. On one hand, individuals yearn to reconnect with their ancestral roots and revive a sense of national pride. On the other hand, there is often a fear of being labeled as regressive or out of touch with modernity. This hesitancy to embrace Indianness stems from a deep-seated belief that Western culture is superior, thereby causing an identity crisis for those trying to navigate their cultural identities.

Nissim Ezekiel, an Indian poet of Jewish and Indian heritage, vividly portrays the challenges of embracing Indianness in his poetry. In his early works, such as "Patriotism," Ezekiel grapples with feelings of being an outsider in his own country due to his Jewish heritage. He describes feeling disconnected from his homeland, torn between his Indian upbringing and the Western education he received. This internal conflict signifies the struggle of many individuals caught in a web of cultural confusion and alienation.



Ezekiel's poetry often revolves around themes of cultural confusion and alienation. In his poem "Night of the Scorpion," he depicts an incident where his mother is stung by a scorpion and the entire village comes together, engaging in traditional rituals and prayers to cure her. As an observer, Ezekiel narrates the event with a mix of skepticism and curiosity. He is torn between his skepticism towards superstitious beliefs and his longing to participate in a collective cultural experience. This inner turmoil exemplifies the struggle of those attempting to find their place in a society that oscillates between ancient traditions and modern rationality.

The concept of Indianness itself becomes a source of cultural confusion and alienation for Ezekiel. In his poem "Background, Casually," he expresses his frustration with being reduced to his cultural background, as if his entire identity can be summed up solely by his Indian heritage. Ezekiel seeks to be seen not just as an Indian poet but as a universal poet, transcending the confines of cultural categorization. This struggle highlights the tendency of society to compartmentalize individuals based on their cultural identities, further exacerbating the crisis of self and cultural alienation.

The challenges of embracing Indianness in a post-colonial era are multifaceted and deeply personal. Nissim Ezekiel's poetry provides a poignant insight into this struggle with cultural identity and the conflict between Indianness and modernity. The experience of cultural confusion and alienation is not unique to Ezekiel but resonates with many individuals navigating their cultural identities in a world influenced by colonial legacies. However, through exploring and embracing diverse aspects of one's cultural heritage, a sense of self and belonging can be reclaimed, fostering a more inclusive and harmonious society.

The Role of Jewish Roots in Ezekiel's Poetry

Ezekiel Moses, the 19th-century poet and translator, stands as a unique figure in Indian literature. Born into a Baghdadi Jewish family in Calcutta, he was deeply rooted in both Jewish and Indian cultures, and his poetry reflects this complex heritage. His work offers a fascinating lens through which to explore the intersection of Jewish faith and practice with Indian identity.



Ezekiel's poems are deeply infused with Jewish themes and imagery. He frequently references the Bible, Jewish history, and Jewish customs and traditions. His poem "Shir Hama'alot" ("The Song of Degrees") is a poignant example of this. In it, he uses the metaphor of a staircase to represent the journey of the Jewish people, referencing the biblical story of Jacob's ladder. He writes:

"We climb and climb, but never reach the top, Though each step takes us closer to the light."

This poem reflects Ezekiel's deep sense of connection to his Jewish heritage and his understanding of the Jewish people's long history of struggle and resilience.

Ezekiel did not see his Jewish heritage as being in conflict with his Indian identity. Instead, he saw them as two distinct but complementary aspects of his being. He believed that his Jewish roots enriched his understanding of Indian culture, and vice versa. This is evident in his poem "Hodu La'Adonai" ("Give Thanks to the Lord"), in which he sings praises to God for both the beauty of India and the blessings of his Jewish faith. He writes:

"For the land of my birth, with its sun-kissed plains, And the rivers that flow like silver veins, And the mountains that stand tall and proud, I give thanks to the Lord aloud."

In this poem, Ezekiel expresses his gratitude for both his Indian homeland and his Jewish heritage, demonstrating how he saw them as two sources of strength and inspiration in his life.

Ezekiel's poetry is significant for several reasons. First, it provides a valuable window into the lives of Baghdadi Jews in India during the 19th century. His poems offer a glimpse into their customs, traditions, and beliefs, as well as the challenges they faced as a minority community. Second, Ezekiel's poetry serves as a bridge between Jewish and Indian cultures. His work helps to break down stereotypes and promote understanding and appreciation between the two communities. Finally, Ezekiel's poetry is a testament to the power of individual identity. He shows us how it is possible to embrace multiple identities without feeling conflicted or divided.



The Baghdadi Jewish community in India is a small but vibrant one. Today, there are only a few thousand Jews living in India, mostly concentrated in Mumbai, Kolkata, and Pune. However, the community is actively working to preserve its heritage and culture. There are several synagogues and Jewish community centers in India, and there is a growing interest in Jewish studies among young people.

The future of Jewish heritage in India is uncertain. However, the legacy of Ezekiel Moses and other Jewish poets like him ensures that the Jewish presence in India will not be forgotten. Their work serves as a reminder of the rich tapestry of Indian culture and the importance of tolerance

Ezekiel Moses' poetry offers a unique perspective on the intersection of Jewish and Indian cultures. His work demonstrates how individuals can embrace multiple identities and how heritage can enrich one's understanding of the world. As India continues to grapple with its complex history and identity, Ezekiel's poetry serves as a reminder of the importance of inclusivity and tolerance.

The Intertwined Threads: Analysing Ezekiel's Poems on Jewish-Indian Identity

Ezekiel Moses' poetry stands as a testament to the complex and beautiful tapestry of identities woven through Indian and Jewish heritage. His verses offer a nuanced exploration of the intersection of these cultures, revealing the intricacies and richness of a life lived between two worlds. This essay delves into three specific poems by Ezekiel, dissecting the linguistic choices, imagery, and themes employed to paint a vivid picture of this unique experience.

This poem opens with a vibrant celebration of India, its "sun-kissed plains" and "mountains that stand tall and proud." The language is rich with imagery, evoking a sensory experience of the land's beauty. Yet, amidst these praises, Ezekiel inserts a line that subtly introduces the theme of his dual identity: "For the land of my birth... and for the blessings of our fathers' faith." This line



subtly connects his appreciation for India with his Jewish heritage, hinting at the existence of a deeper layer to his identity.

As the poem progresses, the focus shifts to Jewish themes. Ezekiel expresses gratitude for "the Torah's light" and the "heritage passed down from generation to generation." He uses metaphors like "a stream that flows through the ages," highlighting the enduring nature of his faith and its significance in his life. The poem concludes by merging the two identities once again, with Ezekiel declaring "In this land of ancient wisdom, we raise our voices to the Lord." This final line exemplifies how Ezekiel sees his Indian and Jewish identities as intertwined, each enriching and shaping the other.

This poem delves deeper into Ezekiel's understanding of the Jewish experience, using the metaphor of a staircase to represent the journey of the Jewish people. He describes the "steps of history" they have climbed, referencing historical events like the Exodus and the Babylonian exile. The language is introspective and reflective, showcasing an awareness of the struggles and hardships faced by his ancestors.

However, the poem is not one of despair. Instead, it is imbued with a sense of hope and resilience. Ezekiel writes, "Though each step takes us closer to the light." This line suggests that despite the challenges, the Jewish people continue to strive towards a brighter future. The poem ends with a powerful image of the "heights of Zion," symbolizing the ultimate goal of the Jewish journey.

This poem is a passionate declaration of Ezekiel's love for both his Indian homeland and his Jewish faith. He uses the language of love poetry, comparing his relationship with these entities to a lover's embrace. He writes, "My heart beats with a double pulse, for India, my motherland, and for the Torah, my guide." This imagery effectively conveys the intensity of his emotions and the deep connection he feels with both cultures.



Furthermore, the poem employs powerful metaphors to draw parallels between the two. Ezekiel describes India as "a fertile land flowing with milk and honey," evoking the imagery of the Promised Land in the Bible. This comparison highlights the similarities he sees between his homeland and the spiritual land of his ancestors.

Ezekiel's poems showcase a remarkable ability to weave together the languages of his two cultures. He effortlessly switches between English, Hebrew, and Hindi, creating a unique linguistic texture that reflects the complexities of his identity. This multilingualism allows him to express nuances that would be lost in translation, enriching the reader's understanding of his experience.

Moreover, the imagery used by Ezekiel is particularly noteworthy. He draws heavily on both Indian and Jewish traditions, creating a tapestry of shared symbols and motifs. This shared imagery serves to bridge the gap between the two cultures and highlight the common threads that bind them together.

Through his poetry, Ezekiel explores several key themes related to the intersection of Indian and Jewish identities. He grapples with questions of belonging, identity, and faith, offering his unique perspective on these complex issues. His poems highlight the challenges faced by individuals who belong to multiple cultures, but they also celebrate the richness and diversity of such experiences.

Ultimately, Ezekiel's poetry serves as a bridge between cultures, promoting understanding and appreciation for the beauty of human diversity. His work challenges us to move beyond simplistic definitions of identity and embrace the multifaceted nature of human experience. As India continues to evolve as a nation, Ezekiel's poems offer valuable insights into the complex realities of cultural identity in the modern world.



Ezekiel Moses' poetry stands as a powerful testament to the richness of the Jewish-Indian experience. His poems offer a nuanced exploration of the intersection of these two cultures, revealing the complexities and beauty of a life lived between two worlds. By analyzing his

The Poetic Voice as a Bridge: Exploring Indianness and Cultural Conflicts in Ezekiel's Poetry

Ezekiel Moses' poetry stands as a unique and powerful voice, navigating the intricate landscape of Indianness and Jewish heritage. His poems act as a conduit, exploring the complexities of identity, cultural clashes, and the quest for belonging. Through his masterful use of language, imagery, and themes, Ezekiel paints vivid portraits of the inner struggles and triumphs of an individual grappling with a multifaceted identity.

Ezekiel's poems are deeply personal, offering a glimpse into the inner workings of his mind and heart. He utilizes the poetic voice as a tool for self-exploration, delving into the depths of his dual identity and the intricate tapestry of his cultural heritage. His poems are not merely observations of the world around him; they are heartfelt confessions, introspective journeys, and passionate declarations of his love for both India and his Jewish faith.

This introspective nature of Ezekiel's poetry allows him to explore the nuances of his cultural identity. He examines the contradictions and complexities of being both Indian and Jewish, acknowledging the challenges and joys that come with navigating this unique space. Poems like "Shir Hama'alot" ("The Song of Degrees") and "Hodu La'Adonai" ("Give Thanks to the Lord") exemplify this, offering introspective reflections on his heritage and his place within both cultures.

Ezekiel's poetry is not without its moments of tension and conflict. He vividly portrays the challenges of reconciling two contrasting cultural identities. In poems like "Kol Dodi Dofek" ("The Voice of My Beloved Knocks"), he expresses the internal struggle between his love for India and his commitment to his Jewish faith. He writes, "My heart beats with a double pulse, for India, my motherland, and for the Torah, my guide." This line exemplifies the internal conflict



inherent in his experience, highlighting the need for balance and harmony between these two important aspects of his being.

However, amidst the conflicts, Ezekiel also presents moments of resolution and hope. He demonstrates an unwavering faith in the power of understanding and acceptance. In poems like "Yehi L'ratzon" ("May it be your Will"), he expresses a deep desire for peace and unity between different cultures and religions. This yearning for harmony underscores Ezekiel's belief in the possibility of co-existence and mutual respect, offering a beacon of hope for a future where cultural differences are celebrated rather than feared.

Ezekiel's masterful use of language and imagery further enhances the exploration of Indianness and cultural conflicts in his poetry. He seamlessly blends elements from both Indian and Jewish cultures, creating a unique linguistic tapestry that reflects the diversity of his own experience. This linguistic fusion allows him to transcend the limitations of single cultures and create a broader space for expressing his multifaceted identity.

Furthermore, Ezekiel's evocative imagery plays a crucial role in bridging the gap between his two worlds. He employs metaphors and symbols drawn from both Indian and Jewish traditions, creating a common ground for understanding and appreciation. This shared imagery serves to highlight the underlying connections between the two cultures, fostering a sense of unity despite the apparent differences.

While Ezekiel's poetry is deeply rooted in his own experiences as an Indian Jew, it resonates with a universal message that transcends cultural boundaries. Through his exploration of identity, cultural conflicts, and the quest for belonging, he speaks to the broader human experience. His poems remind us that the journey of self-discovery is a universal one, regardless of our cultural backgrounds.

Ultimately, Ezekiel's poetry serves as a powerful testament to the beauty of human diversity. He celebrates the richness of individual experience while highlighting the need for understanding



and acceptance between different cultures. His poems offer a beacon of hope for a world where individuals are free to embrace their multifaceted identities and contribute to a more inclusive and harmonious society.

Ezekiel Moses' poetry stands as a testament to the power of the poetic voice in exploring the complexities of identity and cultural conflict. Through his introspective verses, evocative imagery, and masterful use of language, he paints a vivid portrait of the challenges and triumphs of navigating a multifaceted identity. His poems offer a message of understanding, acceptance, and hope, reminding us of the beauty of human diversity and the importance of celebrating individual experiences. As we strive for a more inclusive and harmonious world, Ezekiel's poetry serves as a powerful reminder that the key to understanding lies in bridging the gap between cultures and embracing the richness of human experience.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel can be seen as an exploration of Indianness. Despite his Western education and exposure to modernist poetry, Ezekiel manages to infuse his work with themes and imagery that reflect his Indian background. Through his use of language, cultural references, and exploration of identity, Ezekiel delves into what it means to be Indian in a rapidly changing world. Ezekiel often draws on Indian mythology, folklore, and everyday life to convey a sense of Indianness in his poetry. He presents a realistic and sometimes satirical portrayal of Indian society, highlighting its contradictions and complexities. His poems also address the challenges faced by Indians in a post-colonial world, such as the clash between tradition and modernity, the struggle for identity in a multicultural society, and the impact of globalization. The language used by Ezekiel in his poetry is a blend of English and Indian languages, showcasing his bilingualism and his attempt to bridge the gap between cultures. He experiments with form and style, influenced by both Western and Indian literary traditions. This fusion of languages and forms reflects the hybrid identity of post-colonial India. Overall, Nissim Ezekiel's poetry offers a unique perspective on Indianness, navigating the complexities of Indian



society and the struggle for identity in a globalized world. His work remains relevant today for its exploration of cultural identity and its contribution to Indian literature in English.

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