

A Study of Identity in the Selected Poems of Nissim Ezekiel

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Abstract:

This study explores the complex and multifaceted portrayal of identity in the selected poems of Nissim Ezekiel, a pioneer of Indian English poetry. Born into a minority Jewish community and writing in English within a predominantly Hindu, vernacular-speaking society, Ezekiel's personal background offers a unique perspective on issues of cultural, religious, and existential identity. Through an in-depth analysis of poems such as Background, Casually, The Professor, Night of the Scorpion, and Enterprise, this study examines how Ezekiel negotiates feelings of alienation, belonging, and self-definition. The research highlights Ezekiel's innovative use of Indian English, his ironic tone, and his existential questioning as crucial strategies for articulating a hybrid, evolving self. By focusing on everyday experiences, urban realities, and the philosophical tensions between tradition and modernity, Ezekiel's poetry reflects a continuous search for authenticity and rootedness. This study aims to contribute to a broader understanding of identity formation in postcolonial literature, showing how personal, linguistic, and cultural struggles are intricately woven into the fabric of Ezekiel's poetic imagination. Ultimately, the study demonstrates how Ezekiel's work resonates with universal concerns of selfhood while remaining firmly grounded in the Indian context.

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Introduction:

Identity formation, both personal and communal, remains a central concern of modern and postcolonial literature. For poets like Nissim Ezekiel, identity is not a static or singular phenomenon but a dynamic and evolving process (King, & Bruce.1987) . As an Indian Jewish poet writing in English, Ezekiel occupies a liminal space between cultures, religions, and languages, which profoundly influences his poetic expression.

Nissim Ezekiel (1924–2004) was born into a Bene Israel Jewish family in Bombay (now Mumbai). His upbringing in a minority community in India exposed him to feelings of cultural and religious marginalization from an early age. After completing his education in India, Ezekiel spent time in England before returning to Mumbai, where he became a major figure in the Indian literary scene.

The dual experiences of being a minority in India and an outsider in England significantly shaped Ezekiel's sense of identity (Mehrotra, & Krishna 2003). He was Indian but also perceived as foreign; he was English-

educated but critical of colonial residues. His poetry reflects these tensions, expressing both a deep attachment to India and a clear-eyed critique of its social and cultural shortcomings.

Ezekiel's poems often grapple with questions such as: *What does it mean to be Indian? How does one reconcile personal aspirations with cultural expectations? How can one belong when one is marked as 'other' both at home and abroad?* Through humor, irony, candid self-reflection, and local color, Ezekiel addresses these questions, crafting a unique poetic voice that is both personal and emblematic of larger societal struggles.

Significance of the Study: the study of identity in Nissim Ezekiel's selected poems is significant because it deepens literary analysis, enriches cultural and postcolonial studies, engages with existential thought, and contributes to understanding the construction of modern Indian consciousness. Through such an exploration, one appreciates the profound ways in which Ezekiel's poetry continues to resonate with contemporary concerns about selfhood, belonging, and the meaning of life in a complex, pluralistic world.

Objectives: This paper seeks to trace the trajectory of identity in selected poems of Ezekiel, examining how personal, religious, national, and linguistic identities interact and conflict within his oeuvre.

About the Poems:

Background, Casually

This autobiographical poem is the most comprehensive statement of Ezekiel's evolving identity. Structured as a chronicle of his life, it explores his Jewish upbringing, education, political disillusionment, romantic failures, and eventual commitment to India.

The poem's candid tone, oscillating between irony and earnestness, reveals a man negotiating multiple selves: the colonial subject, the skeptical intellectual, the cultural outsider, and ultimately, the committed citizen.

The poem ends on a note of acceptance, albeit tinged with lingering ambivalence:

"Home is where we have to gather grace."

Night of the Scorpion

While ostensibly a narrative about a mother's suffering after a scorpion sting, *Night of the Scorpion* subtly addresses questions of communal identity, religious syncretism, and faith.

The speaker's village community comes together, employing both folk remedies and prayers from various religious traditions. This collective action reflects an organic, grassroots spirituality distinct from institutional religion.

Ezekiel, observing with detached empathy, suggests that identity in rural India is shaped less by rigid doctrines than by a shared humanistic response to suffering.

The Professor

This satirical monologue captures the rhythms of Indian English and the social expectations of a newly independent, upwardly mobile India. The professor boasts about his sons' prosperity, daughters' marriages, and his own health, embodying the aspirations and anxieties of the urban middle class.

Through this humorous portrayal, Ezekiel critiques the superficial markers of success that define social identity, suggesting that true selfhood cannot be measured by external achievements.

Cultural Alienation and the Quest for Belonging

In poems like *Background*, *Casually*, Ezekiel portrays his journey through alienation towards a tentative sense of belonging:

“I went to Roman Catholic school,
A mugging Jew among the wolves.”

Here, the image of a “mugging Jew among the wolves” highlights the hostility he faced growing up in a non-Jewish environment. His Jewishness marks him as different, and he is made aware of his otherness at every turn. Yet, as the poem progresses, Ezekiel asserts:

“I have made my commitments now.
This is one: to stay where I am.”

Despite feelings of exclusion, he chooses to anchor himself in India, suggesting that identity is not merely given but actively chosen.

Despite pervasive alienation, Ezekiel’s poetry reflects an earnest **desire for belonging**. In *Background*, *Casually*, after chronicling his experiences of exclusion, he asserts:

“I have made my commitments now.
This is one: to stay where I am.”

This declaration is significant. Ezekiel does not seek to escape his marginalization through exile or assimilation; instead, he chooses to root himself in India, embracing the complexities of his identity. Belonging, for Ezekiel, is not a given but a conscious, often painful commitment.

Night of the Scorpion offers another dimension of belonging — a sense of **communal solidarity** in the face of suffering. When the speaker’s mother is stung by a scorpion, the villagers gather, offering prayers and remedies drawn from various religious traditions:

“May the poison purify your flesh
Of desire, and your spirit of ambition.”

The villagers’ collective action transcends religious and cultural divides, presenting a vision of organic, grassroots belonging based on shared humanity. While Ezekiel maintains a detached, ironic tone, he also acknowledges the deep communal bonds that rural India fosters.

Identity and Cultural Hybridity: *Background*, *Casually*

Background, *Casually* is perhaps the most autobiographical of Ezekiel’s poems and a crucial text for understanding his exploration of identity. The poem recounts his upbringing, education, and personal experiences of alienation:

“I went to Roman Catholic school,
A mugging Jew among the wolves.”

Here, Ezekiel highlights the outsider status he experienced even in childhood. His Jewish heritage placed him on the periphery of Indian society, while his English education further alienated him from the indigenous cultural and religious traditions of India.

Yet, despite these early experiences of marginalization, Ezekiel does not adopt a posture of victimhood. Instead, he embraces his complexities:

“I have made my commitments now.
This is one: to stay where I am.”

The poet’s choice to affirm his Indianness — despite his “alien” background — reflects a conscious construction of identity. He chooses to belong, not by blood or inheritance, but by commitment and rootedness. This act of self-definition resonates deeply with postcolonial notions of negotiated identity, where belonging is an act of will rather than a given.

Language and the Formation of Identity

Language is central to the construction of identity in Ezekiel’s poetry. As an Indian writing in English, Ezekiel inhabits a linguistic position that is both empowering and fraught with tension. His innovative use of English — especially his embrace of Indian English idioms — reflects both a parody and affirmation of Indian identity.

In *The Professor*, Ezekiel mimics the characteristic speech patterns of middle-class Indians speaking English:

“Everything is happening with leaps and bounds.”

The use of incorrect or awkward English is not merely comic; it is a political and cultural statement. By validating Indian English as a legitimate mode of literary expression, Ezekiel challenges colonial notions of “proper” English.

Similarly, in *Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.*, the speaker’s enthusiastic, grammatically flawed English captures a specifically Indian sensibility, blending humor, affection, and sincerity. Ezekiel elevates the everyday language of ordinary Indians to the level of poetry, affirming the hybrid identity of postcolonial India.

Thus, language in Ezekiel’s poetry becomes both a mirror and a tool — reflecting cultural hybridity while forging a new space for Indian English literature.

Existential Identity and the Search for Meaning

Beyond cultural and linguistic concerns, Ezekiel’s poetry frequently engages with existential questions of selfhood and meaning. In poems like *Philosophy* and *Enterprise*, he examines the limits of rational understanding and the challenges of living authentically.

In *Enterprise*, a group embarks on a pilgrimage, filled with lofty ideals, only to end in disillusionment:

“The best had been obscured,
lost or never touched.”

The journey becomes a metaphor for the human quest for meaning — a journey marked by conflict, failure, and ultimately, the realization that meaning must be found in the acceptance of life’s imperfections.

In *Philosophy*, Ezekiel critiques abstract theorizing:

“The experience of mystery
and not the mystery itself.”

Existential identity, for Ezekiel, is rooted not in metaphysical systems but in lived experience. The poet resists simplistic explanations of human existence, emphasizing instead the complexity, ambiguity, and necessity of self-definition in an uncertain world.

Religious Identity and Spiritual Ambiguity

As a Jewish Indian, Ezekiel’s relationship with religion is nuanced. He does not adhere rigidly to any religious dogma, and his poetry often reflects a secular, skeptical, yet spiritually searching sensibility.

In *Night of the Scorpion*, religious faith is portrayed with a mixture of respect and irony. The villagers’ superstitious prayers and rituals coexist with the speaker’s rationalism:

“I watched the flame feeding on my mother.
I watched the holy man perform his rites.”

The poet neither fully endorses nor completely rejects religious faith; instead, he presents it as an integral part of communal life, offering both comfort and folly.

This ambivalence reflects Ezekiel’s broader spiritual identity: neither strictly religious nor wholly secular, but engaged in a personal, often conflicted, search for meaning beyond dogma.

Urban Identity and the Modern Indian Self

The city — particularly Bombay — is a recurring symbol in Ezekiel’s poetry, representing both the challenges and possibilities of modern identity. In *Urban*, the speaker embodies the alienated yet resilient city-dweller:

“The hills are always far away.”

The poem captures the tensions between aspiration and reality, movement and stasis, in the urban environment. The speaker is cut off from nature and tradition, trapped in a world of broken roads and repetitive routines.

Yet, there is no retreat into nostalgia or despair. Ezekiel’s urban identity is characterized by endurance, adaptability, and a clear-eyed acceptance of the complexities of modern life. This pragmatic resilience is a crucial aspect of his existential outlook.

National Identity: Commitment to India

Despite his complex personal history, Ezekiel’s poetry affirms a profound commitment to India. He does not idealize India, nor does he romanticize its traditions or modernity. Instead, he embraces the contradictions and imperfections of the nation.

In poems like *Background*, *Casually* and *Island*, Ezekiel’s portrayal of India is affectionate, critical, ironic, and deeply personal. His national identity is forged not through uncritical patriotism but through an honest, sometimes painful engagement with the realities of Indian life.

This approach reflects the postcolonial Indian intellectual's dilemma: how to remain loyal to a nation without ignoring its flaws. Ezekiel's answer is authenticity — to see clearly, to love critically, and to belong by choice and action.

Conclusion:

Nissim Ezekiel's poetry offers a rich and nuanced exploration of identity in its multiple dimensions: cultural, religious, linguistic, urban, and existential. His work resists simplistic categorizations, portraying identity as a dynamic interplay of belonging and alienation, affirmation and critique.

By engaging with his personal experiences and the broader social context of postcolonial India, Ezekiel crafts a poetic voice that is deeply individual yet resonant with universal concerns. His legacy lies in his ability to articulate the fragmented, hybrid nature of modern identity with honesty, wit, and profound insight.

In an increasingly globalized and fractured world, Ezekiel's exploration of identity remains not only relevant but essential, offering readers a mirror in which to examine their own negotiations with selfhood.

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