

Indianness in the Selected Poems of Nissim Ezekiel

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Abstract

This paper examines the construction of “Indianness” in the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel (1924–2004), a foundational figure in Indian English poetry. Despite his Jewish background and Western modernist training, Ezekiel’s work articulates a distinctly Indian sensibility through its engagement with urban and rural life, Indian English, superstition, family ethics, and postcolonial identity crises. Through close readings of selected poems—“*Background, Casually*,” “*Night of the Scorpion*,” “*Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.*,” and passages from “*The Unfinished Man*”—this study argues that Ezekiel’s Indianness is not rooted in ethnic purity or religious orthodoxy but in a conscious commitment to stay in India, to portray its social realities, and to forge a hybrid cultural identity that synthesizes Jewish, Western, and Indian elements. Drawing on postcolonial theories of hybridity and identity, the paper demonstrates how Ezekiel’s poetry negotiates alienation and belonging, ultimately affirming that his “backwards place” is India, where he chooses to belong and to write.

Keywords: Nissim Ezekiel, Indianness, Indian English poetry, postcolonial identity, hybridity, alienation, “*Background, Casually*,” “*Night of the Scorpion*”

1. Introduction

Nissim Ezekiel is widely regarded as the father of modern Indian English poetry. Born in Mumbai into a Bombay Jewish family and educated in the British tradition, he later studied in London and came under the influence of modernist poets such as T.S. Eliot and W.H. Auden. Despite his “alien” background and rationalist, at times atheistic, outlook, Ezekiel is consistently described as a poet deeply committed to Indian sensibility and milieu. His poetry portrays Bombay’s urban landscape, Indian middle-class life, village superstitions, family dynamics, and the awkwardness of Indian English, all with a tone that is ironic, self-deprecating, yet affectionate.

The concept of “Indianness” in Ezekiel’s work is complex. Unlike earlier Indian poets who invoked mythological or spiritual grandeur, Ezekiel focuses on the everyday, often sordid, dimensions of Indian life: slums, bureaucracy, loneliness, neurosis, and frustration. He does not romanticize India; instead, he loves it paradoxically, acknowledging its ugliness while affirming his belonging. In “*Island*,” he confesses:

“I cannot leave the island / I was born here and belong”.

This paper argues that Ezekiel's Indianness is constructed through:

1. **Thematic engagement** with Indian social reality (urban and rural).
2. **Linguistic strategies** that appropriate and Indianize English.
3. **Self-construction** as an insider-outsider who consciously chooses India as his "backwards place."
4. **Synthesis of identities** (Jewish, Western, Indian) into a hybrid postcolonial self.

The Selected poems will be analyzed to demonstrate how these dimensions operate.

2. Theoretical Framework: Postcolonial Identity, Hybridity, and Indianness

Ezekiel's poetry can be read through postcolonial theories of identity, particularly Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity and Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of essentialist identities. Hybridity refers to the mixing of cultural forms and identities that occurs in postcolonial contexts, producing new, ambivalent subjectivities that are neither fully "native" nor fully "colonizer".

Ezekiel embodies this hybridity: he is Indian by birth and sensibility, Jewish by community, and Western by education and literary influence. Critics note that while he has been tagged as a poet of alienation, his later poetry reveals a growing consciousness of an identity that goes beyond his genetic root, upholding Indian ethos and values.

"Indianness" here is not defined by religion, caste, or ethnic purity but by:

- A commitment to the Indian landscape and social fabric.
- A willingness to portray Indian life honestly, including its flaws.
- A linguistic appropriation of English as an Indian language.
- A moral and emotional investment in India's future.

As Ezekiel writes in "*Background, Casually*":

"My ground makes me a natural outsider; circumstances and decisions relate me to India".

This line captures the paradox of his position: by choice and circumstance, he relates himself to India, even as an outsider.

3. "Background, Casually": Autobiography, Alienation, and Commitment to India

"*Background, Casually*" is a confessional, autobiographical poem in which Ezekiel sketches his life, family, education, and philosophical development. The poem traces his journey from a Jewish boy in Bombay to a cosmopolitan intellectual who returns to India and consciously chooses to stay.

3.1 The Indian Landscape and the Outsider-Inside Paradox

Early in the poem, Ezekiel writes:

"The Indian landscape sears my eyes. / I have become a part of it / To be observed by foreigners".

These lines encapsulate the central tension of his identity. The Indian landscape "sears" his eyes, suggesting discomfort, irritation, even pain. Yet he has "become a part of it," absorbed into the

environment. He is now so Indian that foreigners observe him as a local, even though he internally experiences himself as an outsider.

This paradox reflects the postcolonial condition: the colonized subject who is educated in the colonizer's culture often feels alienated from both the native and the foreign. Ezekiel's Jewish identity intensifies this alienation, as his community is historically seen as "alien" in India.

3.2 The Commitment to Stay

The poem culminates in a declaration of commitment:

"I have made my commitments now. / This is one: to stay where I am, / As others choose to give themselves / In some remote and backwards place. / My backwards place is where I am".

Here, Ezekiel acknowledges India's "backwards" qualities—its poverty, superstition, inefficiency—but refuses to abandon it. Instead, he identifies this "backwards place" as his own. The repetition of "where I am" emphasizes presence, rootedness, and choice.

Scholars interpret this as a vow of solidarity: despite complaints and ironies, Ezekiel decides to work within India to improve it from within. This commitment is a crucial marker of his Indianness: it is not inherited passively but actively chosen.

3.3 Identity Beyond Genetic Roots

Ezekiel describes himself as a "poet, rascal, and clown," rejecting grandiose self-images in favor of a modest, human identity. His Indianness is not based on genetic purity but on lived experience, moral choice, and artistic focus. As one study notes, his later poetry marks a growing consciousness of an identity that goes beyond his genetic root, with Indian sensibility and milieu finding true expression.

"Background, Casually" thus stages the negotiation between alienation and belonging, concluding with a deliberate affirmation of India as his home.

4. "Night of the Scorpion": Rural India, Superstition, and Collective Belief

"Night of the Scorpion" is arguably Ezekiel's most famous poem, depicting a rural village event: his mother is stung by a scorpion, and villagers gather, chanting prayers and performing rituals to neutralize the "evil". The poem is quintessentially Indian in its portrayal of community, superstition, and family ethics.

4.1 Cultural Traditions and Superstition

The villagers believe that the scorpion's poison can be neutralized by chanting, dancing, and invoking religious figures. They say:

"May the poison exhaust itself,"

"May the sins of your previous birth be burned away,"

"May your suffering ease the sorrows of the world".

These lines reflect a worldview shaped by karma, dharma, and fate—core concepts in Indian philosophy. The poem juxtaposes these traditional beliefs with the speaker's rational, skeptical perspective, shaped by modern education.

4.2 The Outsider-Inside Gaze

The speaker narrates the event with a mix of detachment and empathy. He observes the peasants' rituals with a slight elitism, looking down on their superstitions, yet he is also part of the family and community. This dual stance mirrors Ezekiel's own position: an urban, rationalist Jew observing rural Indian beliefs. The poem thus captures the "meeting of worlds" within India itself: modernity and tradition, rationality and faith, urban and rural. This internal diversity is a hallmark of Indianness.

4.3 Motherly Love as Universal and Indian

The poem ends with the mother's words after ten hours of pain:

"Thank God the scorpion picked on me / And spared my children".

This line underscores unconditional motherly love, a theme that transcends culture but is expressed here in a distinctly Indian familial context. The mother's self-sacrifice and gratitude reflect Indian values of family duty and acceptance of suffering.

Critics argue that "*Night of the Scorpion*" is a quintessentially Indian poem because it shows collective community ties in the face of disaster, blending cultural symbolism with personal experience. Ezekiel's Indianness here lies in his ability to elevate a humble, local incident into universal poetry while retaining its Indian cultural texture.

5. "Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.": Indian English, Satire, and Social Manners

"*Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.*" is a satirical poem that parodies the way many Indians speak English, often called "Babu English" or Indian English. The poem recounts a farewell party for Miss Pushpa, a South Indian teacher, and is delivered in a voice that mimics the syntax, idioms, and errors of Indian English.

5.1 Indian English as a Cultural Marker

Lines such as:

"Miss Pushpa T.S. is going to abroad now, / To Holland, to join her husband there, / Who is a senior member in the delegation"

"She is very popular here, everybody is saying"

exhibit syntactical peculiarities: missing articles, literal translations, and idiomatic shifts. Ezekiel captures these "errors" not merely to mock but to represent a real linguistic reality.

Scholars argue that the poem is not simply an attack on Indian English but a reflection and natural portrayal of how Indians articulate English, making it “our own”. By Indianizing English, Ezekiel asserts that the language can carry Indian rhythms, attitudes, and sensibilities.

5.2 Satire of Middle-Class Pretensions

The poem also satirizes middle-class Indian manners, pretensions, and lack of genuine feeling. The speakers praise Miss Pushpa in hollow, formulaic ways, revealing social hypocrisy and affectation. This critique of polite society is part of Ezekiel’s broader engagement with Indian social reality.

Through this poem, Ezekiel demonstrates that Indianness can be expressed through the very imperfections of Indian English, transforming what might be seen as deficiency into artistic resource. His use of Indian English makes him “entirely Indian not only in his sensibility but also in proper use of Indian English to depict characteristic Indian attitudes”.

6. “The Unfinished Man” and Other Poems: Human Balance and Moral Concern

In “*A Poem of Dedication*” from *The Unfinished Man*, Ezekiel articulates his poetic manifesto:

“I do not want the Yogi’s concentration / I do not want the perfect charity / Of saints or the tyrant’s endless power / I want a human balance humanly / Acquired fruitfully”.

Here, Ezekiel rejects mystical extremes and tyrannical power, seeking instead a “human balance.” He avows aversion to hypocrisy in religion and poetry, aligning himself with a moral, humanistic vision that is both Indian and universal.

In later volumes such as *Hymns in Darkness* and the “*Poster Poems*,” Ezekiel’s mood shifts toward reverence and submission, addressing God informally like a friend:

“From this human way of life / Who can rescue man / If not his maker? ... / Confiscate my passport, Lord, / I do not want to go abroad / Let me find my song / Where I belong”.

These lines echo the commitment in “*Background, Casually*”: he does not want to go abroad; he wants to find his song where he belongs—in India. This spiritual turn does not involve vague mysticism but a religious humanism with moral concerns, similar to T.S. Eliot.

Ezekiel’s Indianness is thus also ethical: he seeks to do “human good” and to make life meaningful within the Indian context, not in escape from it.

7. Jewish Roots, Alienation, and the Synthesis of Identities

Ezekiel’s Jewish identity is a recurring point of critique: some argue he is not “authentically” Indian because of his Jewish background and urban outlook. However, his poetry reveals a complex negotiation rather than a simple rejection of either identity.

7.1 Alienation and the Outsider Status

Critics note that Ezekiel is preoccupied with alienation, yet he is earnest and passionate about his involvement with Indian sensibility. He confesses:

“My backward place is where I am”,

signifying that despite feeling like an outsider, he chooses India as his place. His Jewish consciousness coexists with his Indian commitment; he is a “natural outsider” whose circumstances and decisions relate him to India.

7.2 Synthesis of Jewish, Western, and Indian Cultures

Ezekiel achieves a remarkable cultural synthesis between the Jewish and the Indian, the Western and the Eastern, and the urban and the rural. He avoids both “the sophistication of the rootless” and “the parochialism of the native,” seeking instead a cross-cultural harmonization grounded in sensibility rather than mere intellectual perspective.

Though he has not inherited the great classical tradition of India (Vedas, Upanishads), he avails himself of the composite culture of India to which he belongs. His Indianness is thus inclusive, drawing on India’s pluralistic heritage rather than on any single religious or cultural stream.

8. Conclusion

Nissim Ezekiel’s poetry demonstrates that Indianness is not a fixed essence tied to religion, ethnicity, or classical tradition but a dynamic, negotiated identity shaped by lived experience, choice, and artistic practice. Through:

- **Thematic engagement** with Indian urban and rural life (“Night of the Scorpion,” “The Truth about the Floods”),
- **Linguistic appropriation** of Indian English (“Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.”),
- **Self-construction** as someone who chooses to stay in India (“Background, Casually,” “The Unfinished Man”), and
- **Synthesis** of Jewish, Western, and Indian influences into a hybrid postcolonial identity,

Ezekiel affirms that he is “entirely Indian not only in his sensibility but also in proper use of Indian English”. His poetry shows all the typical features of a modern Indian poet: thematic variety, social awareness, depiction of common people, satire of societal flaws, and a sympathetic, harmonizing outlook. In the bulk of his poetry, Ezekiel affirms that he is very much an Indian and that his roots lie deep in India. His Indianness is not naive or uncritical; it is honest, ironical, and committed. As he prays in *The Unfinished Man*:

“Whatever the enigma / The passion of the blood / Grant me the metaphor / To make it human good”.

This prayer encapsulates his vision: to use poetry to make sense of Indian life and to contribute to human good within the Indian context. Ezekiel’s work thus remains a foundational model for understanding how

Indianness can be articulated in postcolonial English poetry through hybridity, critical affection, and rooted commitment.

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