

**REDEFINING THE SELF  
A STUDY OF NISSIM EZEKIEL'S POETRY  
(ABSTRACT)**



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## ABSTRACT

Nissim Ezekiel's concept of the self presupposes two basic assumptions. One is that the essence of the self is human and the other is that existence undermines this essential nature of the self. The first premise posits that the relation between the self and human nature/condition is already given, inseparable and inherent. The relation seems to be so obvious that it dissolves in to a self-evident truth; it becomes difficult to refer to the self without implying its humanity. The human subject designates a pre-social, universal hypostasis, which is outside the particularities of time and space. Any disruption between the self and the human is interpreted as a corruption, a reduction to "something less than human".<sup>1</sup> A moving away from the human is a moving away from nature, from truth itself and leads to the misfortune of losing one's nature, the horror of unbecoming or becoming what one is not. Corruption, degeneration and dehumanization, which characterize the condition of modern existence in many of Ezekiel's poems, after all, presuppose a human standard behind the self.

The human designates an essential principle, a hierarchy of values and a chemistry of wants and dispositions, which is encoded in the very nature of man. There is a necessary balance, which presides at the heart of human nature:

I want a human balance humanly  
Acquired, fruitful in the common hour.  
*(Collected poems, 1952-1988; Delhi: 1989, p-40)*

It is this balance which is being unsettled by the condition and circumstances of existence. The human principle implies an eternal, which the temporal disturbs, a universal, which the particular disadvantages of culture and customs repress. The restoration of this principle in the process of existences is one of the main ideals of Ezekiel's poems. It is the ultimate residue, the inalienable quota that remains with man, after his loyalties, affiliations and obligation with religion, politics, culture, economics have been divided and used up; it is internal as the other are external.

In Ezekiel's environment, this human essence provides the self with an identity, which is outside the reductive dialectics of caste, class, race and religion. It is the ultimate platform from which the self can refer back to itself and find its identity and a quasi-spiritual autonomy. Perhaps, it compensates the racial, religious and familial deficiencies that Ezekiel as a Jew in India had to continually encounter. It provides a secure position to the minority whose social and religious identity condemns him to an insecure living space. It is also the bourgeois' way of signifying and justifying his own position in society, for whom the complex network of social, religious and political affiliation constituted an impediment to capitalist-individualist enterprises. Ezekiel's poetry retains a lot of bourgeois ideas, which can be read as the generic feature of post-colonial writing.

Ezekiel's search for identity and wholeness in the context of the urban condition of existence which surrounds him is basically a search for this essential code of the self. These concerns seem to have inevitable humanist orientation. The humanist tradition has its origin in the isolation of the "I" as an autonomous entity, It can be traced back to the Enlightenment where a universal capacity to abstract the "I" from all extraneous conditions and to see it "as in itself it really is" has seized mankind. The concern shifted "from the metaphysically

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derivative soul – to ‘individual centres of consciousness’ – which are said to be self-determining, free and rational by nature”.<sup>2</sup> The self-determining centre of consciousness is the man of Rousseau, born (not created), positioned not by religion but against it, no longer within society but apart from it, not a part of nature but outside it. In this discourse the human represented ‘the unique starting point and end to which everything must finally be related’,<sup>3</sup> the absolute centre ‘which is itself beyond the reach of free play’.<sup>4</sup>

Although Ezekiel’s gestures and assumptions carry authentic humanist implications, it must be said that his assertions lack the imperiousness of conventional humanism. His emphasis is not so much on an individuated capitalist/humanist essence as on a universally available human nature/condition. The human is not necessary (in his concept) as an infinite power or potential on which an individual can build his uniqueness, his difference. Its meaning is not so much determined by its measure or manifestation in an individual as by the commonness and average that underlies and transcends individual difference, while, of course, retaining human nature/condition in its universal and eternal capacity. His idea of the human recognizes the human in all its limitations and flaws:

Give me touch of man and give me smell of  
Fornication, pregnancy and spices.  
*(Collected Poems, p-9)*

What is important to him is the restoration of the natural and the given. This search for identity and integrity is not a transport to unknown possibilities; it is only a return to the essential, the home, the womb. It can be equated with his endearment of his native environment:

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

Ezekiel’s second assumption also redefines his humanist position. This is perhaps because of an informed awareness about the contemporary disillusionment in an anthropocentric order. The awakening of the consciousness to the harsher rhythms of contemporary existence was one of the agenda short-listed by Daruwalla for Modern Indian Poetry in English.

Contemporary (conditions of) existence represents a challenge to human nature, the essential constitution of the self. It can be said here that his second premise does not address an inherent area of the self, it rather emphasizes the exteriorization of what Ezekiel conceives to be the essential self. Transaction with the modern conditions of existence is a predicament for the self, since the essence of the self, human nature, is continually repressed, denied and undermined. The self is present in this context only as a tenuous, disintegrated entity, endlessly reshaped, realigned and determined from outside. The subject position itself is abrogated, scraped away from the story of existence; the subjective/human/essential self is reduced to an obscure dysfunctional dimension of existence “suffering above all the things/ its own obscurity”<sup>5</sup>.

But Ezekiel, perhaps, uses this view only as a condition, a temporary condition of existence, an extraneous aspect of the self, which is, however underlined by an essential, eternal self. This belief in a recuperative, eternally available nature of the self, ultimately places his concept of the self again into the tradition of humanist discourses. But this return to a humanist position is after the knowledge of the contemporary anti-

humanist tradition. He has addressed the self from the perspective of the anti-humanist tradition and reinstated the humanist self by his indestructible hope in an eternally available, inexhaustible human self.

In the following chapters an attempt is being made to approach the conditions of existence in the complexity of the post-colonial situation, where the East and the West are involved in a relation which blurs the boundaries of culture and express in its stead a hybridity which overwhelms and subverts the so-called identity of culture and society. In the context of the Indian situation what can be used/referred to as its tradition finds itself in a process of transformation that places tradition and modernization, the colony and the colonizer, the past and the present in a new relation.

The hybridity extends itself into the very process of writing, as there is a clash of perspectives, values and criteria. The writer's consciousness is not the repository of a single culture or a tradition, but a complex playground of modern awareness and traditional memories. It is assumed that the view of existence as represented in Ezekiel's writing reveals not only a socio-economic reality but a complex construct of ideologies, perspectives, presuppositions, preconceptions, reassessment, reviews and realignment. It transcribes a reality which binds the East and the West in a new socio-economic, politico-historical relationship. In the context of Ezekiel's environment, the existing social and historical facts of existence, revealed not so much the disparity of cultures, as the emergence of 'a new world system', a new reality under which existence regroups as a heterogeneous and diffused network of conditions, characterized by the criss-cross overlapping of political, economic and cultural determinants that are the contributions of more than one region or tradition. And the medium that interact with this reality, the framework within which the poet works and views his experiences, shows to a considerable extent, the prevalence of certain habits, methods and assumptions that can be associated with the non-native, imperial English tradition.

Post-colonial writing is a part of this new reality. And Nissim Ezekiel's poetry, as a typical post-colonial structure, contains the characteristic ambivalence and complexity of this East-West relationship. The desire for a separate voice an identity is evident throughout his writing, but the necessity of this desire, the genuineness of his cause, however, fails to altogether do away with certain imperial propensities which had developed into organic elements of post-independence aesthetics itself.

English discourses mediate Ezekiel's writing by implanting certain premises in his thinking, in his way of seeing the world, which bring along with them what Robert. C. Solomon calls the "transcendental pretence" and a particular of viewing social and cultural phenomena, from a universal point of view. The idea of universals is inextricably associated with the "transcendental pretence" which constitutes an inseparable component of Western thinking and western worldviews. This tradition of interpretation based on a single imperial perspective creates a crucial problem for literatures such as Ezekiel's whose society and culture provides contesting perspectives and history. The awareness of this essential contradiction is one of the major concerns of Ezekiel's poetry. While he cannot completely rid himself of these influences there is also an accompanying awareness of a basic cultural incompatibility which enables him to examine his own tradition and regionality vis-a vis the overwhelming western heritage which the colonial process has implanted in to his consciousness.

The universal as a category has been a constant of western thought; it has been institutionalized and enshrined by the works of several writers in the English tradition. This is because within their episteme 'truth' required a universal space and constancy. Western metaphysics or logo centric metaphysics shows an inherent inability to accept inconsistencies, incoherence and disparity.

The universal is instituted in Ezekiel's writing through the presence of ideas that posit the urban situation as an abstract predicament characterized by a common network of conditions. The urban situation defines a condition of existence, which in contemporary writings signified a total subversion of human values by forces, which were alarmingly unifying and transforming the world of man into an urban space. The urban system could nourish only the material needs of man and led conversely to an emaciation of man's inner being. The urban as a modern structure signifies a spatial and semantic profession that is quite incompatible with its conventional connotation and amounts to a crisis. The city in this context acquires an inseparable predominance over man's existence and relegates the rural and the natural to the corner of man's being. The urban system is of course as old as human civilization but after the industrial revolution it had assumed a significance that can be comprehended only in terms of a crisis, since it creates a break between the present and its past and is for that matter also modern.

The term modern can be used here to emphasize a repression of the old, a decimation of traditional modes of being and the emergence of a present that refers to its past as a distinct history that signifies its difference. Contemporaneity as defined by Anglo-American Modernists can be used to designate a specific stage of human civilization where certain established relations between man and (his) environment, the self and (its) existence had to be re-thought; where existence and environment revealed conditions and characteristics that contradicted certain basic assumptions about man's origin, nature and destiny.

Such a view however, cannot describe the entire human population. Modernity itself can be interpreted as a specific condition associated with the experience and knowledge of writers living within a determinate cultural area. It seems propitious to situate this phenomenon within the social and economic reality of the west. Though as a particular way of life, as a specific way of theorizing and viewing the world the modern overlaps into other times and cultures, historically it remains a distinct western phenomenon.

The city whether as a landscape/locale/metaphor/construct of writing has been immersed for too long in the vision of the centre. Deposits of imperial writings, traces of western signifiers enshrouds, permeates and pervades its architecture, its landscape, its health, its very anatomy, its very existence. Outside the western horizons it accepts only an addition, a localization, a variation that cannot be dissociated from the modern/western proportion in which it has been conceived.

A poetry nourished by the axioms and aesthetics of the centre could not evacuate its deposits of knowledge without excising a vital part of its own history. But at the same time the "transcendental pretence" implicit in the centre's world view as well as the universal clause attached by the centre to modern existence and the urban system could not have completely explained the complexity of existence as it existed in Ezekiel's environment and time.

All the same Ezekiel is not exactly free from the hold of the centre. The sprawling city, Bombay, spreads before him like an irrepressible universal. He cannot expunge the western matrix from his perception of the city; he cannot view its hopelessness, his emptiness, and the squalor except as a universal phenomenon. It places his poetry in the tradition of discourses that institutionalize universals. The centre claims its share from the periphery.

The city in Ezekiel's embodies an ideal, a prototype into which the plurality of cities is being transfused, suppressed and lost. It gathers into itself the monotony of truth. The condition of existence that it describes the emptiness, the morbidity, the squalor, the stagnation, the disintegration, the chaos seem to be the inseparable constant of every city; they redound like postulates of an absolute precondition that preempts, mediates and determines each instance, each manifestation, each writing of the urban conditions.

Ezekiel's poems acknowledge the urban reality posited by western literatures but there is also the awareness that regional circumstances disrupt the seeming totality of their vision. Amidst the universal nothingness that pervades his poems there are evident gaps, moments of release, glimpses of hope that seem to mitigate the given totality of the colonizer's world view. At these instances there is a departure from the universal perimeters of the city and an identification with the actual and diverse conditions of life in Bombay.

The limitation of the colonizer's view about urbanization and modern man are evident in the Indian Context. The paradigm of Indian civilization, strictly speaking, did not recognize the individual site as a self-determining and autonomous entity. So the problems that arises at the individual level in Ezekiel's poetry, the "I" that suffers in his poems, the consciousness that addresses and articulates the predicament of the individual falls outside the tradition of India. His poetry contains a way of seeing, a way of writing that privileges the individual in a sense that is not historically provided for by his natives space.

The idea of the individual is itself a culturally limited term. It represents an idea, a discovery, a space made possible by certain specific relations involving definite economic, social, religious and political factors and events that were limited to Europe. India's history does not provide any combination of circumstances events or developments that would have been congenial to "the development of a universal capacity to think of yourself in a fundamental way as an individual"<sup>6</sup>. The autonomy of the individual, his inviolable difference is not possible within the traditional framework of Indian thought.

As it has already been said the individual consciousness, the self that is aware of its own individual priorities and obligations is a foreign tissue transplanted into the writing of Ezekiel. It is an accumulation, a development in a mind exposed to the expectations, reading habits, attitudes, demeanours, views and vocabulary of the colonizer. The colonizer introduce a network of schools, markets, industries, jobs, technologies and laws in its colonies which led to the institutionalization of the centre's world view in these areas

However, the centre could not wholly entrench itself upon the consciousness of its colonies. The core of Indian culture repressed what it felt as an aggression upon its identity. It remains one of the notable features of the Indian civilization that through out its history of recurrent invasions it had managed to remain unmistakably itself. Conformity to tradition has been the main stay of Indian thought and life.

The respective condition of existence in India and the West reveals the incompatibility of tradition and modernity. In one, tradition represents a continuous whole and in the other tradition is subjected and appropriated by the forces of modernism. The post-colonial space, it can be said, represents the various temporary encounters between tradition and modernism. Post-colonial writings build themselves by ceaselessly eroding the supposed wholeness as well as the disparity of both these cultures. It seeks to view existence in the context of the cultural hybridity and the new relations between the east and the west that has consumed the identity of both traditional and modern societies.

Ezekiel's writing can be read as a text where a supposed origin or model has no light, no presence, no meaning. His writings is available only through and as a medium .The text does not lead to a world beyond its borders, .it only refers back to itself .It is the end of the road, there is no beyond .The beyond is a product "of what Derrida calls 'the exigent, powerful, systematic and irrepressible desire' for a transcendent signified."<sup>7</sup> The supposed original/ essence represents a logocentric present against which there are only temporary disposable truths. It is assumed that no single concept can fix an ultimate meaning to the self. The notion of a true self which is simply there, eluding the grasp of theories, representing a residual mystery, is apparently a myth and itself a concept with its own limitations. Concepts, theories, ideas and impressions are themselves the effects of thought processes, which are neither original nor lead to any absolute truth. As no concept of the self can defy, begin and proceed without and outside the structurality of language and the whole communicative system, concepts of the self, it can be said are only being written, unwritten and rewritten. Poetry, makes inevitable, interaction at all levels and the denial of this complexity leads to a denial of the very mechanism of art. At all its levels it is intertwined and enmeshed in a system of writing which can not be reduced to and traced back to an unwritten, non- linguistic, non literary source. The mechanism of art itself, its preoccupations, its endless play, its endless affiliations obfuscates transcendence and truth. Roland Barthes' theory about text (in The Death of the Author) can be appropriated here:

"In the multiplicity of writing, every thing is to be disentangled, nothing deciphered; the structure can be followed, 'run ' (like the thread of a stocking) at every level, but there is nothing beneath; the space of writing is to be ranged over, not pierced;"<sup>8</sup>

The main assumption of this study is that Ezekiel's concept of the self, as an element of his poetry does not represent a substantial entity. It is enmeshed in a theoretical circuit that only returns and leads to other theories. Hence it is being proposed that its concept is a redefinition of the self, one of the many temporary combinations of ideas in the progression of theories. The complex relation between native and non-native discourses as a fall out of colonialism has already been emphasized. It is surmised that a humanist perspective inheres in his poetry in the form of an unquestioned adherence to the notion of essence; the bourgeois obsession to a transcendent signified permeates his poetry. And the challenge to these humanist propositions, which he addresses as the conditions of existence or anti-humanist propositions also cannot escape from the tangle of theories. These various positions interact, contradict and subvert each other but ultimately there are only theories and the circuit of theories is overwhelming and inescapable. In the midst of this ideological deluge, it can be only said that Ezekiel's poetry is an effort in another redefinition, another reconstruction and another reorganization of the self.

NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Ezekiel, Nissim, Collected Poems 1952-1988 (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989) 7.
- <sup>2</sup> Dollimore, Jonathan, "Beyond Essentialist Humanism" in Barry, Peter, Issues in Contemporary Critical Theory (London: Macmillan, 1987).
- <sup>3</sup> Davies, T. Humanism (London: Routledge, 1997) 123.
- <sup>4</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" in Das, B. and J.M. Mohanty (eds.). Literary Criticism: A Reading (Walton Street: Oxford University Press, 1985). 394.
- <sup>5</sup> Ezekiel, Nissim, Collected Poems 1952-1988 (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989).
- <sup>6</sup> Davies, T. Humanism (London: Routledge, 1997) 16.
- <sup>7</sup> Nicolas Tredell, "Euphoria (Ltd) – The Limitations of Post-structuralism and Deconstruction (1987)", in Barry, Peter, Issues in Contemporary Critical Theory (London: Macmillan, 1987) 94.
- <sup>8</sup> Roland, B. "The Death of the Author" in Barry, Peter, Issues in Contemporary Critical Theory (London: Macmillan, 1987) 54.

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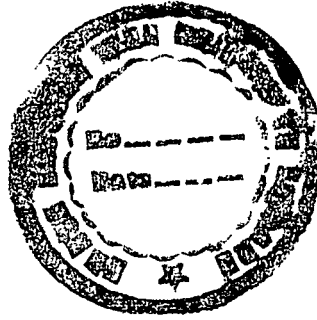
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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH**

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IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENT  
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*MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY IN ENGLISH*  
OF THE NORTH EASTERN HILL UNIVERSITY.  
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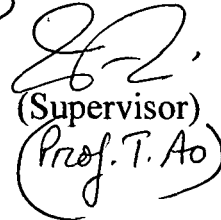
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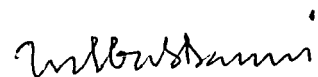
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I, *Wilburn S. Doimary*, hereby declare that the subject matter of the thesis is the record of the work done by me, that the contents of this thesis did not form basic of the award of any previous degree to me or to the best of my knowledge to anybody else, and that the thesis has not been submitted by me for any research degree in any other University.

This is being submitted to the North-Eastern Hill University for the degree of Master of Philosophy in English.

  
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## INTRODUCTION

Nissim Ezekiel occupies an important position among the Modern Indian poets writing in English. With the publication of A Time to Change he became an event in the history of Modern Indian Poetry in English. In its infant days when Modern Indian Poetry in English was struggling for *existence and identity*, he advised other poets, set standards and created places of publication. He introduced seriousness, authenticity, craftsmanship and dedication to poetry. Poetry ceased to be a hobby and became a profession. He was born in December 1929 in Bombay, of Jewish parents. Since his student days in 1947, he had been among other things politician, professor, editor, art critic, theatre-director and a relentless social worker.

His poetry collections include, among others, A Time to Change (1952), Sixty Poems (1953), The Third (1958), The Unfinished Man (1960), The Exact Name (1965) and Hymns in Darkness (1976). He had also experimented with play writing.

Modern Indian Poetry in English, as such, began around the 1950s. About this time certain writers emerged with a literature that by its style and content could be set apart from the English poetry that was being written by Indians before Independence. This poetry departed from its past,

became serious, gathered a canon around itself and clamoured for autonomy and identity. Its writers disowned descent from pre-independence poetry and tolerated it only within a relationship where it could be used as an antithesis, something that it can rebel against, avoid and depart from. They dismissed the “Poetry of the pre-independence period” as “a mass of sentiments, clichés, outdated language and conventions, the ossified remains of a colonial tradition”.<sup>1</sup> According to Parthasarathy “Indian verse in English did not seriously exist before independence.”<sup>2</sup> In these views and statements, Indian Poetry in English before Independence is treated as a single continuous whole, whereas, it can be also said that this tradition includes a period of more than a century and signify more than a generation of writers, since Derozio. According to Makaran Paranjape, this tradition has its origin in the arrival of Vasco da Gama in Calicut in 1498 and the whole cultural and linguistic process that this event set into motion. He says in his introduction to Indian Poetry in English: “A convenient starting point can be the landing of Vasco da Gama in Kerala in 1498.”<sup>3</sup> Colonialism is imbedded in the very heart of Indian writings in English. All the same, the dismissive attitude of the post-colonial generation is legitimate. Up to their time this genre had no particular significance, as its function was undefined and its nature was

amorphous. Further it wasted itself in extra-curricular issues. Contrary to this, after the 1950s it became authentic, autonomous and autotelic.

K.N. Daruwalla situates the main flaw of pre-independence poetry in its disregard to reality. In his 'Introduction' to Two Decades of Indian Poetry, he says:

the final indictment of the earlier poets will be not on the score of their prosody, or their archaic, dandified georgianisms, but that they were untouched by either the reality around them, drought, famine, plague, colonial exploitation or by the reality within, namely erosion, of faith and the disintegration of the modern consciousness.<sup>4</sup>

The new poetry considered a closer relationship between art and reality. Nissim Ezekiel regarded poetry as a personal quest for a satisfactory way of living in the modern world. Of course such pursuits for a solution does not always end in success, but the search itself, in its own way is meaningful enough. Ezekiel regarded poetry as a corollary of life. He sought for a "life/whose texture is poetry."<sup>5</sup> What Ezekiel was trying to reach at through this alignments and realignments between life and poetry was an identity and a wholeness of being. These, Ezekiel believed were original human conditions that were essential to the self. The context to this essentiality comes from the non-human conditions of existence that are the unalienable features of modern civilization and culture. Awareness of this modern predicament was one of the elements, which the Modern

Indian poets, considered to be their discovery. Pre-independence poetry had failed to notice this inalienable aspect of the existential struggle.

Ezekiel's poetry belongs to that period of history, where the displaced, decentred plight of man was the main preoccupation of the major works in literature. The anti-humanist texts had firmly established their positions against the age-old, out-dated humanist assertions. Ezekiel's poetry is an attempt to withdraw into a position, which tries to arrive at a concept of the self, that derives from more than one tradition or school of thought. In this study, his concept of the self is being approached from various angles and it tries to include all these areas as an effort to justify the complexity of Nissim Ezekiel's poetry.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> King, Bruce, Modern Indian Poetry in English (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987) 11.

<sup>2</sup> King, Bruce, Modern Indian Poetry in English (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987) 79.

<sup>3</sup> Paranjape, M. Indian Poetry in English (Madras: Macmillan India Limited, 1993) 1.

<sup>4</sup> Daruwalla, Keki N. Two Decades of Indian Poetry, 1960-1980 (Ghaziabad: Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd., 1980) xvii.

<sup>5</sup> Ezekiel, Nissim, Collected Poems 1952-1988 (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989) 18.

## Chapter-I

### THE CONCEPT OF THE SELF

Nissim Ezekiel's concept of the self presupposes two basic assumptions. One is that the essence of the self is human and the other is that existence undermines this essential nature of the self. The first premise posits that the relation between the self and human nature/condition is already given, inseparable and inherent. The relation seems to be so obvious that it dissolves into a self-evident truth; it becomes difficult to refer to the self without implying its humanity. The human subject designates a pre-social, universal hypothesis, which is outside the particularities of time and space. As the human is deemed to be a truth self-evident and axiomatic, it apparently needs no definition, no predication to understand it. It can be treated as one of the "worn-out metaphors which have become powerless to affect the senses"<sup>1</sup> and has therefore deadened into truth.

In 'The Double Horror', the "I" of the poem is being "continually/Reduced to something less than human."<sup>2</sup> The human is invariably left undefined and its relation with the self is simply taken for granted, although it is being temporarily destabilized by the state of

existence in the urban world. The human remains the point of reference. Any disruption between the self and the human is interpreted as a corruption, a reduction to “something less than human.” A moving away from the human is a moving away from nature, from truth itself and leads to the misfortune of losing one’s nature, the horror of unbecoming or becoming what one is not. Corruption, degeneration and dehumanization, which characterize the condition of modern existence in many of Ezekiel’s poems, after all, presuppose a human standard behind the self.

The human designates an essential principle, a hierarchy of values and chemistry of wants and dispositions, which is encoded in the very nature of man. There is a necessary balance, which presides at the heart of human nature. In ‘A Poem of Dedication’, he says:

I want a human balance humanly  
 Acquired, fruitful in the common hour.  
 (Collected Poems 1952-1988; Delhi:  
 Oxford, 1989, p.40)

It is this balance, which is being unsettled by the conditions and circumstances of existence. The human principle implies an eternal, which the temporal disturbs, a universal, which the particular disadvantages of culture and custom repress. The restoration of this principle in the process of existence is one of the main ideals of Ezekiel’s poems. It is the ultimate residue, the inalienable quota that remains with man, after his loyalties,

affiliations with and obligations toward religion, politics, culture, economics have been divided and used up; it is internal as the others are external. In Ezekiel's environment, this human essence provides the self with an identity, which is outside the reductive dialectics of caste, class, race and religion. It is the ultimate platform from which the self can refer back to itself and find its identity and a quasi-spiritual autonomy. Perhaps, it compensates the racial, religious and familial deficiencies that Ezekiel as a Jew in India had to continually encounter. It provides a secure position to the minority whose social and religious identity condemns him to an insecure living space.

Evidently, the human designates a balance which can be acquired without extra effort and extraneous mediation and significantly the word "common" appears to introduce a sense of the natural, the normal, the simply given. Arguably, a human balance is essential to the "I" and hence its acquisition does not demand "the matador's dexterity"<sup>3</sup>, "the yogi's concentration"<sup>4</sup>, or "the tyrant's endless power"<sup>5</sup>. Again in 'Night of the Scorpion', the final sentence uttered by the mother: "Thank God the scorpion picked on me/and spared my children"<sup>6</sup>, sets to naught the superstitious frenzy of the crowd as well as the learned skepticism of the father. Her words are from the core of her heart; it is a reaction, which is

beyond the influence of religion and education, it is encoded in the very nature of her species and is, therefore, universal, original and only human. Contrary to this, the gestures of the lovers in 'An Affair' are controlled by the dynamics of the screen:

And then she said: I love you, just like this  
 As I had seen the yellow blondes declare  
 Upon the screen, and even stroked my hair.  
 But hates me now because I did not kiss.  
 (Collected Poems 1952-1988; Delhi:  
 Oxford, 1989, p.11)

The golden mean can be read as a metaphor of human condition. It signifies a state of order, a balance which is perhaps the essential, original relation between "the élan of desire/and the rational faculties"<sup>7</sup>, and Ezekiel probably sees it as an innate and inevitable condition of the self. The human condition also describes a state of being which is abstracted from the waste of doubts and questions. Its structure is like poetry. In 'Something to Pursue', he says:

... There shall be no more questions,  
 No more expenditure of doubt  
 But only a limpid style of life  
 Whose texture is poetry.  
 (Collected Poems 1952-1988; Delhi:  
 Oxford, 1989, p.18)

Common things/nature/sense are being repeatedly equated with the human condition/nature. Apparently, these words signify a sense of

satisfaction, harmony with the natural order of being and silently mock the anxiety, effort and stress implicit in the claims of science and philosophy.

In 'Philosophy', he says:

... Common things  
 Become, by virtue of their commonness,  
 An argument against the nakedness  
 That dies of cold to find the truth it brings.  
 (Collected Poems 1952-1988; Delhi:  
 Oxford, 1989, p.129)

This theme of commonness is emphasized again in 'Transmutation'; here he suggests an immersion into social life without prejudice:

Do not, in your vanity, the tenuous thread  
 Of difference flaunt, but be  
 Asserted in the common dance. Participate  
 Entirely, make an end of separation.  
 (Collected Poems 1952-1988; Delhi:  
 Oxford, 1989, p.56)

This process of assimilation requires a deduction of individuality. The "common dance" implies a universal, "a wider meaning", which erases difference. Here the paradox of the human combines into itself the properties of the individual as well as the common social man. Probably, this brings to light one of the inherent paradoxes of Ezekiel's poetry. In his search for an identity and wholeness of being he cannot find a way between the extremes of loneliness and social life. Both these positions are ultimately irreconcilable – the uncertainty within frightens him as his social commitments compel him "to open his eyes outwards"<sup>8</sup> only "to see

heartlessness, brutality”.<sup>9</sup> Obviously, Ezekiel’s individual is not a heroic figure, he has his limitations and failings and his idea of the human recognizes the human in all its limitations and flaws. In ‘On Meeting a Pedant’, he says:

Give me touch of men and give me smell of  
Fornication, pregnancy and spices.  
(Collected Poems 1952-1988; Delhi:  
Oxford, 1989, p.9)

His idea of the human is a recognition of a universal quality, a common nature which rejects exceptions and is, therefore, more visible in the crowd than in the solitude of an individual. It consists rather in the shedding of differences than in the assertion of difference. It is in other words “a fetishing of ‘Average Man’”<sup>10</sup> rather than the unique, heroic individual. The quest for a human ideal is not a voyage into infinite possibilities but the discovery of a given nature and category roots that had been lost. It entails a journey into the centre of the self, a search for a given code and not a transport into unknown possibilities; it is only a return to the essential, the house, the womb. It can be equated with his endearment of his native environment:

I have made my commitments now.  
This is one: to stay where I am.  
As others chose to give themselves  
In some remote and backward place.  
My backward place is where I am.  
(Collected Poems 1952-1988, p.178)

The notion that humanness is so natural, so obvious, so common that it is available to/in every individual, every culture, every age, is one of the central assumptions of essentialist humanism. This notion is of recent origin and not so universal as is supposed to be. Most of the expectations and assumptions that usually gather about man and its antecedents are not as it were encoded in nature (or any other absolute nature itself being an ideological fabrication) or somehow simply given but the results of certain eighteenth and nineteenth century conventions. So successfully had these theories managed to advertise and sell their views that they continue to influence the intellectual habits and critical gestures of readers and writers to our own day.

The roots of such a worldview or '*weltanschauung*' can be traced back to the Enlightenment when a universal capacity, to abstract the "I" from all extraneous conditions and to see it "as it really was",<sup>11</sup> had seized mankind. Such a view became possible at this time because of the shift of concern "from the metaphorically derivative soul ... to 'individual centres of consciousness' ... which are said to be self-determining, free and rational by nature."<sup>12</sup> The self-determining centre of consciousness is the man of Rousseau, born (not created), positioned not by religion but against it, no longer within society but apart from it, not a part of nature but

outside it. In this discourse the human represented “the unique starting point and end to which everything must finally be related”,<sup>13</sup> the absolute centre “which is itself beyond the reach of freeplay.”<sup>14</sup>

Although Ezekiel’s gestures and assumptions carry authentic humanist implications, it must be said that his assertions lack the imperiousness of conventional humanism. The human aspect still represents a condition outside the control of social and religious factors, but it is not the central, constant determinant of the “I”’s position, function and value. The “I” does not enjoy a central, autonomous and absolute subject position. His emphasis is not so much on an individuated capitalist/humanist essence as on a universally available human nature/condition. The human is not necessary (in his concept) as an infinite power or potential on which an individual can build his uniqueness, his difference. Its meaning is not so much determined by its measure or manifestation in an individual as by the commonness and average that underlies and transcends individual difference, while, of course, retaining human nature/condition in its universal and eternal capacity.

Ezekiel’s second assumption also redefines his humanist position. This is perhaps because of an informed awareness about the contemporary disillusionment in an anthropocentric order. The awakening of the

consciousness to the harsher rhythms of contemporary existence was one of the agenda short-listed by Daruwalla for Modern Indian Poetry in English.

Contemporary (conditions of) existence represents a challenge to human nature, the essential constitution of the self. It can be said here that his second premise does not address an inherent area of the self, it rather emphasizes the exteriorization of what Ezekiel conceives to be the essential self. Transaction with the modern conditions of existence is a predicament for the self, since the essence of the self, human nature, is continuously repressed, denied and undermined. The self is present in this context only as a tenuous, disintegrated entity, endlessly reshaped, realigned and determined from outside. In 'The Double Horror', the essential code of the self, its human condition is being continually postponed, undermined, displaced and overlooked by "the crowd/Newspapers, cinema, radio features, speeches."<sup>15</sup> The meaning of life consists in the essential relation between the self and humanness and as this relation is suppressed, undermined by modern existential arrangements, there is non-meaning, a void. In poems, such as 'Emptiness', 'Robert', 'An Affair', 'Urban', 'A Morning Walk', 'Event', 'Case Study' and 'The Double Horror', the self experiences a process of

unbecoming, an endless displacement from and deference of being because the self is denied its nature, its humanity, and is instead exposed to conditions contrary and detrimental to its essence. Experience seems to reject the subjectivity of the essential self. Existence proceeds without it, outside it and probably overlooks it. It is not the determining source but a recipient of sensation, feelings and other activities and experiences. It is reduced to an obscure, dysfunctional dimension of existence “suffering above all things/Its own obscurity”<sup>16</sup>. In ‘What Frightens Me’, the image of the self disintegrates and the human constitutes only one layer of the self. Like a Modernist text it represents a fragmentary structure where “the self-protective self/And the self naked”<sup>17</sup> “the mask/And the secret behind the mask”<sup>18</sup>, coexist perhaps in anarchy. Similarly, in ‘For Her’, the layers of the disintegrated self resists wholeness:

How much of me you leave untouched  
And yet you touch me well.

(Collected Poems 1951-1988; Delhi:  
Oxford, 1989, p.67)



The entire self is more than its essence. Apparently, humanness and/humanity of the self constitutes only one segment of the self and is perhaps a constructed space, a reassurance for integrity, authority and autonomy in the midst of the existential chaos. Finally, it can be said that

Ezekiel's concept of the self retains a belief in the essentiality of the human self which the existential process cannot altogether erase or expel.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Davies, Tony, Humanism (London: Routledge, 1987) 37.
- <sup>2</sup> Ezekiel, Nissim, Collected Poems 1952-1988 (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989) 7.
- <sup>3</sup> Ezekiel, Nissim, Collected Poems 1952-1988 (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989) 40.
- <sup>4</sup> Ezekiel, Nissim, Collected Poems 1952-1988 (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989) 40.
- <sup>5</sup> Ezekiel, Nissim, Collected Poems 1952-1988 (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989) 40.
- <sup>6</sup> Ezekiel, Nissim, Collected Poems 1952-1988 (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989) 131.
- <sup>7</sup> Ezekiel, Nissim, Collected Poems 1952-1988 (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989) 12.
- <sup>8</sup> Ezekiel, Nissim, Collected Poems 1952-1988 (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989) xx.
- <sup>9</sup> Ezekiel, Nissim, Collected Poems 1952-1988 (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989) xx.
- <sup>10</sup> Dollimore, Jonathan, "Beyond Essentialist Humanism" (1984) in Barry, Peter, Issues in Contemporary Critical Theory (London: Macmillan, 1987) 47.
- <sup>11</sup> Lindenberger, Herbert, The History in Literature: On Value, Genre, Institutions (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990) 3.
- <sup>12</sup> Dollimore, Jonathan, "Beyond Essentialist Humanism" (1984) in Barry, Peter, Issues in Contemporary Critical Theory (London: Macmillan, 1987) 38.
- <sup>13</sup> Dollimore, Jonathan, "Beyond Essentialist Humanism" (1984) in Barry, Peter, Issues in Contemporary Critical Theory (London: Macmillan, 1987) 123.
- <sup>14</sup> Derrida, Jacques, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" in Das, B. and J.M. Mohanty, Literary Criticism: A Reading (Walton Street: Oxford University Press, 1985) 393-412.

<sup>15</sup> Ezekiel, Nissim, Collected Poems 1952-1988 (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989) 7.

<sup>16</sup> Ezekiel, Nissim, Collected Poems 1952-1988 (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989) 89.

<sup>17</sup> Ezekiel, Nissim, Collected Poems 1952-1988 (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989) 106.

<sup>18</sup> Ezekiel, Nissim, Collected Poems 1952-1988 (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989) 106.

## Chapter-II

### **THE CONTEXTS OF THE SELF**

Essence and existence, as two distinct identifiable categories, are integral to Nissim Ezekiel's concept of the self. Essence signifies the given code of the self; it transcends and is prior to the process of existence. Existence involves the self in process; it brings the self into contact with the external world. An attempt is being made in this chapter to relate Ezekiel's concept of the self to the conditions of existence as represented in his text. It is assumed that the view of existence as represented in his writing reveals not only a socio-economic reality but also a complex construct of ideologies, perspectives, presuppositions, preconceptions, reassessments, reviews and realignments. It transcribes a reality, which binds the East and the West in a new socio-economic, politico-historical relationship. In the context of Ezekiel's environment, the existing social and historical facts of existence, reveal not so much the disparity of cultures, as the emergence of "a new world system", a new reality under which existence regroups as a heterogeneous and diffused network of conditions, characterized by the criss-cross overlapping of political, economic and cultural determinants that are the contributions of more than one region or tradition. And the medium that interacts with this reality, the

framework within which the poet works and views his experience, shows, to a considerable extent, the prevalence of certain habits, methods and assumptions that can be associated with the non-native, imperial English tradition.

Post-colonial writing is a part of this new reality and Nissim Ezekiel's poetry, as a typical post-colonial structure, contains the characteristic ambivalence and complexity of this East-West relationship. The desire for a separate voice and identity is evident throughout his writing, but the necessity of this desire, the genuineness of his cause, however, fails to altogether do away with certain imperial propensities which had developed into organic elements of post-independence aesthetics itself. Niranjan Mohanty writes in an essay on the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel:

The post-colonial writing ... does not fully dissociate itself from the fabric of the historical truth of coloniality.<sup>1</sup>

In the same essay, he writes:

It is perhaps most gratifying to view the post-colonial as a continuum of experience in which colonialism is perceived as an instrument of disturbance which besides unsettling the native discourses of culture brings in English discourses.<sup>2</sup>

English discourses mediate Ezekiel's writing by implanting certain premises in his thinking, in his way of seeing the world, which brings

along with them what Robert C. Solomon calls the “transcendental pretence”<sup>3</sup> and a particular way of viewing social and cultural phenomena from a universal point of view. The idea of universals is inextricably associated with the “transcendental pretence” which constitutes an inseparable component of western thinking and western worldviews. This tradition of interpretation based on a single imperial perspective creates a crucial problem for literatures such as Ezekiel’s whose society and culture provide contesting perspectives and history. The awareness of this essential contradiction is one of the major concerns of Ezekiel’s poetry. While he cannot completely rid himself of these influences, there is also an accompanying awareness of a basic cultural incompatibility which enables him to examine his own tradition and regionality vis-a-vis the overwhelming western heritage which the colonial process has implanted into his own consciousness.

The universal as a category has been a constant of western thought; it has been institutionalized and enshrined by the works of several writers in the English tradition. This is because within their episteme “truth” required a universal space and constancy. Western metaphysics or logocentric metaphysics shows an inherent inability to accept inconsistencies, incoherence and disparity. Samuel Johnson’s famous

defence of William Shakespeare's universal relevance is a classic instance of this tradition.

The major discourses in the English tradition, shows a general inability to proceed without a universal premise. The universal persists as an underlying axiom, a transcendental framework that pervades and is also outside the ambit of particular experiences and circumstances; an ideal form presiding over the many variants and transience of actuality. In the works of Plato and Aristotle, the source of all western theories and traditions, in the dictates of Samuel Johnson, in the romantic poems of Wordsworth, in the essays of Dryden and the epistles of Alexander Pope, in the theories of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in the absurdist view of existence, in the modernist works of T.S. Eliot, T.E. Hulme and even D.H. Lawrence experience and existence are interpreted from a single cultural and historical point of view that forms the basis of their universal world views. All these texts seem to overlook the existence of other cultures, other histories, other societies, other political and economic systems. From the post-colonial standpoint they seem to embody a text that seeks to transfix human diversity in a single universal and uniform relation; an imperialist myopia/delusion that translates particular experience and situation into universal predicaments and in its insensitivity to other modes

of being “overlooks the casual distinctions of country and condition.”<sup>4</sup> The imperialist concept of human nature/condition that these discourses establish, suffer from the limitations that are implicit in the very notion of universals.

The barriers of class difference collapse before Alexander Pope’s summary of existence, which in its fervour for universals is ready to sacrifice the inconsistencies provided by actual circumstances:

Condition, circumstance is not the thing;  
Bliss is the same in subject or in king,  
Heav’n breathes thro’ ev’ry member of the whole  
One common blessing, as one common soul.<sup>5</sup>

When unity or wholeness is the principle of truth, variation and difference become inessential and all circumstances and conditions tend to proceed towards sameness and harmony. The organic theory of Coleridge cited the ultimate form of poetry in “the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities”<sup>6</sup> in a brilliant diffusion of the poetic power, where unity binds dissimilarity in a single imaginative formula and the conflict and the disease, and the incomplete forms of the finite world are absorbed by the ultimate beauty of truth and infinity. The euphoric visions of Wordsworth based on his experience of the English country side, apparently, does not take into consideration the presence of more

hostile habitats and less agreeable landscapes. These discourses suffer from an inability to look beyond the horizon of their own civilization. The horror of the World War I failed to exercise the ghost of the universal. The writings of the time reflect the terminal despair of a civilization that cannot escape its own doom. The world became a trap and the immensity of their horror could not conceive the limits of this predicaments. As stated by Jonathan Dollimore in Beyond Essentialist Humanism:

It is sustained now by two surrogate universals – the absurdity of the human condition and (once again) consciousness as the grid of a determining absence, the latter now so powerfully conditioning experience and knowledge as to function as a kind of inverted Kantian category of consciousness... Texts like Waiting for Godot do indeed sustain these surrogate universals though only by collapsing them almost entirely into the subject where they survive not as the forms of unchanging truth but of an etiolated suffering stasis.<sup>7</sup>

The universal is instituted in Ezekiel's writing through the presence of ideas that posit the urban situation as an abstract predicament characterized by a common network of conditions. The urban situation defines a condition of existence, which in contemporary writings, signified a total subversion of human values by forces which were alarmingly unifying and transforming the world of man into an urban space. The urban system could nourish only the material needs of man and led conversely to an emaciation of man's inner being. The urban as a modern structure,

signifies a spatial and semantic profusion that is quite incompatible with its traditional definition and amounts to a social crisis. The city in this context acquires an inseparable predominance over man's existence and relegates the rural and the natural to the corner of man's being. The urban system is, of course, as old as human civilization, but after the industrial revolution, it had assumed a significance that can be comprehended only in terms of a crisis, since it creates a break between the present and its past and is for that matter also modern.

The term modern can be used here to emphasize a repression of the old, a decimation of traditional modes of being and the emergence of a present that refers to its past as a distinct history that signifies its difference. Contemporaneity, as defined by Anglo-American Modernists, can be used to designate a specific stage of human civilization where certain established relations between man and (his) environment, the self and (its) existence had to be rethought; where existence and environment revealed conditions and characteristics that contradicted certain basic assumptions about man's origin, nature and destiny. The forces of urbanization and the process as a whole affected man's existence in areas where the city as a structure did not physically exist. The city no longer

simply represented a specific economic and industrial area but symbolized the home of modern man in general.

Such a view, however, cannot describe the entire human population. Modernity, itself, can be interpreted as a specific outlook, a specific ethos, a specific condition associated with the experience and knowledge of writers living within a determinate cultural area. It seems propitious to situate this phenomenon within the social and economic reality of the West. Though, as a particular way of life, as a specific way of theorizing and viewing the world, the modern overlaps into other times and cultures, historically it remains a distinct western phenomenon.

Within English literature, the modern can be more or less associated with a consciousness that tries to discover itself and its 'present' in the absence or disavowal of tradition and a past that has been irretrievably severed from its memory. The city as a literary motif had acquired a significance of its own by the nineteenth century. With Dickens, a new reality began to take shape; the urban landscape begins to replace the benign landscape of romantic poetry, the issues become shabbier and the ideal is removed by more finite and more immediate social problems. It was the age of cooperatives and the solicitude and identity of the individual was lost in the urban crowd. As writers like Dickens and

Arnold, saw the world around them, man's environment, his place of work, his dwelling space was no longer edifying to his being, but has become a trap, a congestion of space, a devitalizing workshop from which escape and excursion was meaningless, if not altogether impossible, because this was the reality, the overwhelming, inescapable state of existence. Against the mechanical, scientific and material progress, writers like Dickens, Arnold, Ruskin and Carlyle saw an opposite decline in the life of sensibility, values, judgement and beauty. D.H. Lawrence writing on the urban system finds ugliness everywhere:

Now although perhaps nobody knew it, it was ugliness which really betrayed the spirit of man in the nineteenth century. The great crime which the moneyed classes and promoters of Industry committed in the palmy Victorian days was the condemning of the workers to ugliness: meanness and formless and ugly surroundings, ugly ideals, ugly religion, ugly hope, ugly love, ugly clothes, ugly furniture, ugly houses, ugly relationship between workers and employers. The human soul needs actual beauty even more than bread.<sup>8</sup>

In the writings of others like W.B. Yeats the sense of emptiness remains undiminished. as the tradition continues, the scene becomes gloomier and consciousness disintegrates into "a thousand sordid images",<sup>9</sup> unable to relate the disjunctured shifting sequence of reality. The Modernist critique of the city finds existence a burden and the city a modern inferno, a barren land where society, religion, culture, knowledge,

and consciousness are deracinated, disintegrated and dead. Life goes on without all these, a meaningless process, an incorrigible monotony, a mechanical duty, an industrial routine. Unity, which had been the conventional basis of truth, breaks up into ambiguity, anonymity and anarchy.

The city, whether, as a landscape/locale/metaphor/construct of writing has been immersed for too long in the purgatorial vision of the centre. Deposits of imperial writings, traces of western signifiers permeate and pervade its architecture, its landscape, its health, its very anatomy, its very existence. Outside the western horizon, it accepts only an addition, a localization, a variation that cannot be dissociated from the modern western proposition in which it has been conceived. It looms over the literatures of the world like a monster that cannot be domesticated into a regional/local species. It is because of this inevitable, inescapable, irrepressible enormity that the urban system cannot perhaps be thought except as a modern predicament, a universal as manufactured by the West in global proportions. The global markets and its freemarket policy, the gigantic Information and Technology system seem to reinstate the universal as a social, historical, economic and municipal fact that

undermines the barriers of human diversity and claims all places and peoples as its unit.

A poetry nourished by the axioms and aesthetics of the centre could not evacuate its deposit of knowledge without excising a vital part of its own history and anatomy. But at the same time the 'transcendental pretence' implicit in the centre's world view as well as the universal clause attached by the centre to modern existence and the urban system could not have completely explained the complexity of existence as it existed in Ezekiel's environment and time. It seems appropriate to quote Niranjana Mohanty again:

It is true that we live in an age of information where the process of globalization has taken an unimaginable enormity. Yet because of the specificities attached to one region, it remains so different from the other regions so that the artist or the poet or the writer retains his or her distinction by adhering to and celebrating, albeit sceptically exposing, analysing these specificities of that particular region. Nissim Ezekiel has successfully tried to eke out such an identity in his poems written in Indian English.<sup>10</sup>

All the same, Ezekiel is also not exactly free from the hold of the centre. The sprawling city, Bombay, spreads before him like an irrepressible universal. He cannot expunge the western matrix from his perception of the city. He cannot view its hopelessness, its emptiness, its squalor except as the symptoms of a universal phenomenon. It places his

poetry in the tradition of discourses that institutionalizes universals. The centre claims its share from the periphery.

The subject in 'Urban' is trapped in the city:

The city like a passion burns  
 He dreams of morning walks, alone,  
 And floating on a wave of sand  
 But still his mind its traffic turns  
 Away from beach and tree and stone  
 To kindred clamour close at hand.

(Collected Poems 1952-1988; Delhi:  
 Oxford, 1989, p.117)

The universe shrinks into a city. It circumscribes his being. The word "alone", throws up the possibility of an escape into identity and selfhood: "He dreams of morning walks, alone, (117). But the city detains the mind; he cannot break the cycle of "kindred clamour close at hand", (117). The fixity of the urban system is relentless, it enmeshes the individual in its process. The same inevitability is described in 'Something to Pursue':

To save myself  
 From what the city had made of me, I returned  
 As intended to the city I had known.

(Collected Poems 1951-1988; Delhi:  
 Oxford, 1989, p.14)

Knowledge and experience are conditioned to a point where departure becomes impossible:

He knows the broken roads, and moves  
 In circles tracked within his head. (117)

Therefore “The hills are always far away”, (117) and “His landscape has no depth or height.” (117) It leads to a depreciation of the inner being or all that is considered most vital to man’s being. “Being” is defined not by the present (or presence) but by an absence. It is always, already expelled from existence or at the most represents a worn out space, since

His will is like the morning dew. (‘A Morning Walk’)  
 (Collected Poems 1951-1988; Delhi: Oxford,  
 1989, p.119)

His senses are dead:

At dawn he never sees the skies  
 Which, silently, are born again,  
 Nor feels the shadows of the night  
 Recline their fingers on his eyes.  
 He welcomes neither sun nor rain.  
 His landscape has no depth or height.  
 (Collected Poems 1951-1988; Delhi: Oxford,  
 1989, p.117)

The rhythms and processes of nature cease to have meaning in his existence. It leads to what Heidegger calls a “forgetting of being”.<sup>11</sup> Human being is in exile from his history and what remains of man is not an embodiment of humanness but a ceaseless evacuation of his history, tradition and truth. Human nature/condition in itself represented a specific relation between history, tradition and truth, which has been effaced by the history of modern man. Modern man is, therefore, a displaced being cut off

from his home without an identity, a faceless unit of the urban system. The environment is equally sterile; the elements are a part of this stasis:

The river which he claims he loves  
Is dry, and all the winds lie dead. (117)

“The view from basement rooms” (39) in ‘A Poem of Dedication’ focusses the myopia of a generation. Man is a mutilated organism, consigned to an existence that stifles his faculties. The “basement rooms” signify the constriction and congestion of the self, a reduction of the self in terms of space and significance. The limitation becomes so oppressive that consciousness closes around itself, the self cannot break away from the circuit of his diurnal, quotidian, municipal boundary. His world is reduced to:

A patch or two of green, a bit of sky  
Children heard but never seen, an old wall,  
Two trees, a washing line between, windows  
With high curtains to block the outward eye; (39)

The situation leads nowhere and the horror of such a survival rests not in an apocalyptic culmination or a sudden break. The horror is diurnal and worse for its plainness, it exists in the inexorable regularity, in the ceaseless repetition of “The ordinariness of most events” (138), a repetition that consumes hope and relief and elongates into despair. The city in ‘A Morning Walk’ with its architecture, its crowd, its occupations, its

transactions, its habitations, its street recur “like a tedious argument”,<sup>12</sup> the sameness is horrifying:

Barbaric city sick with slums,  
Deprived of seasons, blessed with rains,  
Its hawkers, beggars, iron-lunged,  
Processions led by frantic drums,  
A million purgatorial lanes,  
And child-like masses, many-tongued,  
Whose wages are in words and crumbs. (119)

The city is sick and the seasons do not bring change. There is no rebirth, no respite, the pain is a part of existence; it is a modern inferno.

The pain abides in sex and conjugation:

However many times we came  
Apart, we came together. The same  
Thing over and over again. (124)

The disintegration is irreparable, the sterility is terminal. The self cannot emerge out of the prison of his own consciousness. Communication and communion is not possible.

According to ‘Nothingness’, only in nothingness there is reconciliation, because it frees the self from the burden of living. The curves of existence enchain and enmesh the self in the modern city. The narrative of living is composed of:

The impulse and the fear of love,  
Small ambition sick at the roots, (50)

“dissolution”, “twenty thousand abysses”, “the turth/of nothingness, mortality”. If there is any pattern, that is absurdity and nothingness. ‘Sotto Voce’ suggests that life is incompleteness, imperfection and “Desires are half-desires”, (52) and love is unconsummated. This fact can be communicated only through the “fragments of a poem”, the “broken limbs” of poetry, scattered and diffused which “cannot make a man”. ‘For Her’ shows that even “A Knowing Creature” (67), someone really reliable, helpful and sympathetic cannot involve the whole self, cannot restore the coherence and identity of the self. The self wasted in the modern city without roots, without history, without identity in a present that continually alienates and displaces him. The self is elusive, fragmentary and disjointed and marriage, sex and friendship cannot redeem his wholeness.

All these add up to no end, no mitigation, no transformation; it only adds up to a despairing knowledge, that places nothingness at the bottom of existence:

he knew  
That everything would be the same. (120)

OR

It seems that nothing changes, nothing grows, (39)

Nothingness seems to be the common feature of all cities, a sort of surrogate universal that ultimately reduces the existence of modern man into uniformity. The city in Ezekiel’s writings embodies an ideal, a

prototype into which the plurality of “cities” are being transfused, suppressed and lost. It gathers into itself the monotony of truth. The conditions of existence that it describes, the emptiness, the morbidity, the squalor, the stagnation, the disintegration, the chaos seem to be the inseparable constant of every city; they recur like postulates of an absolute precondition that pre-empts, mediates and determines each instance, each manifestation, each writing of the urban condition.

This aspect of Ezekiel’s writing affiliates him to discourses that viewed the urban phenomenon in universal, absolute terms. But the complexity of the East-West relationship places his poetry in quite a different plane by itself. His poems acknowledge the urban reality posited by western literatures but there is also the awareness that regional circumstances disrupt the seeming universality of their vision. Amidst the universal nothingness that pervades his urban poems there are evident gaps, moments of release, glimpses of hope that seem to mitigate the given totality of the colonizer’s world-view. In ‘A Poem of Dedication’ after enacting a circle of nothingness around itself:

Suddenly the mind is loosed of chains  
 And purifies itself before the warm  
 Mediterranean, which fills the veins,  
 To make the body beautiful and light –  
 Heaviness of limbs or soul can mimic calm –  
 I close the eyes to see with better sight. (39)

The residual irreconcilability between the centre and the periphery clearly comes out in 'In India':

The wives of India sit apart.  
They do not drink,  
They do not talk,  
Of course, they do not kiss. (133)

Such differences, however, do not wholly exempt the region from its affinity with the centre. But in their own way these incompatibilities expose the limits of the colonizer's theory, they reduce its scope and identify areas where the invader failed to leave his mark. For a poet trying to assert his own voice, the presence of such gaps is cause for defiance and joy, it provides him with materials to exhibit the specificities of his own region. As Niranjana Mohanty writes:

Ezekiel, living "among the beggars  
Hawkers, pavement sleepers,  
Hutment dwellers, slums,  
Dead souls of men and gods,  
Burnt-out mothers, frightened  
Virgins" ... in the island  
"unsuitable for song as well as sense"  
and watching the monkey-show on Bombay's streets  
where "only the monkeys are sad" and where "some  
in shame, part  
With the smallest coin they have" has in the process learnt  
how to endear the city, hold on to its diverse electrifying  
facets of survivalism.<sup>13</sup>

This is a departure from the universal perimeters of the city and an identification with the actual and diverse conditions of city life in Bombay.

The limitations of the colonizer's view about urbanization and modern man are evident in the Indian context. The social and religious life of India provides enough diversity and differences to counteract the supposed universality of the centre's world-view. It can be said here that within the social, religious and cultural context of India, the conditions of existence were perhaps not as decaying and dehumanizing as in English or Western cities. Spiritual morbidity and psychic desiccation were symptoms not exactly relevant to the Indian situation. If rootlessness and displacement was the common scourge of capitalist cities, perhaps, in India, the roots of society and culture were rather too deep and old. Orthodoxy and conformity to established rules and customs were having the opposite effect in Indian societies. If the loneliness and incommunicability of the individual in modern societies was becoming unbearable due to the disintegration of common beliefs and codes, in Ezekiel's society "the question of the individual ranged against establishment assumes a sharp and strident note" because "the poet has to cross the hurdles set by code ethics, or grapple with fossilized tradition."<sup>14</sup> At the moment when Ezekiel scripted these poems (A Time to Change to The Exact Name) there was a vast difference in the political atmosphere of the West and India. India was romancing with its new identity as a nation and experiencing the immensity of nationhood, a new feeling, because for

the first time in its long history, all of this diverse subcontinent was being stitched together into such a big whole.

Depression, malaise, entropy or ennui scarcely seem to have been part of the consciousness of a new political community initiated into independence. The socio-cultural relations were relatively static. The adoption of a western style political edifice, did not bring about much actual change in the social and cultural life of India. India still lived in its villages. Urbanization affected only a small section of Indian society. Continuity was still an impressive characteristic of Indian culture. The political upheaval and the long history of invasions had failed to shake institutions, such as the caste system, the family structure, and marriage laws – some of them thousands of years old. Rituals and rites, customs and codes were essential and vital to an individual's being. Of course, it is not appropriate to attribute a person with individual freedom and autonomy in the Indian context. The history and civilization of India does not sanction such a meaning and concept. The concept of a secular human condition, extricated from social and religious antecedents appears anomalous and alien within the tradition of India. Humanitarianism, equalitarianism and secularism are not traditional Indian values. Legal systems were established to sustain the interest of privileged social and religious groups.

Inequality is an integral part of Indian social life. Values could not be conceived outside the established codes of religion. The self's function and value were inextricably linked with religious destiny and origin. A woman's social importance contained in progenition. Sex and marriage had explicit social purpose. Marriage was not solely a union of individuals but an equation involving familial, racial and caste interests.

The paradigm of Indian civilization, strictly speaking, did not recognise the individual site, as a self-determining and autonomous entity. So the problems that arises at the individual level in Ezekiel's poetry the "I" that suffers in his poems, the consciousness that addresses and articulates the predicament of the individual falls outside the tradition of India. His poetry contains a way of seeing, a way of writing that privileges the individual in a sense that is not historically provided for by his native space.

The idea of the individual is itself a culturally limited term. It represents an idea, a discovery, a space made possible by certain specific relations involving definite economic, social, religious, political factors and events that were limited to Europe. In his study of Renaissance or the city states of fifteenth century Italy Jacob Burckhardt finds in this period, as Tony Davis writes:

The development of a universal capacity to think of yourself, in a fundamental way, as an individual: not as Florentine or Marseilles or a sailor or Roman Catholic or somebody's daughter and grand-daughter, important though all these affiliations might be, but as a free-standing self-determining person with an identity and a name that is not simply a marker of family, birth place or occupation but is 'proper' – belonging to you alone.<sup>15</sup>

The notion of the individual, is more or less a typical bourgeois discovery; the bourgeois revolution of modernity, as a matter of fact, developed exclusively in the west.

Such a condition did not exist in India. Its history does not provide any combination of circumstances, events or developments that would have been congenial to “the development of a universal capacity to think of yourself, in a fundamental way, as an individual”.<sup>16</sup> The story of the “individual” a complete being, a Christopher Columbus, a Don Quixote or an Odysseus, going out for adventure and survey in hope of glory and discovery, returning back in time, a Prufrock or a Godot, disillusioned to find himself alone, incommunicable, rootless and lost in a modern purgatory is irrelevant in the context of Indian history and culture. The concept of the “individual”, perhaps confronts a crisis of meaning outside the history of Europe. The autonomy of the individual, his inviolable difference is not possible within the traditional framework of Indian thought. The accumulated network of communal, religious, familial and

other inherited affiliations outweigh a person's supposed individual priorities. As it has been already said, the individual consciousness, the self, that is aware of its own individual priorities and obligations is a foreign tissue transplanted into the writing of Ezekiel. It is an accumulation, a development in a mind exposed for too long to the expectations, reading habits, attitudes, demeanors, views and vocabulary of the colonizer. The colonizer introduced a network of schools, markets, industries, jobs, technologies and laws in its colonies, which led to the colonization of the centre's worldview in these areas.

The respective condition of existence in India and the west reveals the incompatibility of tradition and modernity. In one, tradition represents a continuous whole and in the other tradition is subjected and appropriated by the forces of modernism. The post-colonial space, it can be said here, represents the various temporary encounters between tradition and modernism. Post-colonial writings build themselves by ceaselessly eroding the supposed wholeness as well as the disparity of both these cultures. It seeks to view existence in the context of the cultural hybridity that has consumed the identity of both traditional and modern societies and is a more appropriate term to describe the condition of existence in the erstwhile colonies.

It must be said here, that post-colonial writing does not describe a strict dichotomy between the colonizer's worldview and native discourses. The colonizer's worldview does not come to the post-colonial poet as a unified whole. It represented a dubious battleground of several theories and it was only obvious that the ideological battles fought at the centre reverberated to the periphery. Further, poets like Ezekiel saw before them a new reality, which was disrupting the traditional values and establishments of his own region.

In 'In India', the celebration at "the year's end", foreign mannerisms and styles, however slightly, intrude the atmosphere of the party:

The men are quite at home  
among the foreign styles  
(What fun the flirting is!)  
I myself, decorously,  
press a thigh or two in sly innocence.  
The party is a great success.  
(Collected Poems, p.133)

At the same time, the transformation is not quite complete:

The wives of India sit apart.  
They do not drink,  
they do not talk,  
Of course, they do not kiss.  
(Collected Poems, p.133)

Here two different cultures are engaged in a strange company. The linguistic corruption is beautifully expressed in 'Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.':

Friends  
our dear sister  
is departing for foreign  
in two three days  
and  
we are meeting today  
to wish her bon voyage. (p.190)

Even in 'Background Casually' where Ezekiel states his decision to remain in his backward place, the 'foreign' intervenes his consciousness and the foreign audience is taken for granted: "To be observed by foreigners". (181)

It was not only a change in perspectives and literary style but also a change in the socio-economic reality of India. In his works the given tradition and culture of his native civilization are not simply taken for granted. They are being subjected to a vigorous process of reassessment and review. Around him the existing institutions, knowledge, technology, values and beliefs revealed if not the facets of modernism itself, at least, its effects in a new dispersion of conformity and change, which was neither exactly modern nor traditional but could be more appropriately indicated by the word modernization which signifies a process of change, a

compromise between the forces of modernism and the traditional institutions. M.N. Srinivas in Social Change in Modern India defines modernization as:

A popular term for the changes brought about in a non-western country by contact, direct or indirect, with a western country is “modernization” ... “modernization” includes a “disquieting positive spirit” touching “public institutions as well as private aspirations”. But the positivist spirit is not enough, a revolution in communications is essential. Modernization is also marked by increasing urbanization which has, in turn, resulted in the spread of literacy. The latter again has tended to enhance “media exposure” and finally enhanced media exposure is associated with wider economic participation (voting). Modernization also implies social mobility: “A mobile society has to encourage rationality for the calculus of choice shapes individual behaviour and conditions its rewards. People come to see the social future as manipulated rather than ordained and their personal prospects in terms of achievement rather than heritage”.<sup>17</sup>

This did not amount to an obliteration of the old ways of survival, it only represented one of the many facets of the new reality which consisted not in the institutionalization of one value or system but a dispersion of several colours, several views, several customs, several traditions, several changes. In such a diffusion of facts and theories there can be no simple binaries or opposites: the past-present, tradition-modernity, east-west, centre-periphery, non-native-native antitheses are endlessly disturbed and distorted by shifting temporary relations. Reality is subverted by realities and unity by plurality. Further, this phenomenon is confined not to the

centre or periphery as culturally, politically, economically discrete conditions but exhibit a multi-dimensional reality that engages the centre and periphery, culture and cultures, economy and economies, country and countries, state and states, people and peoples in one common global condition.

The stasis described in 'A Poem of Dedication', 'Urban', 'A Morning Walk' is of a nature which cannot be attributed to a specific city. It is the system of a new global phenomenon. One can find such description in many western texts:

You tossed a blanket from the bed,  
 You lay upon your back, and waited;  
 You dozed, and watched the night revealing  
 The thousand sordid images  
 Of which your soul was constituted  
 (Collected Poems 1909-1962; London:  
 Faber & Faber, 1963, pp.23-24)

The diversity, the incoherence, the temporariness regroups, however diffusedly, in one hybridity, in one dispersion, in one difference, in a new world system that is in its own uniform. David Murdoch describes this as follows:

We must also pay attention to the cultural hybridity that is the natural feature of post-colonial writing and that has become one of the most-characteristic features of the modern world itself.<sup>18</sup>

The barriers of culture and country collapse only to reintroduce a new culture that includes the dispersion of culture and history in a new uniformity that transfuses particulars into a new universal relation. At the back of this phenomenon is what Adorno calls the “massification of culture”,<sup>19</sup> the “progressively conscious participation of the masses in public life”,<sup>20</sup> the “technical development of machinery”<sup>21</sup> and the “shallowing of intellectual life”,<sup>22</sup> which leads to a reduction of the “I”, the cause of individuality. A decisive event in this development were the two world wars. According to Milan Kundera:

Suddenly in our century, the world is closing around us. The decisive event in that transformation of the world into a trap was surely the 1914 war, called (for the first time in history) a world war, wrongly ‘world’. It involved only Europe and not all of Europe at that. But the adjective ‘world’ expresses all the more eloquently the sense of horror before the fact that henceforward, nothing that occurs on the planet will be a merely local matter, that all catastrophes concern the entire world, and that consequently we are becoming more and more determined by external conditions, by situations that no one escape and that more and more make us resemble each other.<sup>23</sup>

This is where geographical, political and cultural diversity ceases to have meaning.

In a fast unifying world, Bombay, perhaps as a centre of hectic economic activity was already, increasingly, becoming a part of this reductive, generalizing process during the time in which these works were

produced. In Rushdie's words, "Bombay was central. In Bombay, as the old, founding myth of the nation faded, the new god-and-mammon India was being born."<sup>24</sup> The social and economic condition here, unlike in the rest of the country was perhaps complex enough to approximate the urban decay of the West without much incongruity.

The writings of Ezekiel are to a considerable extent the peculiar product of the urban matrix that was Bombay. As economic and commercial development has a way of diminishing difference and collapsing barriers, the attribution of urbanity and its problems to Bombay, serves to emphasize the universalizing and unifying state of "contemporaneity" or modernity, to which industry and commerce can lead. This is accompanied by a necessary reduction of man's role and perhaps his exclusion from the process of change and development. This leads to the effacement of the essential characteristics of man from the story of existence. The structure of existence is fast reconstructed along lines laid down by the commercial and industrial system. And it can be stated that this condition was becoming global, common and universal in an alarming rate.

So, while including existence as an integral aspect of his concept of the self, Ezekiel had to consider all these changing conditions which

determined the position, nature and value of the self in his immediate environment.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Mohanty, Niranjan. "The Post-Colonial Gesture: Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel" in Pandey, Surya Nath, Writing in a Post-Colonial Space (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 1999) 25.

<sup>2</sup> Mohanty, Niranjan. "The Post-Colonial Gesture: Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel" in Pandey, Surya Nath, Writing in a Post-Colonial Space (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 1999) 24.

<sup>3</sup> Dollimore, Jonathan, "Beyond Essentialist Humanism", 1984, in Barry, Peter, Issues in Contemporary Critical Theory (London: Macmillan, 1987) 41.

<sup>4</sup> Dollimore, Jonathan, "Beyond Essentialist Humanism", 1984, in Barry, Peter, Issues in Contemporary Critical Theory (London: Macmillan, 1987) 45.

<sup>5</sup> Dollimore, Jonathan, "Beyond Essentialist Humanism", 1984, in Barry, Peter, Issues in Contemporary Critical Theory (London: Macmillan, 1987) 45.

<sup>6</sup> Coleridge, S.T. "From Biographia Literaria" in Das, B.B. and J.M. Mohanty, Literary Criticism: A Reading (Walton Street: Oxford University Press, 1985) 52.

<sup>7</sup> Dollimore, Jonathan, "Beyond Essentialist Humanism", 1984, in Barry, Peter, Issues in Contemporary Critical Theory (London: Macmillan, 1987) 47.

<sup>8</sup> Klingopulos, G.D. "Notes on the Victorian Scene" in Ford, Boris, The New Pelican Guide to English Literature Vol.6 (London: Penguin, 1982) 15-16.

<sup>9</sup> Eliot, T.S. Collected Poems 1909-1962 (London: Faber and Faber, 1963) 23-24.

<sup>10</sup> Mohanty, Niranjana. "The Post-Colonial Gesture: Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel" in Pandey, Surya Nath, Writing in a Post-Colonial Space (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 1999) 26.

<sup>11</sup> Kundera, Milan, The Art of the Novel - Trans. by Asher Linda (London: Faber and Faber, 1986) 4.

<sup>12</sup> Eliot, T.S. Collected Poems 1909-1962 (London: Faber and Faber, 1963) 13.

<sup>13</sup> Mohanty, Niranjana. "The Post-Colonial Gesture: Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel" in Pandey, Surya Nath, Writing in a Post-Colonial Space (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 1999) 27.

<sup>14</sup> Singh, Satyanarain, 'Journey into Self': Nissim Ezekiel's Recent Poetry in Shahave, Vasant and Sivaramakrishna, M. Indian Poetry in English: A Critical Assessment (Delhi: Macmillan, 1980) 50.

<sup>15</sup> Davies, Tony, Humanism (London: Routledge, 1997) 16.

<sup>16</sup> Davies, Tony, Humanism (London: Routledge, 1997) 14.

<sup>17</sup> Srinivas, M.N. Social Change in Modern India (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1966) 53.

<sup>18</sup> Mohanty, Niranjana. "The Post-Colonial Gesture: Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel" in Pandey, Surya Nath, Writing in a Post-Colonial Space (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 1999) 24.

<sup>19</sup> Davies, Tony, Humanism (London: Routledge, 1997) 54.

<sup>20</sup> Davies, Tony, Humanism (London: Routledge, 1997) 55-56.

<sup>21</sup> Davies, Tony, Humanism (London: Routledge, 1997) 55.

<sup>22</sup> Davies, Tony, Humanism (London: Routledge, 1997) 56.

<sup>23</sup> Kundera, Milan, The Art of the Novel - Trans. by Asher Linda (London: Faber and Faber, 1986) 27.

<sup>24</sup> Rushdie Salman, The Moon's Last Sigh (London: Vintage, 1996) 351.

### Chapter-III

## REDIFINING THE SELF

It has been suggested in the preceding chapter that Ezekiel's concept of the self is entangled in the post-colonial dialectics of his own poetry (which includes his study of his environment and his culture in his understanding of the self). The East-west ambivalence is treated as a relevant context of the self, since it informs his analysis of the self. This chapter while including the post-colonial subject goes beyond it to approach his concept of the self as an abstract construct which is available to the reader only as a rewriting of other texts and that is why it has been described as a redefinition of the self. The post-colonial effort itself cannot escape the circuit of theories, which operates as an inevitable given.

Ezekiel's treatment of the self introduces the reader to an artifact, where a supposed origin or model has no light, no presence, no meaning. The self that he creates and presents in his writing has already been recognized and discovered by other writings; what he contributes is only a re-analysis and readjustment of these given ideas. In the epigraph to 'The Unfinished Man' (1960), he presents the self as an unfinished process/entity.

A living man is blind and drinks his drop.  
What matter if the ditches are impure?

What matter if I live it all once more?  
 Endure that toil of growing up;  
 The ignominy of boyhood; the distress  
 Of boyhood changing into man;  
 The unfinished man and his pain  
 Brought face to face with his own clumsiness  
 - Yeats.

(Collected Poems 1952-1988; Delhi:  
 Oxford, 1989, p.115)

Yeats' text is already incorporated in the poems of this collection and so are the traces of other contemporary writings equally legible in these poems. Poems such as 'Urban', 'A Morning Walk' and 'Event' views the self as a tormented area, deadened by extraneous conditions and patterns. The subject in 'Urban'

never sees the skies  
 which, silently, are born again.  
 Nor feels the shadows of the night  
 Recline their fingers on his eyes.  
 His landscape has no depth or height.  
 (Collected Poems 1952-1988; Delhi:  
 Oxford, 1989, p.117)

In 'A Morning Walk'

Alone, he waited for the sun  
 And felt his blood a sluggish stream.  
 (Collected Poems 1952-1988; Delhi:  
 Oxford, 1989, p.119)

In 'Event' the body and the mind are two irreconcilable entities.

The self is disintegrated

Remote from the exploring act  
 I knew that both were undefined,

Who lived in day-dreams, not in fact,  
 Reflections of the cheated mind.  
 (Collected Poems 1952-1988; Delhi:  
 Oxford, 1989, p.123)

This image of the self can be equated with many of the death-in-life conditions described in Eliot's poetry.

In 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', it is the evening of a civilization:

Let us go then, you and I,  
 When the evening is spread out against the sky  
 Like a patient etherised upon a table;  
 (Collected Poems 1909-1962; London:  
 Faber and Faber, 1963, p.13)

In 'Gerontion', the desiccation of the old man shows the plight of a generation:

Here I am, an old man in a dry mouth,  
 Being read to by a boy, waiting for rain.  
 I was neither at the hot gates  
 Nor fought in the warm rain  
 Nor knee deep in the salt marsh, heaving cutlass,  
 Bitten by flies, fought.  
 My house is a decayed house,  
 And the Jew squats on the window-sill, the owner,  
 Spawned in some estaminet of Antwerp,  
 Blistered in Brussels, patched and peeled in London.  
 The goat coughs at night in the field overhead;  
 Rocks, moss, stonecrop, iron, merds.  
 The woman keeps the kitchen, makes tea,  
 Sneezes at evening, poking the peevish gutter.  
 I an old man,  
 A dull head among windy spaces.  
 (Collected Poems 1909-1962; London:  
 Faber and Faber, 1963, p.39)

Ezekiel's text like Eliot's, also includes the study of the environment to emphasize the predicament of the self. The self functions as an area, which is constantly being determined by the urban stasis. In 'Urban'.

The city like a passion burns.  
 He dreams of morning walks, alone,  
 And floating on a wave of sand.  
 But still his mind its traffic turns  
 Away from beach and tree and stone  
 To kindred clamour close at hand.  
 (Collected Poems 1952-1988; Delhi:  
 Oxford, 1989, p.117)

These texts addresses a civilization in disarray; in 'Commitment' "our bridges burnt ..." and "The fog is thick, and men are lost". The pilgrimage in 'Enterprise' shows the journey of a disappointed civilization toward hope and revelation. In 'A Morning Walk' it is a

Barbaric city sick with slums  
 Deprived of seasons, blessed with rains  
 Its hawkers, beggars, iron-lunged,  
 Processions led by frantic drums,  
 A million purgatorial lanes,  
 And child-like masses, many-tongued,  
 Whose wages are in words and crumbs.  
 (Collected Poems 1952-1988; Delhi:  
 Oxford, 1989, p.119)

Perhaps, this is the only way in which his poetry could view the self and its environment. His writing is a part of the contemporaneity institutionalized by countless contemporary texts and at the same time, contemporaneity is itself a product of his writing. It is not something

beyond his writing, it is within his text and the countless other texts from which he derived it.

But it has been already said that Ezekiel believes in a human centre of the self. The predicament of the self in the contemporary matrix does not reduce his belief in an essential human self. The search for an integrated human self is one of the main pre-occupations of his poetry. But even this idea of an essential self cannot be treated as the original self. It represents an idea whose relevance was being contested by other theories. It is another way of viewing man, positing in turn the perfect form of beauty and truth. It is the man of Hamlet:

What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form, in moving, how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals!<sup>1</sup>

It is the original nature of man posited by Rousseau, whose given perfection was being destroyed by the accumulations of civilizations.

To trace the origin of Ezekiel's notion of the self one cannot go beyond these already written texts. Loosely, it can be stated that Ezekiel's concept of the self is affiliated to the various texts which can be categorised under the term humanism.

This is the form in which the self stands, it cannot be pushed further back, beyond the intervention of already existing ideas. It is available only

through and as a medium. This is not because Ezekiel's writing is composed of one idea or the other which falls short of communicating the reality but because this is the only way in which reality can be transcribed. It only emphasizes the inherent limitations of texts. The text is not a window to a world beyond its borders; it is not a reflection, a symbol or a metaphor, "the mechanisms of the text, the ways in which it is constantly constructing, editing, ordering and juxtaposing its effects"<sup>2</sup> endlessly refer back to itself. It is the end of the road, there is no beyond. The beyond is a product "of what Derrida calls "the exigent, powerful, systematic and irrepressible desire" for a transcendent signified."<sup>3</sup> The text itself is present at all levels only as

Allegory rather than symbols;  
 Fancy rather than Imagination;  
 Metonymy rather than Metaphor;  
 Grammar rather than rhetoric;  
 (Denis Donoghue, "Epireading and  
 Graphireading", 1981, in Barry, Peter,  
Issues in Contemporary Criticism, p.57).

It anticipates and cuts short all routes to a supposed original, an unwritten set of events or reality that is simply there outside and without the system of writing. The supposed actuality is a logo centric present against which there is only temporary disposable truths. It is a dream as old as man, a product of logo centric metaphysics, which established the

authority of both man and truth. It is necessary here perhaps to introduce certain delimiting clauses to the concept of man. Michel Foucault writes:

As the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing the end.<sup>4</sup>

The truth about man, his understanding about himself and his world is itself entangled in the dialectics of theories that can be read as metaphors and illusions and no more. Truth itself is a norm invented and advanced by man and nothing more. Nietzsche's critique of western metaphysics deserves mention here:

What then is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymics, anthropomorphisms – in short, a sum of human relations which, poetically and rhetorically intensified, became transposed and adorned, and which after long usage by a people seem fixed, canonical and binding on them. Truths are illusions which one has forgotten are illusions, worn-out metaphors which have become powerless to affect the senses. (Tony Davies, Humanism, London: Routledge, 1997, pp.36-37)

Although post-structuralist and deconstructionist theories themselves are not exempt from the charge of making total claims, it can be at least said for their theories, that in their scepticism they expose the limitations of theories that make total claims and especially the inconsistencies, gaps and aporias of the logo centric bourgeois ideology which has become almost inseparable from the study of man and his civilization. Using a post-structuralist commonplace, it can be said that no

single concept can fire an ultimate meaning to the self. Also the promise of a true self is misleading. The notion of a true self, which is simply there eluding the grasp of theories, representing a residual mystery, is apparently a myth and itself a concept with its own limitations. Concepts, theories, ideas and impressions are themselves the accidents and effects of thought processes, which are neither original nor lead to any absolute truth. As no concept of the self can defy and begin and proceed without and outside the structurality of language and the whole system of communications, concepts, it can be said, are only being written/rewritten/unwritten. Poetry and for that matter all literary productions necessitates and makes inevitable, interaction at all levels and a denial of this interactive complexity leads to denial of the very mechanism of art. At all its levels it is intertwined and enmeshed in a system of writing which cannot be reduced to and traced back to an unwritten, non-linguistic, non-literary source. The mechanism of art itself, its preoccupations, its endless play, its endless affiliations obfuscate transcendence and truth. Roland Barthes' theory about text (in The Death of the Author) can be quoted here:

In the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be disentangled, nothing deciphered; the structure can be followed, 'run' (like the thread of a stocking) at every level, but there is nothing beneath; the space of writing is to be ranged over, not pierced.

(Barry Peter, Issues in Contemporary Criticism, London: Macmillan, 1987, p.54)

There is no luxury of transcendence and theology, there is only pattern, design and structure. There is no central, reassuring hypostasis, essence or God.

The main assumption of this chapter is that Ezekiel's concept of the self as an element of his poetry does not represent a substantial entity. It is enmeshed in a theoretical circuit that only returns and leads to other theories. Hence it is being proposed that his concept is a redefinition of the self, one of the many temporary combinations of ideas in the progression of theories. The complex relation between native and non-native discourses as a fall-out of colonialism has already been emphasized. It is surmised in this chapter that a humanist perspective inheres his poetry in the form of an unquestionable adherence to the notion of essence; the bourgeois obsession to a "transcendent signified" permeates his poetry.

The belief in an eternal human nature or a "transcendent signified" inspires his journey motifs. Bruce King writes about A Time to Change:

The subject is a mind tormented by awareness of following false gods, disgusted by continuing restlessness while desiring stability, quiet, discipline, purpose, order.

(Bruce King, Modern Indian Poetry in English, p.92)

The corruption that the subject encounters in London is countered against an essential code which consists in owning:

a singing voice and a talking voice,  
 A bit of land, a woman and a child or two,  
 Accommodated to their needs and changing moods  
 And patiently to build a life with these;  
 A bit of land, a woman and a child or two  
 Accommodated to their needs and changing moods,  
 Practising a singing and a talking voice  
 Is all the creed a man of God requires.<sup>5</sup>

According to Bruce King, again:

In these early poems desire and imagination lead the mind  
 into unquietness; the quest is for a way which will offer  
 wholeness and bring such restlessness to an end.<sup>6</sup>

The restlessness and unquietness is expressed in the first stanza of  
the poem:

We who leave the house in April, Lord,  
 How shall we return?  
 Debtors to the whore of Love,  
 Corrupted by the things imagined  
 Through the winter nights, alone,  
 The flesh defiled by dreams of flesh,  
 Rehearsed desire dead in spring,  
 How shall we return?<sup>7</sup>

The return to wholeness and integrity of the self is however suspect. In simplicity and quietness, wholeness of the self has been institutionalized if by nothing atleast by common sense. The basic economics of shelter manhood and family cannot guarantee wholeness. It remains in the last analysis, a relation which has been institutionalized again as it seems by a particular point of view and a particular interpretation which has its own limitations. It is an absent code towards which the poet rallies his

existence. The disgust with the prevailing state of existence is ultimately compensated by a nostalgia and hope for an original state of existence, which had been, as it were, temporarily disrupted by the contingent forces of survival but not altogether dumped into oblivion. All originals however gather into a human centre. Judgement and values presuppose a human centre:

I am corrupted by the world, continually  
 Reduced to something less than human.  
 (Collected Poems 1952-1988, Delhi:  
 Oxford, 1989, p.7)

The human is the source of all essence, universals and truth. It is the whole, the completeness of this nature, which is left unnegotiated in relationship:

How much of me you leave untouched,  
 And yet you touch me well.  
 (Collected Poems 1952-1988; Delhi:  
 Oxford, 1989, p.67)

It is expressed in the spontaneous reaction of the mother, in 'Night of the Scorpion':

My mother only said:  
 Thank God the scorpion picked on me  
 and spared my children. (Collected Poems, p.131)

It is in such unwritten, uncorrupted areas of nature that Ezekiel seeks to find the essential self. Disappointed by the various intricacies of the self,

he resorts to a mere naming of things in The Exact Name. “The aim” in this collection, as Bruce King says “is not to explain but to make real by naming; by saying ‘common things’.”<sup>8</sup> The epigraph to The Exact Name (1965) reads:

Intelligence, give me  
 The exact name of things  
 Let my word be  
 The thing itself,  
 Newly created by my soul.  
 Through me may all those  
 Who have no knowledge of things reach them;  
 Through me may all those  
 Who have forgotten things reach them;  
 Through me may all those  
 Who even love things reach them...  
 Intelligence, give me  
 The exact name, and yours,  
 And his, and mine, of things!

- Juan Ramon Timenez

(Collected Poems 1952-1988, p.127)

However, this ordinariness is also not simply available. It requires a particular set of mind, a specific eye to discover it. Prior abstractions, prior generalisations, prior institutionalization intervene even at this seemingly natural/common level. In Philosophy he says:

What cannot be explained, do not explain.  
 The mundane language of the senses sings  
 Its own interpretations. Common things  
 Become, by virtue of their commonness,  
 An argument against the nakedness  
 That dies of cold to find the truth it brings.

(Collected Poems, p.129)

The mere withdrawal of explanation, however, does not make truth more obvious or real. What remains or emerges is also an abstract that cannot be outside and without language. Ezekiel seeks to find the human as a truth which is simply present outside and without the communicative process and he makes his comments and judgement upon life and survival on the basis of such an essence. But his view, his position, is also a construct of theories, a contribution of existing ideas and beliefs. In his works, a humanist ideology presides over, analyses, explicates and judges reality. The universal, essential fall-out of this ideology only attests the success of propagation, the strength of eloquence, the extent of influence of a school of thought that postulates that 'Man is the measure of all things.'<sup>9</sup>

The order, the potential that is posited at the heart of the self promotes the idea of a prototype, an essence that has been temporarily lost. Contingence and the present conceals it.

Significantly, for Ezekiel, the human designates not an ascetic rigidity, a flawless perfection, but is more importantly an emphasis on nature and essence which might in its own way be imperfect and twisted.

He does not

hanker for a wide, god-like range  
of thought, nor the matador's dexterity.

I do not want the yogi's concentration,  
 I do not want the perfect charity  
 Of saints nor the tyrant's endless power.  
 I want a human balance humanly  
 Acquired, fruitful in the common hour.  
 ('A Poem of Dedication', Collected  
 Poems 1952-1988, p.40)

A humanist norm presides in judgement over the corruptions of the world. The desiccation of human values is the shallowing of a humanist construct, a hierarchy which conceives man as "the measure of all things." The vision of a disintegrated amorphous self presupposes a prior integrity and behind the loss of identity is a pre-established notion of identity; the entrapment of the self in the modern inferno derives its signification from a humanist thesis of individual freedom. Such concepts as "humanness", "humanity", "wholeness" and "individuality" are themselves the products of theorisations which have become too rigid, too indispensable and too old to be questioned. They have fossilized into what can be called truth, the ultimate inevitable, unquestionable grounds or bases which later thinkings or discourses find too obvious to proceed without or defy.

The conflicts of life, tend to lead the poet towards nature and home, which stipulates an essential preordained code of ethics and survival. Behind the horror of corruption that haunts the city dweller in 'The Double Horror' is a fear of displacement from the womb, a nostalgic exclamation

for a desecrated essence, the helpless cry of the exile who dreams of an original home. In 'On Meeting a Pedant', the insubstantiality of the pedant's mind is exposed against a crystal clear vision of the substantial, sensual human world:

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.  
(Collected Poems, p.9)

This is an assertion of a nature, which has been prescribed by a tradition of thought which has associated the human with nature in an almost axiomatic reduction. It is the effect of an anthropocentric tradition that has codified human nature as the basis of truth. The absence of this supposed essence, the lack of spontaneous feelings dehumanizes the woman in 'An Affair'.

And then she said: I love you, just like this  
As I had seen the yellow blondes declare  
Upon the screen, and even stroked my hair.  
But hates me now because I did not kiss. (p.11)

Love is frustrated and in the court of nature the lovers stand condemned. In 'In Emptiness', the door is left open to nourish the human core of the self:

Acquainted with the intricate  
Bizarre movements of the heart  
Inopportune desire, resentment

Of a service rendered, I am  
 Waiting now in emptiness,  
 Annulled, cancelled, made a blank,  
 Resolved to find another way.

But this, I am sure, can never be:  
 That I should shut the door on gods  
 Who may exist or men who do,  
 Living in abstractions, hostile  
 To the human, shocked by the free,  
 And make no rendezvous with love –  
 I would rather suffer when I must.

(Collected Poems, p.11)

The human provisos are again reintroduced to fill up the emptiness of present conditions. The emptiness and abstraction is felt as the absence of human interaction and love, a repression of emotions and an emptying of “the house of words and music”.<sup>10</sup> The impoverishment of the present state of existence leads to a counter-image of existence which is fixed as the original state of existence, which is perhaps a nostalgic construct of the idea of balance:

Between the élan of desire  
 And the rational facilities.  
 (Collected Poems, p.12)

is a humanist construct which assigned the inner world of man with “design and colour”<sup>11</sup> and presented it as a paragon of beauty and perfection.

Ezekiel's view of man is summarised in 'Commitment':

Truly, I wish to be a man. Alone  
 Or in the crowd this is my only guide.  
 There is a world of old simplicities  
 To which my calling calls me, turbulence  
 Is stilled in it and slow understood,  
 Hearts of men are hearts of men, words have meanings,  
 Only good is praised, evil is condemned  
 Or forgiven, song and ceremony  
 Celebrate our flowing to appointed ends  
 And wisdom is not cautious fear but only love. (p.26)

The virtues that he associates with 'man' is a counterimage of the impoverished spiritual life that is described in the first stanza:

Truly, I am betrayed, consorting with  
 The world contracts my love, vast organised  
 Futilities suck the marrow from my bones  
 And put a fever there for cash and fame.  
 Huge posters dwarf my thoughts, I am reduced  
 To appetites and godlessness. 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.(p.26)

Association with the world results in the betrayal of the self, an evacuation of essence. This reduction of the self is viewed against a preconceived notion of man and a hierarchy of values which describe the human nature. The bestial meanness that lurks behind the human mask, the loveless soul, the feverish futility of a material existence, the monstrous distortion of his thoughts are seen as the degradation of an ideal life which

exists beyond this vicious cycle of contemporaneity. Identity, wholeness and essence are transported to an abstract non-present, which transcends as well as restitutes the deficiencies, deprivations and disappointments of a hostile present. In the “world of old simplicities” humanity is restored to the self. There is a sense of belonging, a sense of homecoming, the security and properness of home and nature, to “which my calling calls me;” moral balance is restored: “only good is praised, evil is condemned/or forgiven”; direction and purpose are restored: “song and ceremony/celebrate our flowing to appointed ends”; order is restored: turbulence/is stilled in it “and the emotions and feelings find their proper frequency: “Hearts of men are hearts of men”. But the self envisions the “world of old simplicities” only through a wish: “I wish to be a man.” It is a vision from what he conceives to be the prison house of modern man: the world, in its urban, dehumanized state/ambiguity. But the ideal world does not represent an unwritten world outside and without the system of writing. It bears the indelible traces of other writings that disperses the readers’ response to other texts and drowns the authorial voice in a chorus of other voices; his writing coalesces into a semantic profusion that only show the endless flicker of allusions, metaphors, metonymies, signs and symbols. As it is the text far from providing a medium to an objective world overwhelms the reader’s attention unto itself. The ‘world of old simplicities’ describe a

world where the writer's belief in human virtues seem to effect a vision based on values which have been institutionalized by countless humanist texts or texts which considered certain humanist constructs as given truths. The traces of other discourses cannot be repressed; they already always anticipate and mediate the writing and reading of the particular text.

In 'A Poem of Dedication' the sea is evoked as a "symbol of the free/Demoniac life within," and the "surface facts" are only repudiated to establish a principle of existence, which is perhaps readable only as a counter-image of the absurd surrounding which breeds a meaningless circle of existence. The world of the basement rooms is constructed only to illuminate all the more attractively a preconceived opposite which compensates the emptiness of contemporary existence. At the core of this opposite is

a human balance humanly  
Acquired, fruitful in the common hour. (p.40)

Organic growth ("Each season brings its own peculiar fruits")<sup>12</sup> is posited against the monotony of existence ("It seems that nothing changes, nothing grows").<sup>13</sup> The opposites are well-balanced to present all the more convincingly and nostalgically the absence of an ideal human condition.

The journey and quest motif is a frequent concern of Ezekiel's poetry. Bruce King writes:

Life is seen as a quest for wholeness, for intellectual and spiritual satisfaction, for maturity. While the aim is salvation of the spirit from distractions and obsessions, it is grounded in the physical and social. The quest essentially concerns how to live happily, calmly, ethically as an integrated human being.

(Modern Indian Poetry in English, p.92)

Many of his poems are journeys in search of ideality and wholeness.

In 'Enterprise' the journey does not yield any dawn, any discovery of an ontological cure-all:

When, finally, we reached the place,  
We hardly knew why we were there.  
The trip had darkened every face,  
Our deeds were neither great nor rare.

(Collected Poems, p.118)

But even in defeat and destitution, there is a belief in an essential order, a hidden identity, a potential wholeness that a renewed perspective can provide at home or in the here and now, in the very ordinariness of life, in "My backward place ... where I am." It is this hidden essence, it is this given order (it is this elusive poetry), the other part of the here and now, the eternal of the moment, the universal that is beyond the limited appearances that direct and give a purpose to existence, amidst the chaos and futility of modern existence. It is the centre, the transcendental telos whose inevitability (whose indispensability, whose totality) is acknowledged even in its absence.

But this ideal, this transcendence cannot be transcribed. It is always repressed, absent in the text which only reveals at all levels the absence of the author, the irrelevance of the I, the disintegration and diffusion of individual identity, the ceaseless evacuation of the "I" from the self. There is no final turn of the journey leading to an eternal dawn. There is no final moment of glory. It is dissipated in the intricacies of the play, in the labours of the journey. The conditions of existence do not derive from any original state of existence. There is no corruption of nature; there is only conditions and the plurality of experience.

The concept of the self proposed by Ezekiel is a system of theories which leads nowhere except to other theories and the endless tangle of theories.

His poetry as well as his views about poetry reveals the blend and clash of conflicting ideologies and positions. His view of poetry as summarized by Bruce King in Modern Indian Poetry in English "would seem to and does, put more emphasis on poetry as communication of insight and experience, expressed in concentrated precise forms." (p.78) Interestingly, while trying to reach at the formalistic rigour of pure poetry through the economy and precision, aesthetic distance and unified vision of the early-twentieth century poets, it appears as though Ezekiel also seeks to

reintroduce into his poetry the very things against whose excesses the Modernists reacted. Aesthetic distance implies distrust in the subjective nature of the self, as a result of which the self is treated as an object of study and not as something taken for granted. But in allowing self-knowledge, experience and insight into his poetry, he endangers the status of the impersonality in his poetry. Anglo-American Modernism had started as a movement away from the messiness of the human. T.E. Hulme dismissed any art expressive of human experience and aspirations as “slop and romanticism”<sup>14</sup> and instead called for an aesthetic of geometric impersonality. W.B. Yeats, in his own way abandoned “all that is too personal”<sup>15</sup> in favour of a poetry “cold and passionate as the dawn.”<sup>16</sup> T.S. Eliot insisted that “poetry is not the expression of personality, it is an escape from personality.”<sup>17</sup>

The impulse behind these Modernist outbursts betrays an authentic anti-humanism, a revulsion against the human. From their point of view the self is not seen as a unified entity, several cracks appear and it seems fragmentary, elusive and uncertain. This picture of the self conflicts with the humanist belief in an indivisible, reliable self. The opacity, the incommunicability, the mystery of the self is not the cause for a transcendent dream but an image of the inherent void. Irrationality implies

an absence of government and power, the demystification of the enlightened autocrat and the aridity and waste is due to a corruption at the centre, the sterility of the fisher king, a reduction of the self (a shallowing of the inherent and a transfer of power and meaning) to the external, non-self, non-human, non-essential, objective, mechanical, materialistic and scientific worlds. The self seems so inessential and temporary and mutable that its metamorphosis into non-human categories becomes a probable absurdity. It has been mentioned that the works of Ezekiel never descend into the extremities of such positions, but the pressure of these views, perhaps weigh heavily upon his writings, all the same. He has enough belief in the recuperative, redeeming potential of the human structure. But the fear of contamination, disintegration and loss of essentiality disrupts this belief.

Both the humanist and the anti-humanist views about the self can be seen as ideological constructs, edified by the ideas of certain schools and periods. As it is known, no theory or concept is complete by itself and the tangle of ideas and meanings hide origins and cuts off transcendence. Truth is a commodity which does not sell in this ideological, conceptual and theoretical market. There is no respite from ideas. In the absence of a single, undisputed image, no concept can be considered to be final, real or

total. Perhaps the desire for reality, truth or totality is irrelevant and the significance of concepts lie only in their design, in the combination of existing ideas and concepts, which are themselves the product of other ideas and concepts.

Ezekiel's concept of the self can be seen as a structure of ideas, which have both humanist and anti-humanist affiliations. In his works, aesthetic distance, objectivity and impersonality are observed side by side with a constant commerce between art and life. The search for a wholeness of being or the integration of the self is nothing but a narrative, which presupposes a humanist resolution. Consequently, an inherent tension is built into his poetry.

Given the complexity of modern existence, and the peculiarity of his own position, a wholesale adoption of humanism, in all its conventional, pre-war totality, would not have been appropriate. By the early twentieth century, humanism had ceased to be a dominant discourse in Western thought. Having occupied the Western mind for more than two centuries, it was dying the natural death of all theories. Besides, after the experience of the two World Wars, the conscience of Europe could have hardly tolerated it as a paradigm (by the laws of humanism itself). Also, because of his non-western origins, a re-adjustment according to immediate and local

conditions seemed necessary. It was rather because of his peculiar cultural position that he sought for a human point of reference in his schema of being. India, as a political unit was more or less outside the theatre of war and its experience of the monstrous side of man was of a less immediate kind. The Faustian megalomania of the Third Reich, the gothic horrors of the concentration camps and the post-war despair of Europe were, perhaps, not impressive enough to cause a revulsion against human nature. On the other hand, for one like Ezekiel, the concept of an identity and position undetermined by the differences of caste, colour, creed and clan and based on something as abstract, universal and accommodative as the human fact had its own attraction. His sense of alienation gets expressed in 'Background Casually':

I went to a 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.  
 I grew in terror of the strong  
 But undernourished Hindu lads. (p.179)

Amidst such a network of categories and compartments, a secular humanist superstructure seemed to provide security and space. These various issues added up to an exotic homespun humanism that had its own anti-humanist reservations. While his human subject represents an

etiolated, emaciated progeny of the humanist individual, his urban cityscape and its existential conditions do not give the picture of a twentieth century inferno. The mental state of his characters do not descend into an irredeemable state of despair. The suffering human subject is no longer reliable as a source of truth and meaning, as his status as a self-determining, autonomous entity has been devalorized by the anti-humanist discourse. As a result, the subjectivity of the individual human subject is replaced by an aesthetic distance and the individual consciousness becomes an object of study. But inspite of his Modernist commitments he retained a high value for the human. And even if his position does not give “the comfort of symmetry and system, there is the substance of life itself,”<sup>18</sup> the possibility of being “Asserted in the common dance.”<sup>19</sup> Abandonment into life is of course another illusion caught in the tangle of ideas and concepts. In the midst of this ideological deluge, it can be only said that Ezekiel’s poetry is an effort in another redefinition, another reconstruction and another reorganization of the self.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Davies, Tony, Humanism (London: Routledge, 1997) 98.
- <sup>2</sup> Barry, Peter, Issues in Contemporary Critical Theory (London: Macmillan, 1987) 12.
- <sup>3</sup> Tredell, Nicolas “Euphoria (Ltd) – The Limitations of Post-Structuralism and Deconstruction” in Barry, Peter, Issues in Contemporary Critical Theory (London: Macmillan, 1987) 94.
- <sup>4</sup> Davies, Tony, Humanism (London: Routledge, 1997) 35.
- <sup>5</sup> Paranjape, M. Indian Poetry in English (Madras: Macmillan India Limited, 1993) 107.
- <sup>6</sup> King, Bruce, Modern Indian Poetry in English (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987) 92.
- <sup>7</sup> Paranjape, M. Indian Poetry in English (Madras: Macmillan India Limited, 1993) 106.
- <sup>8</sup> King, Bruce, Modern Indian Poetry in English (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987) 99.
- <sup>9</sup> Davies, Tony, Humanism (London: Routledge, 1997) 123.
- <sup>10</sup> Ezekiel, Nissim, Collected Poems 1952-1988 (Delhi: Oxford, 1989) 11.
- <sup>11</sup> Ezekiel, Nissim, Collected Poems 1952-1988 (Delhi: Oxford, 1989) 11.
- <sup>12</sup> Ezekiel, Nissim, Collected Poems 1952-1988 (Delhi: Oxford, 1989) 39.

- <sup>13</sup> Ezekiel, Nissim, Collected Poems 1952-1988 (Delhi: Oxford, 1989) 39.
- <sup>14</sup> Davies, Tony, Humanism (London: Routledge, 1997) 48.
- <sup>15</sup> Davies, Tony, Humanism (London: Routledge, 1997) 48.
- <sup>16</sup> Davies, Tony, Humanism (London: Routledge, 1997) 48.
- <sup>17</sup> Davies, Tony, Humanism (London: Routledge, 1997) 48.
- <sup>18</sup> Karnani, Chetan, Nissim Ezekiel (New Delhi: Arnold Heinemann, 1974) 47.
- <sup>19</sup> Ezekiel, Nissim, Collected Poems 1952-1988 (Delhi: Oxford, 1989) 48.

## CONCLUSION

In this study, Nissim Ezekiel's poetry has been treated as a form of writing in which the poet studies, explores and in a way redefines the self as a construct of writing. It has been thought that Ezekiel's exploration of the self proceeds from certain basic assumptions of the self, which the poet believes, defines and tries to discover through the various situations and circumstances that he finds around himself. Existence is one of the problems, which is closely interlinked with the problem of the self, since existence is a very important process in which the various forms and aspects of the self are revealed and worked out.

In the first chapter, **The Concept of the Self**, Nissim Ezekiel's concept of the self, has been examined in the light of basic assumptions which have been treated as fundamental aspects of his study of the self. His belief in an essential self is being perpetually contested by an acute awareness of the existential process which provides instances of the self in which the idea of essence is being continually undermined by various extraneous factors and conditions.

The second chapter, **The Contexts of the Self**, explores Ezekiel's concept of the self as being placed within the post-colonial situation which

has been recognized as an integral feature of his poetry. As a result, Ezekiel's ideas become a part of this post-colonial whole, which circumscribes and determines his poetry. In this chapter, the ambivalent relation between the East and the West are being treated as relevant contexts of Ezekiel's idea of the self. The East and the West are referred to as two distinct cultural areas, where the native Indian space is the periphery of the western centre. However, the East and the West are present in Ezekiel's poetry not as two distinct, distinguishable areas. The interesting fact is, both these areas are involved in his poetry in a very ambivalent relationship. This ambivalence affects his writing in a way, which can only be categorized as a characteristic of a new reality, a new world system, where different cultural areas overlap each other in a new hybridity. Ezekiel's poetry has been placed within this new hybridity, where the East and the West are being redefined, restructured not only in the form of ideas and consciousness, but also in the form of political, social and economic realities.

Ezekiel proceeds with a belief in the essentiality of the self. But as he examines the self in the context of his social, political and cultural reality, he constantly encounters conditions and circumstances which context<sup>s</sup> his basic position. This is very much because of an awareness and

a frame of mind which has been exposed to western texts and ideologies. Especially, when Ezekiel studies his immediate city, Bombay, his mind is already affected by the viewpoints and attitudes which several writers in the western tradition has institutionalized in their study of their own cities. The city in his poems is, therefore, not only Bombay, but a construct which retains the traces of all these texts about the city. The city is also a symbol, a universal sign, as it is also an image of Bombay. This writing of the city is, therefore, referred to as a post-colonial text and it is being assumed that his concept of the self also is a part of this post-colonial text. Therefore, it is suggested that Ezekiel's concept of the self has certain contexts which it cannot avoid and transcend.

The third chapter, **Redefining the Self**, is an attempt to study Ezekiel's concept of the self as a text which inheres as it also cannot forego the given limitations of all other texts. The text as a phenomenon is seen as an abstract construct which follows an endless system of derivation that provides neither an origin nor an ultimate reality. Other texts and theories are cited which bears relevance with Ezekiel's text. Loosely speaking, Ezekiel's concept is seen as a compromise between the humanist and anti-humanist tradition of thought.

Ezekiel's poetry seeks to follow the impersonal style of poetry prescribed by Anglo-American Modernist antihumanist tradition which sought to withdraw from the pre-established human centre institutionalized by the humanist tradition. But certain humanist postulates are too deep-rooted in Ezekiel's poetry and he keeps proceeding towards a discovery of a solution, which inspite of all its complexity, retains an assurance in a human resolution of the self.

The problem of the self has been marked out as an area of study, because it has been considered to bear a crucial place in Ezekiel's poetry. Ezekiel has clearly stated his belief as a continuity between poetry and life. In 'Something to Pursue', he writes:

The answer is: There shall be no more questions,  
No more expenditure of doubt  
But only a limpid style of life  
Whose texture is poetry.

(Collected Poems 1952-1988, p.18)

Further in 'A Poem of Dedication', the interrelation between life and poetry is emphasized:

Both poetry and living illustrate  
Each season brings its own peculiar fruits.

(Collected Poems 1952-1988, p.39)

The self is one issue which interconnects these two areas and his concept of the self is integral or at least affects both his poetry and life.

The search for an identity and a wholeness of being is one of the main concerns of his poetry and it can be said that the poet hopes to find it in the self. And his answer is a view of the self, which is redefinition since it examines and recombines various other ideas and concepts about the self.

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