

T.S. Eliot and Nissim Ezekiel: Two Harbingers of Modernism in English Literature

Paper Submission: 15/10/2020, Date of Acceptance: 29/10/2020, Date of Publication: 30/10/2020



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Abstract

The birth of modernism in European art and culture in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was a definite outcome of a desire to break away from the traditional modes of expression in art forms and philosophical thoughts. Though Ezra Pound's famous dictum "Make it new!" of 1934 is considered to embody the essence of the movement, its origin can be traced back to Industrial Revolution of the 19th century. The first recognized and full-fledged appearance of modernism in English literature was in James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) that offered a whole new concept of reality, different from mere compilation of external facts. Joyce's experiment in fiction was carried into the field of poetry by Thomas Stearns Eliot's *The Waste Land and Other Poems* later that very year. He had, of course, given hints to his coming experiments with poetry with his earliest volume *Prufrock and Other Observations* as early as in 1917. Nissim Ezekiel enjoys a general approval as one of the chief architects of modern Indian English poetry, just as T.S. Eliot has become synonymous with modernism in English literature. From here originates the present effort of making a comparative study between these two poets.

Keywords: Modernism, English Poetry, Indian English Poetry, Symbol, Urban.

Introduction

The birth of modernism in European art and culture in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was a definite outcome of a desire to break away from the traditional modes of expression in art forms and philosophical thoughts. Though Ezra Pound's famous dictum "Make it new!" of 1934 is considered to embody the essence of the movement, its origin can be traced back to Industrial Revolution of the 19th century. The makers of modernism are many and its birth had been through a long and complicated gestation. Modernism in Indian-English poetry, on the other hand, was a result of a long and complex process and not just an offspring of Indian independence in 1947. E.V Ramakrishnan rightly observes that due to the perplexing diversity of languages, communities and literary cultures, the continued life of oral traditions and uneven levels of literacy, and complexities of political and economic realities in postcolonial India, modernism in Indian literary context defies any tidy definition. The gradual movement away from the parochial nationalist concerns, the influence of Marxism, contemporary socio-economic and religious factors proved decisive in creating its multi-faceted image. Nissim Ezekiel enjoys a general approval as one of the chief architects of modern Indian English poetry, just as T.S. Eliot has become synonymous with modernism in English literature. From here originates the present effort of making a comparative study between these two poets.

Aim of the study

From the above discussion, it comes out that there is dearth of study in finding common features between T.S. Eliot and Nissim Ezekiel. Though located far away physically and temporally from each other, the two poets cultivated many common crops in their poetic creations, notwithstanding their differences. In fact, modernism in European literature has commonalities with that in Indian literature, as the latter evolved under the direct influence of the former. A comparative study of the two representative figures of the movement from two different locales would help one understand that this essential relationship.

Review of Literature

The studies of T. S. Eliot's relationship with modernism in English literature have been innumerable. Louis Menand has made a great effort in his OUP publication *Discovering Modernism: T.S. Eliot and His Context* in 1996. In *The Birth of Modernism* Leon Surette effectively related *the birth of modernism* to Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot and W.B. Yeats (McGill-Queen's University Press, London, 1994). Another formidable effort is *Theorists of Modernism* (Routledge, London, 2007) by Rebecca Beasley. On the other hand, the role of Nissim Ezekiel as a harbinger of modernism in Indian English poetry has been studied by R. Raghu in *The Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel* (Atlantic, New Delhi, 2002), S. Mishra and N. Kumar in "Influence of the English Modernists on Nissim Ezekiel's Poetry" in *The Criterion* (Vol. II, Issue. I, 2011), R.K. Mishra in "Nissim Ezekiel: foreshadowing postmodernism" in *International Journal of English Literature and Culture*, Vol. 2(5), 2014, among others. But no direct effort has yet been made to make a comparative study between T.S. Eliot and Nissim Ezekiel in terms of their contributions to the formation of modernism in their respective fields. The study of S. Mishra and N. Kumar brings some points into focus, but avoids elaboration as the purpose is to study different influences on Nissim Ezekiel. The present article aims to fill in the gap.

Main Article

From around 1880 there could be perceived the inadequacies of past knowledge and norms to analyse contemporary experiences, and a number of philosophers, scientists and thinkers came forward with revolutionary ideas to remake the contemporary epistemological structure. The movement towards incorporating the inner reality was initiated by John Locke's (1632–1704) empiricism, which saw the mind beginning as a 'tabula rasa' or a blank slate, and was reinforced by Sigmund Freud's (1856–1939) theory of the working of the subconscious mind and Ernst Mach's (1838–1916) idea of the structure of the mind. Carl Jung (1875–1961) further renovated and complicated the contemporary intellectual mechanism with the idea of the collective unconscious. The long neglected Aristotelian idea of "man, the animal" was rejuvenated in the field of science by Charles Darwin's theory of evolution and its philosophical counterpart was provided by Jung's explication of the animal instinct in man as the reason behind his individualistic and anti-social movements. Friedrich Nietzsche declared the superiority of psychological drives over external facts, while Henri Bergson brought in the concept of psychological time. Under such a situation, the unprecedented social, economic and psychological changes brought in by the World War I provided the necessary impetus for the full outburst of the movement. Various economic, political, scientific, and religious factors resulting from the greatly devastating war fostered anti-bourgeoisie modes of thought and economic practice. From the attempt to incorporate new realities and attitudes, modernism was born in the European literary soil.

The first recognized and full-fledged appearance of modernism in English literature was in James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) that offered a whole new concept of reality, different from mere compilation of external facts. Joyce's experiment in fiction was carried into the field of poetry by Thomas Stearns Eliot's *The Waste Land and Other Poems* later that very year. He had, of course, given hints to his coming experiments with poetry with his earliest volume *Prufrock and Other Observations* as early as in 1917. But the real trendsetter was definitely *The Waste Land*. It was seen to be complementary to Joyce's technique of what Eliot himself has described as "a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history...."ⁱ All the iconic qualities of literary modernism—break from tradition, fragmentation, contradictory allusions, multiple points of view, harsh realism, lack of finality and absolute truth, etc.—characterize both the works. Eliot's role in shaping English literary modernism was particularly decisive taking into view his long literary career. First a literary critic and then a poet, Eliot prepared the readers to accept his unprecedented poetry with his essays compiled in his *The Sacred Wood* (1920). Later in 1928 in the Preface to *Lancelot Andrews*, he was to make his oft-quoted proclamation, "I am an Anglo-Catholic in religion, a classicist in literature and a royalist in politics", that would well establish his position as a deviant from the early twentieth century romanticism that was prevailing in the British literary world at the beginning of his literary career. Throughout his literary career, he maintained his avant-garde stance and remained synonymous with British literary modernism.

In Indian English poetry, the process of discontinuity from the romantic tradition bequeathed by Derozio, Sarojini Naidu and Toru Dutt among others, had started well before 1947. In fact, the seeds of modernism in Indian English poetry had been sown by figures no less than Tagore and Sri Aurobindo, but the proper cultivation started only with post-independence authors like Nissim Ezekiel, P. Lal, Jayanta Mahapatra, Keki Daruwalla, Dom Moraes and Kamala Das, among others.

Influences upon Nissim Ezekiel's poetic evolution have been diverse—Rilke, Yeats, Eliot, Pound, Larkin, Donald Davie, Thom Gunn—the list may be conveniently lengthened. In an interview with Suresh Kohli, Ezekiel has put the matter in the following manner:

"Some of my early poetry was influenced by Rilke. I did not succeed in assimilating this and eventually discarded it. I have imitated Eliot, Pound, Yeats and others, but never very well. My own voice has often been muffled or confused by random and temporary influences. That is the main weakness of my verse."ⁱⁱ

According to Eliot's own theory of impersonal poetry put forward in his famous essay "Tradition and Individual Talent", it is quite natural and legitimate for an author to imitate his predecessors in his formative years, and Ezekiel did the same. Had he not shaken

E: ISSN No. 2349-9443

off these influences to prepare a new path for himself, any comparative study with any of his literary models would have been meaningless. But mature Ezekiel is not a product of imitation and hence qualifies for such a study.

If T.S. Eliot is a connoisseur of the ailments of post-war European urban society, Nissim Ezekiel's poetry is equally urban in theme and tone. The twentieth century alienated urban individual is the poetic persona in many of Eliot's early poems. A product of the cosmopolitan towns like Boston and London, he remained completely alive with the squalid reality of urban living. The largest manifestation of this acquaintance is, no doubt, "The Waste Land", but his early poetry also evinces this consciousness. "Preludes" is a collage of a few aspects of city life. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is a brilliant study of a nervous urban fellow, suffering from Hamlet-like indecisiveness in minor matters of daily life. The oft-cited medical image in the opening line spreads a pervasive influence over the whole poem:

"Let us go then, you and I,

When the evening is spread out against the sky

Like a patient etherized upon a table..."

Then the poem provides glimpses of city life with "certain half-deserted streets", "one night cheap hotels", "sawdust restaurants" and the engulfing yellow smog resulting from the pollution in cosmopolitan cities like Boston. The inability of the speaker to relieve his innermost feelings with anyone makes him a victim of physical and psychological isolation, and isolation of an urban individual is a patent theme in Eliot's poetry.

Nissim Ezekiel, on the other hand, is a poet located in the erstwhile Bombay. His early poetry created his image as a victim of urban isolation. His isolation was further intensified due to his Jewish background. But out of the insensitive world around him, Ezekiel has constantly attempted to search out an order and relevance for his own existence. But the nagging sense of dissociation from the surrounding world that he was a victim of since his joining his Roman Catholic school was always alive in him. Even the life abroad could not bring any solace from it, as he narrates in his "Background, Casually" from Hymns in Darkness:

"Twenty-two: time to go abroad.

First, the decision, and then a friend

To pay the fare. Philosophy,

Poverty and Poetry, three

Companions shared my basement room."

His hometown Bombay to him is the "bitter native city" and various negative symbols about it come out in different poems. He wants to leave this city life but cannot, and there comes his bitter-sweet relationship with this city. A recurring note in his poetry is the wound urban civilisation inflicts on unattached man. His Ezekiel has seen the splendour and poverty of the great city, its air-conditioned skyscrapers and claustrophobic slums, its marvellous capacity for survivals and its slow decadence.ⁱⁱⁱ His reaction to the city's oppression is a light-hearted, ironic and often sardonic exposure of its several hidden faces. "Many of his poems derive their

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effectiveness from the poet's puzzled emotional reaction to the modern Indian dilemma, which he feels to be poignant conflicts of tradition and modernism, the city and the village: a somewhat obvious theme but treated by Ezekiel as an intensely personal exploration".^{iv} For Ezekiel this Indian dilemma is symbolised by the city of Bombay, believes Ramachandran.

It is often said that the poetry of T.S. Eliot is poetry in allusions. The long and versatile education of Eliot went to form the complex references and allusions and often their excess creates difficulty for a reader to understand his poems. The complexity and versatility of the allusions sometimes makes it impossible to locate their sources. Therefore, James Longenbach rightly observes, "It is ultimately important to understand the nature of Eliot's allusive practice—to ask not only what is the source? But why does Eliot allude? And how do we experience the allusion?"^v In John Crowe Ransom's words, Eliot "inserts beautiful quotations into ugly contexts."^{vi} "The Waste Land" is saturated with quotations, references and allusions, ranging spans from Greek tragedies to modern science, covering ancient and modern learning, Western and Eastern religion, philosophy, history and so on. Such allusiveness in his poems, in fact, determines the course of whole modern poetry and makes critics generalized comments like, "One characteristic of works we call modern is that they positively insist on a general frame of reference within and beyond themselves."^{vii} Ezekiel, likewise resorts to the use of reference and allusions time and again to bring home his message. "My Cat" bears explicit shadows of Verlaine's "Cat and Lady" and Baudelaire's "Le Chat". Ezekiel's cat, however, does not bear as complex associations as Verlaine's and Baudelaire's, both of whom have used the cat to bring out the decadence in the society, and is a simple animal with "single mood". But the novelty lies in the attitude of the speaker who is unhinged in his interaction with the everyday animal. The allusion to Helen of Troy in "Episode" and the comparison between the modern metropolis of Bombay to Dante's Purgatory in "A Morning Walk" are other brilliant examples of Ezekiel's deft use of allusions.

Following Donald Davie, it would be quite true to comment that modern poetry begins with symbolism^{viii}. Following the French masters like Mallarmé, Rimbaud, Verlaine, Valéry, Corbière and Laforgue, T.S. Eliot picked up the style of speaking through symbols. In the early years of his career he came in acquaintance with Arthur Symonds The Symbolist Movement in Literature and remained fascinated with the symbolist French poets throughout his career. His use of symbols is spread over the ideas, the characters, the situations, the moods, the phrases, and even the titles of his poems. As Kenner maintains, "Eliot is most Eliot when not only the words but the situation stirs into life restless symbolic echoes."^{ix}

The commonest and broadest manifestation of Eliot's use of symbolism lies in his depiction of the landscape, as found in poems like "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", "The Waste Land", "Four Quartets"

E: ISSN No. 2349-9443

and other poems. The symbolic settings are made to reflect the psychological states of the protagonists and achieve the status of what Eliot himself has termed "objective correlative" in "The Metaphysical Poets". It was through Rimbaud that Eliot came into acquaintance with Dante's masterly creation of symbolic landscape. This spared Eliot from direct presentation of the emotional states of his protagonists. Such uses have added to the economy, precision, effectiveness, poetic charm and also complexity in his poetry.

The symbolic movement in English literature had a deep and lasting influence on Nissim Ezekiel's poetry. Unlike the symbolists, he is, however, against the idea of bringing complexity in his poetry through his use of symbols. He makes his stand clear in the following way:

"Attacks on obscurity in poetry are generally dismissed as anti-intellectualist. But there still remains a case against always giving obscurity and difficulty the benefit of the doubt on the ground that some profound truths can be expressed in no other way. Too many poets in the twentieth century offer only the difficulty and not the profundity, though it is not considered respectable in literary circles to say so.

"Modern writers have a tendency to justify the complexity of their writing on the ground that modern life is complex. However, the complexity can be presented in deceptively simple form, as sometimes the profoundest philosophical truths are presented."

In "Urban" from *The Unfinished Man* (1960) different natural objects unite to show the miserable alienated life of the urban dweller:

"The hills are always far away
He knows the broken roads, and moves
And moves in circles tracked within his head.
Before he wakes and has his say,
The river which he claims he loves is dry,
And all the winds lie dead."

In "Enterprise", the journey through a desert becomes a symbol of the journey of life. The ultimate achievement of the long and arduous enterprise remains unsatisfactory:

"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.
Home is where we have to earn our grace."

Here one encounters the use of irony which is another iconic feature of modern poetry. T. S. Eliot's poetry is replete in irony as evident in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", among other poems. The very title is ironic as the prosaic name J. Alfred Prufrock is highly incompatible with 'love song'. Moreover, far from being a 'love song', the poem is an internal monologue where a middle-aged, neurotic nervous, urban individual is suffering from Hamlet-like indecisiveness about whether to go or not to go. The ludicrous contrast between this dilemma-ridden petty individual and the giant figures like Hamlet and Lazarus creates the largest irony in the poem.

Nissim Ezekiel, on the other hand, uses various ironic devices in portraying the condition of

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modern Indian life. The language in "Very Indian Poems in Indian English" creates irony by the application of the colloquial forms of Indian languages to English. The patriot's speech in "The Patriot" is an example:

"Ancient Indian Wisdom is 100% correct.

I should say even 200% correct.

But modern generation is neglecting—

Too much going for fashion and foreign thing."

The present continuous tense and the epithet 'foreign' come from the Indian styles speaking. The very opening line of "Background, Casually"—"A poet-rascal-clown was born"—ironically hits at the conservative Indian society that hardly displays religious tolerance even in the children's world.

Conclusion

T.S. Eliot is indisputably the master of modernism in English literature. Under the patronage of Ezra Pound, Eliot waged war against the early nineteenth century romanticism prevalent in the European literary field when Eliot started his writing career. His debut collection *Prufrock and Other Observations* initiated a fusillade on the dominant customs and conventions and put English literature on a whole new track. The World War I provided the necessary impetus and English literature assumed a whole new outlook in theme and style. Similarly, Nissim Ezekiel was instrumental in bringing in fresh airs after the romantic traditions in post-independence Indian English poetry. From him, later Indian English poets learnt a lot in terms of poetic technique. In good many points the two masters worked on parallel tracks and displayed similar tendencies. Both established an imitable literary tradition and left a long lineage in their respective domains. Both are formidable figures and have secured imperishable places in the gallery of literary authors basically as harbingers of modernism.

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