

Poetry
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Lecture 68
Nissim Ezekiel

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Nissim Ezekiel (1924-2004)



- Historical and Literary Context
- Nissim Ezekiel
- Three Poems
 - "Background Casually"
 - "Philosophy"
 - "Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher"
- Analysis



Hello friends, we are going to deal with the pioneer of Indian Poetry in English Nissim Ezekiel, who was born in 1924 and who died in 2004. First, we will see the historical and literary context, we will look at the life of Nissim Ezekiel briefly and then discuss two poems, "Philosophy," "Poet, Lover and Birdwatcher" in detail. Just to get an idea of Nissim Ezekiel's life, we will also start our discussion by reading "Background Casually."

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Historical and Literary Context



- Independent India in 1947
- A multicultural country with Hindu, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Sikh, Jewish, and other followings
- A multilingual country with 100s of languages: Official and unofficial, tribal, marginal and mainstream,
- An ancient country with a glorious literary tradition in several languages
- English as a link language for the nation
- Paradoxically, English took roots in India after the English people had left the country.
- Displaced and deprived people followed English as their own: Nissim Ezekiel, Dom Moraes, etc.
- Educated Indians too attempted to embrace English for creative purposes.



When we come to the historical and literary context, it is our own country you can see that we got independence in 1947. We have to understand further that ours is a multicultural country with Hindu, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Sikh, Jewish and other kinds of religious followings. It's also a multilingual country with hundreds of languages, both official and unofficial, tribal, marginal and mainstream languages. Ours is an ancient country with a glorious literary tradition in several languages, but we have used English as a link language for our whole country.

Paradoxically, English took roots in India after the English people had left the country. Some displaced and deprived people followed English as their own language. We have two examples Nissim Ezekiel and Dom Moraes who did not have any other language to express themselves creatively, that is why they choose English. We have large number of educated Indians who attempted to embrace English for creative purposes, not only poetry, we have short story, fiction, memo, testimony various other accounts in English.

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Nissim Ezekiel (1924-2004)



- Pioneer of Modern Indian Poetry in English
- Pursued poetry and philosophy in India and England
- Acquired industrial and academic experience
- Devoted to poetry in English, edited poetry magazines like *Quest*, *Imprint*, *Poetry India*, and *The Indian P.E.N.*
- Wrote traditional, experimental, modernist, secular, and religious poems
- Received Sahitya Akademi Award in 1983 and a Padma Shri in 1988
- Widely appreciated for *The Unfinished Man* (1960), *The Exact Name* (1965), *Hymns in Darkness* (1976), *Latter-Day Psalms* (1982), and other volumes



Let us deal with the pioneer of modern Indian Poetry in English, that is Nissim Ezekiel now. He pursued poetry and philosophy in India and England passionately, he studied philosophy in England and he started writing poetry in England and also in India. He acquired industrial and academic experience, he became a professor of English at the university of Bombay, before that he had some industrial experience in the sense, he was working as a journalist, he was working advertising and things like that.

He was devoted to poetry in English, he edited poetry magazines like *Quest*, *Imprint*, *Poetry India* and *The Indian P.E.N.* He wrote traditional, experimental, modernist, secular, and religious poems. He also received Sahitya Akademi Award in 1983 and a Padma Shri Award in 1988. He is widely appreciated for his volumes *The Unfinished Man*, *The Exact Name*, *Hymns in Darkness*, *Latter-Day Psalms*, and other volumes.

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Three Poems



- **'Background Casually'**
 - A 75-line and 15-stanza poem
 - An ironical and self-deprecatory portrait
- **'Philosophy'**
 - Published in the volume, *The Exact Name* (1965)
 - A 20-line and four-stanza poem
 - Deals with the scientific and artistic approaches to seeking knowledge
- **'Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher'**
 - Published in the volume, *The Exact Name* (1965)
 - A 20-line and two stanza poem
 - Shows the linkages between writing poetry, loving a woman, and watching a bird as acts of waiting for the right word/ woman/ bird to come by.



We have three poems here, first we will read “Background Casually.” It is a 70-line poem in 15 stanzas. It is an ironical and self-deprecatory portrait of the poet himself. Then we will read two poems “Philosophy” and “Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher.” ‘Philosophy’ is published in the volume, ‘The Exact Name,’ 1965. It is a 20-line and 4 a stanza poem. It deals with the scientific and artistic approaches to seeking knowledge.

The second poem ‘Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher’ for our discussion was also published in ‘The Exact Name.’ It is a 20-line and 2 stanza a poem. It shows the linkages between writing poetry, loving a woman and watching a bird as acts of waiting for the right word, the right person and bird to come by.

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Background Casually - 1



A poet-rascal-clown was born,
The frightened child who would not eat
Or sleep, a boy of meagre bone.
He never learned to fly a kite,
His borrowed top refused to spin. 5

....

Twenty two: time to go abroad.
First, the decision, then a friend
To pay the fare. **Philosophy,**
Poverty and Poetry, three
Companions shared my basement room. 25



Let us read some extracts from ‘Background Casually’ to understand the personality of Nissim Ezekiel.

“A poet rascal-clown was born,
The frightened child who would not eat
Or sleep, a boy of meagre bone.
He never learned to fly a kite
His borrowed top refused to spin.
Twenty-two: time to go abroad.
First, the decision, then a friend
To pay the fare. **Philosophy,**
Poverty and Poetry, three
Companions shared my basement room.”

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Background Casually - 2



The London seasons passed me by.
I lay in bed two years alone,
And then a Woman came to tell
My willing ears I was the Son
Of Man. I knew that I had failed 30

....

The song of my experience sung,
I knew that all was yet to sing.
My ancestors, among the castes,
Were aliens crushing seed for bread
(The hooded bullock made his rounds). 50



“The London seasons passed me by

I lay in bed two years alone

And then a woman came to tell

My willing ears I was the son

Of Man. I knew that I had failed. 30

...

The song of my experience sung,

I knew that all was yet to sing.

My ancestors, among the castes,

Were aliens crushing seed for bread

(The hooded bullock made his rounds). 50

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Background Casually - 3



The Indian landscape sears my eyes,
I have become a part of it
To be observed by foreigners.
They say that I am singular,
Their letters overstate the case. 70

I have made my commitments now.
This is one: to stay where I am,
As others choose to give themselves
In some remote and backward place.
My backward place is where I am. 75



The Indian landscape sears my eyes.

I have become a part of it

To be observed by foreigners.

They say that I am singular,

Their letters overstate the case.

70

I have made my commitments now.

This is one: to stay where I am,

As others choose to give themselves

In some remote and backward place.

My backward place is where I am.

75

Thus, Nissim Ezekiel identified himself with India with the Bombay that he lived in.

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“Philosophy,” Stanzas 1 & 2



There is a place to which I often **go**,
Not by planning to, but by a **flow**
Away from all existence, to a **cold**
Lucidity, whose will is **uncontrolled**.
Here, the mills of God are never **slow**. 5

The landscape in its geological **prime**
Dissolves to **show** its quinte**ss**ential **slime**.
A million stars are blotted out. I **think**
Of each historic passion as a **blink**
That happened to the sad eye of **Time**. 10



Now let us see the first poem for our discussion ‘Philosophy.’

“There is a place to which I often **go**,

Not by planning to, but by a **flow**

Away from all existence, to a **cold**

Lucidity, whose will is **uncontrolled**.

Here, the mills of God are never **slow**.

The landscape in its geological **prime**

Dissolves to **show** its quinte**ss**ential **slime**.

A million stars are blotted out. I **think**

Of each historic passion as a **blink**

That happened to the sad eye of **Time**.

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“Philosophy,” Stanzas 3 & 4



But residues of meaning still **remain**,
As darkest **myths** **meander** **through the pain**
Towards a **final** formula of **light**.
I, too, reject this clarity of **sight**.
What cannot be explained, do not **explain**. 15

The mundane language of the **senses** **sings**
Its own interpretations. Common **things**
Become, by virtue of their **commonness**,
An argument against their **nakedness**
That dies of cold to find the truth it **brings**. 20



But residues of meaning still **remain**,
As darkest **myths** **meander** **through the pain**
Towards a final formula of **light**.
I, too, reject this clarity of **sight**.
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 their **nakedness**
That dies of cold to find the truth it **brings**.”

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Thematic Contrast



- Flow and Stasis
- Lucidity and Obscurity
- Uncontrolled/ Unplanned and Controlled/ Planned
- Time and Eternity
- Sad and Happy
- Light and Dark
- Interpretations and Misinterpretations
- Common and Uncommon
- Life and Death
- Truth and Falsehood
- Argument/ Reasoning and Statement/ Feeling



Now, let us see that thematic contrast that we have in this poem between flow and stasis, lucidity and obscurity, uncontrolled unplanned and controlled planned, time and eternity, sad and happy, light and dark, interpretations and misinterpretations, common and uncommon, life death, truth falsehood, argument/ reasoning, and statement and feeling. If you look at the poem, you can see these kinds of contrast which interact with each other to give a philosophy of life.

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Poetic Devices



- **Personification:** Lucidity (4) and Time (10)
- **Metaphor:** The landscape in its geological prime
Dissolves to show its quintessential slime (6-7)
- **Metaphor:** But residues of meaning still remain, (Asso)
As darkest myths meander through the pain (11-12)
- **Alli/ Asso:** Towards a final formula of light.(13),
- **Epigram:** What cannot be explained, do not explain. (15)
- **Alliteration:** the language of the senses sings (16)
- **Metaphor:** The mundane language of the senses sings
Its own interpretations. (16-17)
- **Metaphor:** An argument against their nakedness
That dies of cold to find the truth it brings. (19-20)



A number of poetic devices operate in this poem to build the thrust of the contrast between life and death, between one approach to life and another approach to life or to knowledge. We have

personification in 'Lucidity and Time.' We have a metaphor in 'The landscape in its geological prime Dissolves to show its quintessential slime.' Another metaphor in 'But residues of meaning still remain, as darkest myths meander through the pain.' We also have assonance in 'residues and meaning still remain.'

Then we have alliteration and assonance in 'towards a final formula of light.' This assonance you can see in 'I' highlighted there and alliteration in 'f' underlined. Then we have a pity saying something like an epigram, it may be a trite expression but it is succinctly put, 'what cannot be explain do not explain.' Alliteration in 'the language of the senses sings.' Then a metaphor in 'The mundane language of the senses sings its own interpretations.' Language sings its own interpretations. Then we have a metaphor in 'An argument against their nakedness That dies of cold to find the truth it brings.'

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Rhyme, Rhythm, and Meter



Rhyme: consistently AABBA

Rhythm: predominantly iambic; 10 syllables in each line

Meter: iambic Pentameter; five feet in every line

Caesura, Enjambment, and End-Stopped Lines

But re | sidues | of mea | ning still | remain,

As dar | kest myths | mea | nder through | the pain ➔

Towards | a fi | nal for | mula | of light.

I, too | reject | this cla | rity | of sight. (11-14)



Along with these poetic devices we have some rhyme, rhythm and meter in this poem. The rhyme is consistently AABBA in every stanza. Then the rhythm is predominantly iambic; it has 10 syllables in each line. The meter is iambic pentameter as every line has almost 5 feet. Then we also have caesura, enjambment and end-stopped lines,

“But re sidues of mea ning still remain,

As dar kest myths mea nder through the pain

Towards a final for mula of light.

I, too, reject this cla rity of sight. (11-14)

We have predominantly iambic pentameter, we have underlined all those places where we are the stress like re, dar, too.

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Overall Impression



- Philosophy is about all kinds of knowledge, not just the logical and scientific knowledge alone.
- Hence, the speaker presents different approaches to various forms of organized and unorganized knowledge.
- The speaker prefers residues of meaning after the dissolution of the geological processes and rejects clarity and lucidity as advanced by science and logic.
- He also exposes the limits of language through which knowledge is articulated and recorded.
- All false knowledge will vanish in front of the real truth, which finds expression in poetry through metaphor, rhyme, rhythm and meter.



To give an overall impression of this poem, let us look at this point that we have listed here. Philosophy is about all kinds of knowledge, not just the logical and scientific knowledge alone. Hence, the speaker presents different approaches to various forms of organized and unorganized knowledge, that is experience.

The speaker prefers residues of meaning after the dissolution of the geological processes and rejects clarity and lucidity as advanced by science and logic. He also exposes the limits of language through which knowledge is articulated and recorded. All false knowledge will vanish in front of the real truth, which finds expression in poetry through metaphor, rhyme, rhythm and meter.

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“Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher”



To force the pace and never to be still
Is **not** the way of those who study birds
Or women. The best poets wait for words.
The hunt is **not** an exercise of will
But patient love relaxing on a hill 5
To note the movement of a **timid** wing;
Until the one who knows that she is loved
No longer waits but risks surrendering –
In this the poet finds his moral proved
Who **never** spoke before his spirit moved. 10



Now let us come to the second poem ‘Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher.’ This is again one of the anthologized poems of Nissim Ezekiel.

“To force the pace and never to be still
Is not the way of those who study birds
Or women. The best poets wait for words.
The hunt is not an exercise of will
But the patient love relaxing on a hill
To note the movement of a timid wing;
Until the one who knows that she is loved
No longer waits but risks surrendering
In this the poet finds his moral proved
Who never spoke before his spirit moved.

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“Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher”



The slow movement seems, somehow, to say much more.

To watch the rarer birds, you have to go

Along deserted lanes and where the rivers flow

In silence near the source, or by a shore

Remote and thorny like the heart's dark floor. 15

And there the women slowly turn around,

Not only flesh and bone but myths of light

With darkness at the core, and sense is found

But poets lost in crooked, restless flight,

The deaf can hear, the blind recover sight. 20



The slow movement seems, somehow, to say much more.

To watch the rare birds, you have to go

Along deserted lanes and where the rivers flow

In silence near the source, or by a shore

Remote and thorny like the heart's dark floor.

And there the women slowly turn around,

Not only flesh and bone but myths of light

With darkness at the core, and sense is found

But poets lost in crooked, restless flight,

The deaf can hear, the blind recover sight.”

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Thematic Contrast



- Motion and Stillness
- Free will and Fate
- Patience and Impatience
- Love/Life and Hate/Death
- Body and Spirit
- Silence (visual) and Sound/Speech (auditory)
- Light and Dark
- Myth/Imagination and Reality/Truth
- Crooked and Straight
- Restless and Restful
- Theme of Imagination/ Love/ Nature



It is a beautiful poem; we could see the flow in the reading of our poem itself. We have the thematic contrast between motion and stillness, free will and fate, patience and impatience, love life and hate and death, body and spirit, silence which is visual sound and speech which is auditory, light and dark, myth imagination reality and truth, crooked and straight, restless and restful. We have the theme of imagination of love of nature and we have this correspondence between various activities in this poem. That is why we have this kind of contrast and the communication of the idea of writing of a poem by observation.

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Poetic Devices



- **Metaphor:** poet, lover, and bird: flight of imagination
- **Alliteration:** Or women. The best poets wait for words. (3)
- **Conso and Asso:** movement of a timid wing; (6)
- **Metaphor:** The hunt is not an exercise of will
But patient love relaxing on a hill
To note the movement of a timid wing;(4-5)
- **Alliteration:** poet finds his moral proved (9)
- **Alliteration:** spoke before his spirit moved (10)
- The slow movement seems, somehow, to say much more
- **Simile:** Remote and thorny like the heart's dark floor.(15)
- **Paradox:** myths of light
With darkness at the core, (17-18)
- **Metaphor:** But poets lost in crooked, restless flight,
- **Paradox:** The deaf can hear, the blind recover sight.(20)



The poetic devices we see in this poem are listed here. First, we have a metaphor in the title itself poet, lover, and bird; all of them deal with the flight of imagination. Alliteration we have in ‘Or women. The best poets wait for words.’ Women, wait, words that is where we have this alliteration. Then we have consonants and assonance: movement of a timid wing, timid wing and then movement mid, in that we have this consonance.

Next, we have this metaphor,

“The hunt is not an exercise of will
But patient love relaxing on a hill
To note the movement of a timid wing.”

Next, we have alliterations ‘poet finds his moral proved spoke before his spirit moved.’ ‘The slow movement seems somehow to say much more,’ it is one of the longest lines that we have in this poem. The slow movement seems, caesura we have to break the speed somehow again break to say much more. And lengthening the line means slowing down the speech or slowing down the song.

Simile we have in ‘remote and thorny like the heart’s dark floor. We have the paradox of ‘myths of light with darkness at the core’ in line 17 and 18. Then we have a metaphor in ‘But poets lost in crooked, restless flight.’ Lastly, we have the paradox ‘The deaf can hear, the blind recover sight.’ This is all about the problems of communication in life, especially so in poetry, philosophically or scientifically we have the same problem everywhere. How can the deaf hear? How can the blind recover sight? We always try the impossible.

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Rhyme, Rhythm, and Meter



Form: Two 10-line stanzas

Rhyme: Almost regular end rhyme with some exceptions:
still, birds, words, will, hill, wing, loved,
surrendering, **proved, moved**; more, go, flow, show,
floor, around, light, forced, **flight, sight**; and
couplets at the end of the stanza

Rhythm: iambic with an extra syllable in some lines

Meter: iambic Pentameter

To force | the pace | and ne | ver to | be still
Is not | the way | of those | who stu | dy birds
Or wo | men. The | best po | ets wait | for words.



Now let us see the rhyme, rhythm, and meter in this poem. The poetic form is regular meter we have; we have two 10 lines stanzas. The rhyme is possible because of the regular end rhyme in almost all lines with some exceptions. We have the rhyming words like still, birds, words, will, hill, wing, loved, surrendering, proved, moved, more, go, flow, show, floor, around, light, forced, flight, sight and the highlighted words proved, moved, flight and sight that come at the end of the stanzas are couplets.

The rhythm of the poem is mostly iambic with an extra syllable in some lines. Let us see the iambic pentameter in the first three lines we have here.

“To force the pace and ne ver to be still
Is not the way of those who stu dy birds
Or wo men. The best po ets wait for words.”

If you read it a little carefully, we can without the lines split, we can read it easier.

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Overall Impression



- This poem clearly depicts the process of writing a poem as an analogous process of waiting for a beloved as a lover or a bird as a birdwatcher.
- "The best poets wait for words" because that is the best way to catch their prey when their spirit moves.
- The poet has to undertake an arduous journey across difficult terrains to the source of life, love, light, i.e., death, the dark core, to catch a glimpse of rare words, women, and rare birds.
- In the stationary flight of the poet he can hear the unheard and see the invisible like Keats in "Ode to a Nightingale." The slow movement to the still source comes alive through the long line (11) with alliterations and assonances throughout the poem with an intricate pattern of images taking birth as a beautiful poem.



Let us see the overall impression we have here. This poem clearly depicts the process of writing a poem as an analogous process of waiting for a beloved as a lover or a bird as a birdwatcher. The best poets wait for words because that is the best way to catch the prey when the spirit moves. The poet has to undertake an arduous journey across difficult terrains to the source of life, love, light that is death, the dark core to catch a glimpse of rare words, women, and rare birds.

In the stationary flight, it is oxymoronic. In the stationary flight as the poet waits, he can hear the unheard and see the invisible like Keats in Ode to a "Nightingale." The slow movement to the still source comes alive through the long line in 11 with alliterations and assonances through out the poem with an intricate pattern of images taking birth as a beautiful poem.

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Summary



- Historical and Literary Context
- Nissim Ezekiel
- Three Poems
- "Background Casually"
- "Philosophy"
- "Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher"
- Analysis
- "Home is where we have to gather grace."
- from Nissim Ezekiel's poem "Enterprise"



Let us see the summary. We have looked at the historical and literary context of Nissim Ezekiel who became the pioneer of English Poetry in India by writing a number of poems dedicating himself to poetry in English. It is almost like a sage like life, entire life he dedicated for this, that is why he is considered to be, some critics call him the father of Indian Poetry in English.

We read "Background Casually" to understand his own personality. And then looked at "Philosophy," "Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher" to understand the nuances of his own writing. He has a line called; "Home is where we have to gather grace" in a poem "Enterprise." Language is the home for a poet like Nissim Ezekiel. The geographical location Bombay did not make him feel belonging to that land. Somehow mentally he just consoled himself that he belongs to the land. This kind of disturbance in him unsettled feeling, alienated feeling, that is what we find in the modernist to poems of Nissim Ezekiel.

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References



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- Kher, Inder Nath. 1972. "The Message from Another Shore: The Esthetic Vision of Nissim Ezekiel," *Mahfil*, 8 (4): 17-28.



We have some references here, hope you will be able to get them, read them, and understand Nissim Ezekiel much better, thank you.