

SIMILARITIES IN THE POETRY OF NISSIM EZEKIEL AND GEETA CHHABRA: A BRIEF ASSESSMENT

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Abstract:

Described as “the father of post- independence Indian verse in English,” Nissim Ezekiel is one of India's finest poets. Winner of the 1983 Sahitya Academy Award for his poetry collection Latter Day Psalms, Ezekiel has penned numerous poems on everyday objects that testify to postcolonial India's rich literary history. Apart from his prose and plays, Ezekiel asserts a strong influence on Indian writing in English especially through his poetry. He has published collections such as A Time to Change, Sixty Poems, The Third, The Unfinished Man, The Exact Name, Hymns in Darkness and Latter- Day Psalms. On his passing away in January 2004 at the age of 76, Ezekiel was called the poet's poet by The Independent of London. Another poet of Indian origin, Geeta Chhabra, had the privilege of being tutored under Ezekiel's patronage. This paper addresses the similarities in the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel and Geeta Chhabra as depicted through the images of the Orient in Chhabra's poetry collection of forty poems and photographs titled An Indian Ode to the Emirates.

Key Words: *Orient, middle-east, chhabra, ezeziel, poetry, ode, emirates.*

The Orient is an umbrella term for the East in contrast to the Occident that stands for the West. Primarily it comprises of Asia that is further divided into the Near East, the Middle East and the Far East. The Middle East is a part of the Orient that is a transcontinental region comprising of eighteen countries and several ethnic groups. The United Arab Emirates is a country in Western Asia at the south east end of the Arabian Peninsula on the Persian Gulf. It is made up of seven Emirates or provinces namely- Al Ain, Fujairah, Umm Al Quwain, Ras Al Khaimah, Sharjah, Abu Dhabi and Dubai. Indians have been living in the Middle East as expatriate “guest” workers for decades ever since the oil boom of the 70s brought about the requirement for foreign labour.

Geeta Chhabra is a part of this Indian diaspora community. Born in Amritsar, the holy city of Sikhdom, she subsequently studied in Shimla in the North Indian state of Himachal Pradesh. Married to a shipping entrepreneur Ved Chhabra, she later moved to Mumbai and eventually to Dubai which has been her home away from home. She has been a resident of the Emirates since 1991. Though she is a globe trotter, having visited several destinations worldwide, the Arabian environs remain central to her poetic creativity. Since 1992, she has been writing and publishing poetry that has appeared in reputed journals like Dubai Al Thaqafiyah, Al Itihad, Al Bayan, Al Khaleej Cultural Supplement, Al Rafed Magazine and in Likai Tarsom Sawrat Tayer by Dr. Shihab M Ghanem. Regarding her poetry, Geeta Chhabra observes, “I express. I surrender. I confess. I am cleansed. I am addicted to poetry in all its aspects.”

Nissim Ezekiel appeared on the scene when Indian poetry was shackled by the bondage of British Romantic and Victorian poetry. It had become inert and effete under the influence of Georgian and Romantic poetry. Ezekiel's presence on this barren scene is similar to the barren framework against which Chhabra rests An Indian Ode to the Emirates. She emerges at a time when the Indian diaspora community from the Middle East does not have a poetic voice. Also, little is fictionalised about the lives of the Indian residents living in the Middle East or their experiences, livelihoods and views.

Akin to this bareness, is the barren backdrop against which her poetry is portrayed. Her poetry is a

glimpse into modern day Arabia and its environs. In the opening poem To Dubai-My Second Home she mentions, "On deserty skies." The image of the modern metropolitan city that Dubai has cropped up into is its skyline which now equals and replicates that of Manhattan, New York or Shanghai. However, it is far from fascinating to understand that beneath this metropolitanism is an underlying desert that was once nothing beyond vast expanses of sandy terrain. The poem The Sand mentions:

"the sand moves
Like shifting patterns
Of four lives."

It is an image of the temporariness of life in general and expatriate life in the Gulf in particular.

Being urbanites, both Geeta Chhabra and Nissim Ezekiel feature the plight of the poetic self through the bogged down existence of the city. The urban-rural or city-countryside dichotomy is central to their poetry. Ezekiel mentions in the poem Urban:

"He dreams of morning walks, alone,
And floating on a wave of sand."

However, the unnerving complexity of the city lands him back to the state of the "unfinished" and "clumsy" (Kurup 54). This is seen in the following lines of the same poem:

"But still his mind its traffic turns
Away from beach and tree and stone
To kindred clamour close at hand."

Halt at Rub' Al-Khali in An Indian Ode to the Emirates mentions the "scattered silences" of what in English is called the Empty Quarter. It is a huge desert in the middle of the Arabian Peninsula that stretches from central Saudi Arabia in the north to Yemen in the south (Chhabra 43). This image juxtaposes with the historical imagery of old Dubai in "the first star of dusk" that is represented by the bareness of Sheikh Saeed Makhtoum's old house by the Creek in Shindagha in the second poem of the collection. All of this constructs the image of a plainness that the desert is replete with. The past coalesces with the present in the poem An Ode to Burj Khalifa: "Burj Khalifa stands out like a pearl" which showcases the modern engineering feats that the UAE has achieved in the face of the bareness. Another such achievement is the Sheikh Zayed Road that had been constructed on land reclamation upon silt and sand. The poem By the Sheikh Zayed Road from Ghaya Residence, Dubai is reminiscent of the never-endingsurprises that Dubai keeps up its sleeves. This is reflected in the lines:

"From the twenty eighth floor,
My eyes walk on the serpentine streets,
Each worth looking at.
Never be in doubt,
Even towards night's ending approach,
Cars will pursue cars,
Drawing their glittering lights in a train."

Borne away from a social vacuum, both Nissim Ezekiel and Geeta Chhabra write highly realistic poetry. Their realism is sophisticated. It points to their immediate social realities. Nissim Ezekiel's poem, Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S, shows a realistic issue that plagues the Indian ethos and has turned out to become a prominent problem in the Indian culture - the social and class power dynamics that are involved in the usage of English as a language of the common man. Those who can use English are seen as social superiors. The lines of the poem mention:

“Miss Pushpa is coming
 from very high family.
 Her father was renowned advocate
 in Bulsar or Surat,
 I am not remembering now which place.”

This diction points to the simple sentence framing and at the poor English that a commoner speaks as opposed to the fluency that he admires in Miss Pushpa's spoken English. Geeta Chhabra's realism on the other hand also elicits the social issues but in a more subtle and indirect manner. She points to the religious variety that is seen in India as a means of religious harmony that instils unity to the country on the whole.

Shahjahan Madampat notes regarding Geeta Chhabra's poems, “They negotiate the tension areas between nature, culture and civilisation in a way that collapses all the three into a single whole, embellished by the noblest of thoughts, feelings and emotions” (Chhabra 6). This is akin to the eighteenth century iconoclast poet of the Bhakti Movement Bulleh Shah's unitarian trend of unity through the metaphor of Alif that goes beyond specificities. Religion, spirituality and Godliness are presented in the light of positivity that they emanate to unite the country and its varied population under one roof of a multicultural nation. This microcosmic existence is reflected in *Speaking To My Maker* in the line: “God of all planets.” A sense of practical religious humility is seen in the poem *The Mosque* in the lines:

“Between duel and chase,
 those who are felled
 come to the Mosque.
 Between duel and chase,
 those who are crowned,
 come to the Mosque.”

As pointed out by the cultural critic and commentator Shahjahan Madampat in quoting Indian writer O. V. Vijayan that Geeta Chhabra's poetry has “the infinity of grace.” Nissim Ezekiel shows no faith in institutionalised religion but his poetic self shows faith in a higher positive being of God which is the same as poetry or art to him. This is seen in the lines:

“The going forth
 Prepared with prayer
 The timed return
 Redeemed with prayer.”

Both Ezekiel and Chhabra write highly descriptive poems. Their poetry not only mentions all that surrounds them but also has underlying descriptions of images of emotionality, passion and sentiment. This is presented without over dramatizing or undermining any part of their descriptions. Denoting the stars as “heaven filled twinkling bulbs” Geeta Chhabra takes note of the simplest of things around her. Her mention of the simple-hearted Bedouin and “sloe-eyed camel” in *Signet Ties* anticipates *An Ode To A Bedouin's Ancestors* which highlights her idea of sacred remembrances. Their realism gives way to an eye for detail that entails in an earthy and life-like poetry. The poetry of both Nissim Ezekiel and Geeta Chhabra hints at them being individuals who have experienced as much as they have observed. Apart from minute reflection, they are also capable of soaking in all that the images connote. Their poetry is highly connective and it is in these human connections that the readers are expected to redefine themselves. This goes on to prove that we are all similar in our different ways and part of the larger human race. This humanism is seen in the poem *The Stalker* where Chhabra doesn't forget to mention her good fate and fortune in being a part of life in the Middle East. She considers it as a dream fulfilment of what is otherwise God's pre-planned destiny. Her poems hint at strong realisations about the shortness of life and mortality of

human beings who will have to die someday as seen in *The Tombstone* in the alliterative phrase “sematic selvedge.”

Nissim Ezekiel's poems deal with whims, fancies and superstitions. In *Night of The Scorpion*, Nissim Ezekiel delineates a situation that is representative of the rural Indian ethos and brings out the prevalence of such a situation in the Indian village scenes. Chhabra on the other hand deals with the intricacies of human emotions, thoughts, feelings and beliefs in poems like *Illusions*, *The Climb of Life*, *The Truth*, *The Stalker*, *Hard Facts*, *In the Mood*, *The Plain Truth* and *Double Grief*.

One theme that often surfaces in the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel is love. While the other themes are politically charged, this is one of the most universal themes that Nissim Ezekiel touches upon. He has portrayed love with extreme candour and openness in his poetry. Such intimacy can be seen in many of his poems, one such poem being *In Emptiness*:

“And make no rendezvous with love
I would rather suffer when I must”

Chhabra writes of love in a triadic manner. One is her love for God, then for His creations and finally for her husband. *The Phantom's Call* is dedicated to her husband Ved Chhabra. All forms of love are summed down in the finding and sustaining of peace as she pens poems for all peace lovers of the world in *The Way I Feel*. Love for God is seen in *A Prayer*, *A form of a Prayer* and *The Mosque*. Love for nature is seen in *Spring's renewal in Dubai*. It is profound and full of positivity.

One of the salient features of their poetic form is its objective outlook. Both Nissim Ezekiel and Geeta Chhabra have a coolness and distance that they swiftly maintain from the world surrounding them that their eye for detail to observe things around is equated to their objectivity that adds to the highly private sensibility of their poems. Nissim Ezekiel is an Indian Jew from the Bene Israel community which makes him a religious minority and practising English as the language of the home makes him detached from the living language of the society. This is reflected in the following lines of *Minority Poem*:

“And you, uneasy
orphan of their racial
memories, merely
Polish up your alien
techniques of observation,
while the city burns.”

He is constantly aware of being a permanent expatriate on the Indian scene and sticks to this choice of staying an expatriate forever (*Kurup*). His sense of alienation due to his 'un-Indian' roots adds to the aesthetic quality of the poems. Similarly, Geeta Chhabra is an expatriate living in the Gulf and will never be given the privileges of holding a Middle Eastern citizenship. Knowingly, she remains a part of the expatriate community while holding strong ties with her nation of origin (India) and her nation of residence (the United Arab Emirates). Reiterated in the lines:

“After all, what is the object of living?
Within a moment of moment's fading time-
One, two, three minutes pass.
I see in the declining view,
The sky eat up the orange sun.”

This makes her act as a bridge transcending between nations and people to join in the higher cause of humanitarian concern, friendship and brotherhood. This hides the sense of emotional estrangement and social alienation that is often experienced by the expatriates to give rise to a harmonious pastoral or primordial effectiveness to her poetry.

This gives rise to a tension within Nissim Ezekiel's poetry that qualifies them to have modesty of

tone, objectivity of attitude, neutrality of the medium, restraint of self, discipline of contemplation and ironic detachment (Kurup). However, simplicity is the ultimate sophistication for Ezekiel which is also echoed by Geeta Chhabra. Their writing style is conversational with autobiographical motives. The language flows in gradually and naturally with essential subjectivism to depend on as and where necessary. Nonetheless, their subjectivism does not retreat into the narrowest confines of the self that may lead to functioning in terms of self irony or self pity.

Despite moments of shocking discoveries by the poetic self, the form of their poems remain taut and concise. It is then that the ultimate inevitable revelation is made by Nissim Ezekiel that “Home is where we have to gather grace.” For Geeta Chhabra, Dubai remains her “land” but her second home. Nothing is mentioned about where she may consider her first home but the refrain

“Do you know, I often wish,

I had a hermit's cell for dwelling” in *The Great Escape* shows her decisive disaffiliation to any particular land or country and stretching beyond national and local borders to become a global citizen through a multiculturalism that Dubai embodies.

Indianness is perhaps the most challenging and controversial theme that surfaces in the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel and Geeta Chhabra. In the words of Keki Daruwalla, “Nissim Ezekiel was the first Indian poet to express modern India's sensibility in a modern idiom.” The idea of the Indianness of a work manifests time and again in their poetry. The content written by Nissim Ezekiel is very Indian in its social context. Poems like *Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.* and *Night of The Scorpion* deal with extensively Indian issues. Though belonging to a Bene Israel family makes him feel like a perpetual outsider but he reiterates, “Circumstances and decisions relate me to India.” Such themes resurface in the poems of Geeta Chhabra whose Indian identity is more international from the perspective of a member of a diaspora community. She is far from associating or endorsing provincial identities and combines spiritual unity of humankind with intellectual openness. Deeply rooted in Sufi mystical traditions like those of Ghalib, Rumi and Bulleh Shah her poetry stands for the notion of unity in diversity that is central to the Indian ethos and integral to the constitution of India. Dedicated to the everlasting ties between India and the UAE, her collection manifests moments that are punctuated by the emotions of life and the need to integrate a collective desire of the civilisation to escape annihilation. This can only be achieved if the world learns to think in a unified manner.

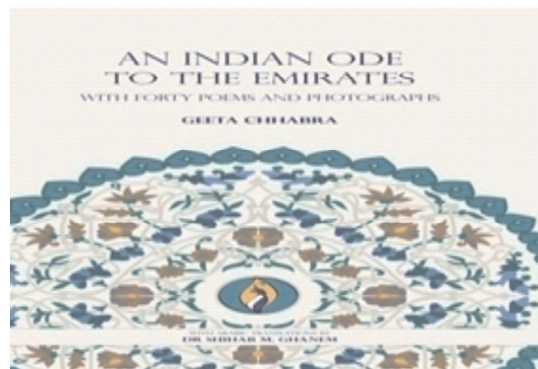


Fig. 1 Cover photo of An Indian Ode to the Emirates

Chhabra's lyrical style is intense as seen in

“During my unending quests,

Awkward compromises,

And restless journeys....

You have given me reasons to live! (Speaking to my Maker).

This intensity is coupled with a taste for intricacy that is reflected in the cover photo of the book that depicts the ornate designs of Persian carpets and Indian floral patterns (Fig 1). Similarly, Ezekiel mentions: "Scores of my poems are written for personal therapeutic purpose." Perhaps burdened or endowed, but the spiritual journey of the poetic self is ever pervasive throughout their poems. Nonetheless, a critical strain flows in between channels of exploration between the physical and the metaphysical realms.

Relatability is another aspect of their poetry. Both of them write poems that can be easily relatable to young and old, residents of urban and rural scenarios alike. The poems are more informal making them quintessentially modern. Ezekiel portrays the ills of the society and his own attitude towards them. At all times there is a sense of honesty and desire to provide a solution that is also the moral of both their collections. Chhabra asserts the notion that no society can progress towards faithfulness without self-correction. Contrasts are pitted and internal psychological debates held to humanize a broken humanity. Holistically Chhabra's poems are echoes from an aching soul best seen in *Hard Facts* and *Me- The Puzzled Person*.

Versatile and diverse, the means of expressing oneself through poetry remains eternally significant to their works. For Nissim Ezekiel, only poetry can achieve a worthwhile balance between observable reality and personal temperament. The same goes for Geeta Chhabra. Such confessional poetry helps them to render the poetic self transparent. According to Kurup, poetry offers to Ezekiel many more possibilities. It helps him to resist the temptation for ignoring or overlooking the "instructions from parents, ancestors and friends," "to know the various lives and dreams of man," "to withdraw to look at his condition with secret faults concealed no more." Geeta Chhabra's collection posits her in a position where she cannot imagine life without poetry. Both Ezekiel and Chhabra then write highly confessional poetry.

Likewise, Nissim Ezekiel's self reflexivity matches with his highly private sensibility in relation to significant social and ethical changes in post-independent India. Both their poems present a personal quest for self discovery and experimental in terms of seeking to dive deep into their own psychological structures. Dilemma is never far from their psychic embodiments. Chhabra notes in *Hard Facts*:

"And I am left destroyed by:
The voice of Terror.
The Spells of Evil.
The Contempt of Vengeance.
Images of Exploitation.
The Cry of Anguish.
The Sceptre of Disappointments.
Barriers of Ignorance.
Spaces of Loneliness.
A Sigh of Grief."

This multiplicity in their themes of Indianness, passion and politics is beyond the ordinary mix of cosmopolitan chaos and romanticised history. Their charm lies in the balance between depicting passionate emotions within glimpses of modern reality. The poems reflect the post-modern dilemma in trying to reconcile the excesses of developmental façade with the inner human instincts. It is the emotions that lie behind this 'present' that is particularized by the poet. Geeta Chhabra seeks to hold onto the values taught by her mentor and not lose faith. It is her uprightness that holds the book together. In her own words Geeta Chhabra mentions that, "As a mentor, Nissim Ezekiel gifted me a belief system to write and secure my thoughts in verse."

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