

Volume 3

Issue 1

ISSN : 2456-8228  
January-December 2018



# DERA NATUNG GOVERNMENT COLLEGE RESEARCH JOURNAL

DERA NATUNG GOVERNMENT COLLEGE

Itanagar - 791 113, Arunachal Pradesh, India

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**Voice of the Voiceless: An Analyses of the Poems of Nissim Ezekiel and  
Kamala Das**

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**Abstract**

Literature is a mirror of the mind and society. Poems, novels, short-stories, dramas and sketches would give an image of an individual, society, country and the world at large of a particular century and beyond. A profound investigation into poems or novels would reveal the unfathomable mystery of human life, expressions, emotions, feelings and struggles. Poems are a vehicle to transport the milk and honey, fire and fury of an illumined mind. Hence, the present paper is an attempt to explore the poetic stance of Nissim Ezekiel and Kamala Das and their endeavours in giving voices to their embittered experiences of marginalization, double-marginalization, exploitation and identity quest.

**Keywords:** Embittered, Marginalization, Double-Marginalization, Exploitation, Identity.

**Introduction**

‘Anglo-Indian’ to ‘Indo-Anglian’ or ‘Indian-English’ had to emerge; because early Indian English poets like Henry Derozio, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Toru Dutt, Rabindranth Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, etc. were greatly influenced by the English Romantic and Neo-Classical schools of thought as well as Greek mythology. These poets were Indian of course in blood and colour but English in flavour, ideas and thoughts. The early English poetry in India had a wide range of themes and it adhered to the norms of prosody. They maintained great poise and their rhyme and rhythm. Hence, the Post-Independent poets had to make an ‘Exodus’ from ‘Anglo-Indian’ to ‘Indo-Anglian’ (Das, 2012).

The identity of any literature is derived from the idioms, flavours, thoughts, “a local habitation and a name.” Bearing the stamp of individuality is something inevitable for any literature. The Post-Independence poets are different from the Pre-Independence poets in ethos, values and sensibility, reflecting the change in perspective and milieu after Independence. Poets like A. K. Ramanujan, R. Parthasarathy, and Kamala Das turned inward to get at their roots and made an attempt to adapt an innate tradition to English. A. K. Ramanujan reveals “Indianness” and a complex psychological force kept underlinguistic and formal control in his poetry. Nissim Ezekiel’s poems attempts to re-create Indian characters in their situations (Kumar & Tayal, 2011).

Nissim Ezekiel (1924-2004) was born in Bombay present (Mumbai) of Jewish parents (Bene-Israel) both devoted to education. His parents influenced him greatly. Ezekiel has taught at school, college and at university. His poetry collection consists of *A Time to Change* (1952), *Sixty Poems* (1953), *The Third* (1959), *The Unfinished Man* (1960), *The Exact Name* (1965), *Hymns in Darkness* (1976) and *Latter-Day Psalms*. Ezekiel has been hailed as ‘the founding father’ of Modern Indian English Poetry and eulogized as a poet-critic, who gave a new direction to it in the Post-Independence era. Varied are the themes that can be drawn from the poems of Nissim Ezekiel. All his poems are a sign board which pin-points to the reality of life. Here I would like to focus on ‘marginalization’ and ‘identity quest’ in the light of his poems (Chindhade, 2011).

### **Marginalization**

Dictionary defines marginalization is the process of making a group or class of people less important or relegated to a secondary position. Business dictionary defines marginalization as a process whereby something or someone is pushed to the edge of a group and accorded lesser importance. The condition of someone being ‘pushed to the edge of a group,’ to be ‘excluded’ and to be ‘ignored’ is being invisible though the physical body is visible. The discrimination shown to an individual or a society on the basis of caste, colour, creed, power, etc. cannot be expressed or explained in words as painful, terrible, horrible or as unbearable. It is greater than what words can express. Here Nissim Ezekiel tries to highlight this situation through his poems. He is pleading with the readers to read between the lines. He beliefs in humanism. His poems express his concern for humanity and try to find out the reason that pains mankind and the means to get rid of it. He uses irony and parody as a weapon to expose the injustice meted out to people at the various levels of the society. The agony of a railway clerk who lives in poverty and does not get promotion is presented in ‘The Railway Clerk’:

“I am never neglecting my responsibility,  
I am discharging in properly,  
I am doing my duty  
But who is appreciating?  
Nobody, I am telling you”.

(Das, 2012, p.58).

Nissim Ezekiel himself had an experience of being pushed to the edge by his own classmates ‘excluded’ and ‘ignored’. He narrates his own embittered and bitter experience. He becomes, thus, ‘A mugging Jew among the wolves.’ The Christian boys had no Christian or forgiveness of Christ. The Muslim and Hindu boys as well were inconsiderate and unkind and they terrorised Ezekiel. It is explicit in ‘Background casually’:

“I went to 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”.

(Chindhade, 2011, p.48).

## **Identity Quest**

The quest for identity or a sense of belongingness never ends in an individual. There is an inner thirst and quest in everyone to belong to another, to a family, a peer group, society and country. A rootless existence, alienation, dissociation and disunion are terrible and unimaginable. “We may think that the quest for personal identity is confined to the delicate period of adolescence. But identity is something that shifts and grows throughout life as we confront new challenges and tackle different experiences” (Vassallo, 2015).

We are never complete even when we belong, still there is a spiritual quest down in our hearts, yearning and pining for God as the Psalmist prays “As the deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you God” (Psalm 42.1, Christian Community Bible).

Searching for the roots, being rooted in a family, society, country, to a tradition and custom seems to claim the identity of an individual. Nissim Ezekiel in his poems made an attempt to relate himself to India disregarding his past. Poems like “Background casually” and “Island” are obvious instances. Ezekiel’s desire to identify himself

with the soil of India is highlighted in the poem 'Island':

“Confiscate my passport, Lord’  
I don’t want to go abroad;  
Let me find my song  
Where I belong”.

(Chindhade, 2011, p.50).

Nissim Ezekiel is a poet of modern era presenting the authentic crisis of existence of modern man. He treats life “As a journey where poetry is the source through which he could discover himself. The developing body of his poem expresses his lost self and his personal quest for a satisfactory way of living in the modern world” (Mahan, 2001, p. 193). Nissim Ezekiel’s poem ‘Encounter’ stresses the mechanical existence of the modern man;

“The city pressed upon me;  
Shops, cinemas and  
Business houses  
Spoke in unambiguous  
Accents. Only the people said  
Nothing  
They bought the evening  
Papers, hurries to a tube  
Station,  
Ceasing to exist”.

(Mahan,2001, p.35).

The above lines point out the dehumanizing effect of the modern city. It is not about a specific city, but any place where an individual loses identity. The desire to belong is identified and to be recognized is certainly is a basic need similar to that of food and shelter. Hence, Ezekiel tries to establish his identity in ‘Hymns in Darkness.’

“The Indian landscape sears my eyes.  
I have become a part of it.  
To be observed by foreigners....  
I have made my commitment now,  
This is one: to stay where I am”.

(Chindhade, 2011, pp.32-33).

Further Ezekiel confesses with resolution and determination in the poem 'Island' in the following lines:

"I cannot leave this island  
I was born here and belong".

(Das, 2012, p.54).

**Kamala Das (1934-2009)** is one of the best known contemporary Indian women writers. Writing in two languages, English and Malayalam Das has authored many autobiographical works, novels, collection of poetry in English, short stories and essays. Das published six volumes of poetry between 1965 and 1985. Das provocative poems are known for their unflinchingly honest explorations of the self and female sexuality, urban life, and women's roles in traditional Indian society, issues of postcolonial identity and the political and the personal struggles of marginalized people. She has received many awards and honours, including the P.E.N. (Poems, Essays, and Novels). In 1984, she was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature (Sen & Sharma, 1969).

### **Double-Marginalization and Exploitation**

There occurs a second type of discrimination which can be termed as double marginalization or double jeopardy just because they are poor, black and female. Double-marginalization is a concept of marginalization of a particular group or an individual within marginalized group and society. Women are the main victims of Double-Marginalization, for instance; Indian women during the colonial period, when Britishers were ruling India; Indians were marginalized in every field. Although, they (Indians) were marginalized, the women flock were doubly dispossessed, whose dignity was snatched away, the subaltern among the subaltern though visible made invisible and silenced in the society and family. The proverb says, "The face is the index of the heart." Kamala Das could read the varied expressions on the face of Indian women, their untold sages, struggles, terrifying experiences of domestic violence and exploitations. Her poems are the fire and fury of herself and the voiceless women of every age who suffers all forms of marginalization. Kamala's poems are an outburst outcry and a cloudburst against exploitation, marginalization and identity crisis of being a woman. Why should women be suppressed, discriminated, rejected and ignored? Are they not human beings? When will women be free and equal with men? The present is not different from the past. A long way to tread to be illumined with experience and knowledge. Women should be convinced, bold, determined and free to involve and to express them. They should develop wings that make them fly high above all oppression and inferiority (Mittapalli & Piciucco, 2013).



“The Old Playhouse” is a poem of protest against patriarchy in which Kamala Das lashes out against the domination of the male and the consequent dwarfing of the female. She is considered a doll, a subaltern, an “invisible” and voiceless just because she is a woman. She is humiliated and exploited. The poetess expresses the common expectations of the male-dominated Indian society. In the male-dominated society, a woman is expected to play certain conventional roles and her own wishes and aspirations are not taken into account. The poem is written in the first-person point of view. The persona in this poem is a woman who is disappointed with her conjugal life. She compares herself to a swallow and her husband a captor who wanted to tame the power of his love-making is presented in the poem ‘The Old Playhouse.’:

“You called me wife  
I was called to break saccharine into your tea and,  
To offer at the right moment the vitamins, cowering,  
Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf  
Became a dwarf I lost my will and reason, to all your  
Questions I mumbled incoherent replies”.

(Sen & Sharma, 1969, p.118)

In the above stanza, the persona’s husband’s “monstrous ego” dwarfed her personality, which resulted in the loss of her freedom, will and reason. She felt suffocated in her husband’s home. She was denied the enjoyment of free and fresh air of the outside world. She lost all interest in life and living- “no more singing, no more dance, my mind is an old house with all its lights put out”. It is a clear expression of the losing one’s identity and identity as a woman. “Incoherent replies” is a vivid proof of Kamala’s exploitation and double marginalization being with her husband. The Bible says, “And God said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and unite with his wife, and the two will become one’”(Matthew 19:5, Christian Community Bible). But in these lines of the poem we see altogether a different reality. She becomes ‘a dwarf’ loses will, reason and unconnected in speech. Speech which is the most precious gift of mankind is lost just because of her marriage and psychological fear. Is it not something alarming and precautionary? The same can be attributed to all women in a male-dominated society across the globe. They just become voiceless- to bring peace, avoid shame, uphold dignity and traditional values. It can be seen in the poems ‘An Introduction.’

My womanliness. Dress in sarees, be girl  
Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook,  
Be a quarreller with servants. Fit in, Oh,  
Belong, cried the categorizers.

(Mittapalli & Piciucco, 2013, p.85)

The woman of the poem does not want to be a woman, because her womanhood is choking and suffocating her to a living death. The so called ‘categorizers’ defines how and what should make a woman, a wife and a girl. Should the world marginalize, exploit and take away the freedom of an individual because she is born a girl? It is a painful, sad flight of every woman even today. These few lines quoted vindicate the ‘voice ‘of the illumined for the voiceless.

## **Conclusion**

Voiceless members of societies and countries are numerous. They have become voiceless on account of being poor, illiterate, low class, creed, dispersion, refugees, colour, female, power and position. If the voiceless are unnumbered, then the voice of a few should be heeded. It is just because everyone cannot speak and express the inner most feelings. Every form of literature, art and films are a mode to transport the milk and honey, fire and fury of a mind. Literature offers subjective and objective view of an individual and society. It presents the past, present and future. It also brings out the real and unreal. The poets and novelists can be compared to scientist, because the brain child of writer can be made real. Nissim Ezekiel and Kamala Das poems raise their voices as critique against the society for crushing the powerless and voiceless. The poems that are analysed here are vivid instances of their own experiences of being marginalized, exploited and the loss of identity. Marginalization, Double-Marginalization and Identity Quest has been there in all culture and world over affecting in big or small scales. It cannot be uprooted overnight but in the course of time it has to disappear from the face of the earth; to consider every individual with a unique dignity of their own or for being a human being. Here I would like to quote Rabindranath Tagore’s, Gitanjali.

“Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;  
Where knowledge is free;  
Where the world has not been broken up fragments by narrow domestic walls;”  
(Tagore, 2007, p.35).

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1. Ramya, T. (2016). People of Arunachal Pradesh. *Dera Natung Government College Research Journal*, 1(1), 100-121.

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Volume 3

Issue 1

ISSN : 2456-8228  
January-December 2018

## **DERA NATUNG GOVERNMENT COLLEGE RESEARCH JOURNAL**

**Printed and published by Mr. Tao Abo on behalf of Dera Natung Government College. Printed and published from M/s Eastern Horizon Printing Press Bank Tinali, Itanagar, Papum Pare District -791 111, Arunachal Pradesh, Editor Mr. Tao Abo.**