

Indian Modernity in English Verse: A Comparative Study of Nissim Ezekiel and A. K. Ramanujan

Mr. Rupesh Dilip Tanksale (M.A., SET, NET)

Assistant Professor in English Savitribai Phule Mahila Mahavidyalaya Satara

Abstract—Indian English poetry changed greatly after Indian Independence in 1947. Earlier poets often wrote about Indian spirituality, nationalism, nature, and an idealized India. Post-Independence poets, however, began to write about ordinary life, cities, family, social problems, loneliness, cultural conflict, and modern identity. Nissim Ezekiel and A. K. Ramanujan are two important poets of this modern period. Both wrote in English, but they presented Indian modernity in different ways. Ezekiel mainly writes about the modern city, loneliness, social life, religion, and the problems of belonging. Ramanujan focuses more on family, memory, tradition, Indian culture, and the relationship between India and the West. Nissim Ezekiel and A. K. Ramanujan occupy a particularly significant position in this development. Both poets write in English, but their English is reshaped by Indian experience, speech patterns, cultural memory, and indigenous traditions. This paper compares their poetry and shows that both poets use English to express Indian experiences. Their poetry combines modern ideas with Indian culture and tradition. Thus, Indian modernity in their poetry is not simply Westernization but a meeting of Indian traditions and modern life. Indian English poetry underwent a major transformation after Independence in 1947. The study argues that neither poet understands modernity as a simple rejection of tradition. Instead, their poetry presents modern Indian identity as hybrid, conflicted, and continuously negotiating between inherited cultural structures and contemporary life.

Index Terms—Indian English poetry, Modernity, Tradition, Identity, Culture

I. INTRODUCTION

Indian English poetry became more modern after Independence. Poets began to move away from romantic and highly idealized descriptions of India. They started writing about real people, cities, family relationships, social problems, and personal

experiences. Nissim Ezekiel and A. K. Ramanujan are two important poets of this period. Ezekiel is known for his poems about Bombay, modern life, religion, relationships, and loneliness. Ramanujan is known for his poems about family, childhood, memory, Indian traditions, and cultural differences. Both poets use English, but they make the language suitable for Indian experience. Their poetry shows that Indian modernity is a mixture of the old and the new.

II. RESEARCH OBJECTIVITIES

- To examine the representation of Indian Modernity in the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel and A. K. Ramanujan.
- To investigate the relationship between Indian tradition and Western modernity.
- To analyse their use of language, imagery, irony, and poetic techniques.
- To explore the influence of Indian traditions and Western modernity on their poetry.
- To highlight their contribution to Indian English poetry and their distinctive responses to modern Indian life.

III. NISSIM EZEKIEL AND INDIAN MODERNITY

Nissim Ezekiel: Nissim Ezekiel is considered one of the major pioneers of modern Indian English poetry. He occupies a foundational position in modern Indian English poetry. He was born in Bombay and belonged to the Bene Israel Jewish community. His cultural position was therefore already complex: he was Indian, Jewish, educated in English, influenced by Western modernism, and deeply involved in Indian literary life. His poetry is closely connected with urban

life. He writes about the ordinary experiences of people living in modern India. His poem “Night of the Scorpion” is a good example. The poem open with a simple memory:

“I remember the night my mother
Was stung by a scorpion.”
(Collected Poems: 1952–1988, p. 130)

The simplicity of the opening is characteristic of Ezekiel's poetry. There is no elaborate romantic introduction. The poem begins with an ordinary domestic event. The villagers interpret the mother's suffering through traditional concepts of sin, karma, and rebirth. The father, described as a “sceptic” and “rationalist,” attempts practical remedies. The villagers may be superstitious, yet they come together to help the suffering woman. The poem presents two different attitudes. The villagers believe in traditional religious practices, while the poet's father is a rationalist. Ezekiel writes:

“My father, sceptic, rationalist”

Here we see the conflict between traditional belief and modern rational thinking. However, Ezekiel does not simply say that one side is right and the other is wrong. Both traditional belief and modern rationalism exist together in Indian society. The poem ends with the mother's loving words:

“Thank God the scorpion picked on me
and spared my children.”
(Collected Poems: 1952–1988, p. 131)

The poem therefore combines modern thinking with traditional family values.

“Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T. S.” is another important poem for understanding Ezekiel's treatment of Indian modernity. The poem imitates the speech of an Indian speaker giving a farewell speech in English. The speaker uses incorrect grammar, repetitions, unusual expressions, and Indian idioms. The humour is obvious, but the poem is more than a linguistic joke. It represents: Indian middle-class culture, social pretension, colonial educational influence, bureaucratic language, the gap between formal English and everyday Indian speech.

Ezekiel and Urban Life-Ezekiel's poetry often presents the Indian city as a place of loneliness and confusion. His poem “Enterprise” begins:

“It started as a pilgrimage”
(Collected Poems: 1952–1988, p. 117)

The journey begins with a religious purpose but gradually becomes difficult and disappointing. The poem shows the difference between human expectations and reality. Ezekiel's modern man is often lonely and uncertain. He does not completely accept traditional values, but he also does not find complete satisfaction in modern life. His poem “The Patriot” is also important because it uses Indian English. The poet presents the way ordinary Indians speak English. In this way, English becomes an Indian language rather than simply a colonial language.

A. K. Ramanujan: Modernity through Memory and Tradition – A.K. Ramanujan (1929–1993) occupies a different position from Ezekiel. Ramanujan was deeply connected with South Indian linguistic and cultural traditions. He was a poet, translator, folklorist, and scholar. His experience of living and working in the United States created another dimension in his poetry. A. K. Ramanujan presents modernity in a different way. His poetry is strongly connected with memory, family, childhood, Indian culture, and tradition. At the same time, he was deeply influenced by Western education and spent much of his professional life in the United States. *Small-Scale Reflections on a Great House* is one of the poem reflected Indian modernity and treatment of family. The poem begins:

“Sometimes I think that nothing
That ever comes into this house goes out.”

The house in the poem becomes a powerful symbol. It represents: family, tradition, memory, social relationships. Everything entering the house becomes part of its history. This image is particularly significant for Indian modernity. Modern life encourages individual independence, mobility, and geographical movement. Yet the traditional Indian family often operates through continuity, obligation, memory, and collective identity. Ramanujan “house” therefore becomes an image of cultural inheritance.

Ramanujan: Tradition and Modern Life- Ramanujan's poetry does not present tradition as completely good. He also shows its weaknesses and contradictions. His family poems contain love, but they also contain problems, obligations, and restrictions. In "Obituary," Ramanujan writes about his father's death. He remembers the ordinary things that remain after his father's death. The poem includes the phrase:

"A house of books and bills"
(The Collected Poems, p. 111)

The phrase is simple but meaningful. Books represent knowledge and culture, while bills represent ordinary modern life. Ramanujan brings these two worlds together. His poetry therefore shows that tradition does not disappear in modern society. It continues through family memories, language, customs, and relationships.

Ezekiel and Ramanujan: Language- Language is one of the most important areas of comparison. Both poets write in English, but neither simply reproduces British literary English. They create an Indian English poetic idiom. Ezekiel frequently uses: conversational language, irony, ordinary speech, comic expressions, urban vocabulary. His poems sound close to everyday Indian conversation. Ramanujan language is generally more compressed and intellectually controlled. He uses: cultural references, mythological allusions, Tamil/Kannada cultural structures, metaphor. Both therefore demonstrate that English can become an Indian literary language.

IV. FINDINGS-

The comparative study finds that Nissim Ezekiel and A. K. Ramanujan portray Indian modernity as a conflicted and hybrid experience, shaped by the interaction of Indian tradition, colonial influence, Western ideas, and rapidly changing social realities.

- Both are Post-Independence Poets- They belong to the generation that established a strong modern Indian English poetic tradition.
- Both Reject Romantic Idealization- They represent ordinary life rather than an imaginary ideal India.
- Both poets: write about ordinary Indian life.

- Use of English language in an Indian way- They adapt English to Indian speech and cultural contexts.
- Explore identity and cultural conflict- Their poetry repeatedly moves between tradition and modernity.
- Show the influence of both Indian and Western cultures- Western modernist techniques are adapted to Indian subject matter.

However, their approaches are different. Ezekiel mainly focuses on urban life and the individual. His modernity is connected with Bombay, loneliness, social problems, religion, and personal identity. Ramanujan mainly focuses on family, memory, culture, and tradition. His modernity develops from the meeting of Indian traditions and Western experience.

V. CONCLUSION

Nissim Ezekiel and A. K. Ramanujan played an important role in the development of modern Indian English poetry. Both poets rejected the idealized picture of India and wrote about real experiences. Ezekiel presents Indian modernity through the city, individual loneliness, social life, religious doubt, and Indian English. Ramanujan presents it through family, memory, tradition, language, and cultural conflict. Although their methods are different, both poets show that Indian modernity is not simply an imitation of the West. It is a mixture of tradition and change, India and the West, past and present. Their poetry proves that English can be used successfully to express the complex realities of Indian life.

The study concludes that Ezekiel and Ramanujan represent two complementary dimensions of Indian modernity. Ezekiel's poetry is more strongly associated with the external realities of modern urban India, while Ramanujan explores the internal and cultural dimensions of modernity through memory, family, and tradition. Despite their differences, both poets demonstrate that Indian modernity is a dynamic, contradictory, and culturally hybrid experience. Their poetry therefore occupies an important position in the development of modern Indian English literature.

REFERENCES

- [1] Ezekiel, Nissim. Collected Poems: 1952–1988. Oxford University Press, 1989.
- [2] Ramanujan, A. K. The Collected Poems. Oxford University Press, 1995.
- [3] Iyengar, K. R. Srinivasa. Indian Writing in English. Sterling Publishers.
- [4] King, Bruce. Modern Indian Poetry in English. Oxford University Press.
- [5] Naik, M. K. A History of Indian English Literature. Sahitya Akademi.
- [6] Parthasarathy, R., editor. Ten Twentieth-Century Indian Poets. Oxford University Press.
- [7] Rajan, P. K. Studies in the Recent Indian English Poetry. Abhinav Publications.
- [8] Mehrotra, Arvind Krishna, editor. The Oxford India Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets. Oxford University Press.