

## **I MA ENGLISH 18PELE1**

### **INDIAN WRITING IN ENGLISH UNIT – I**

#### **“Background Casually” Nissim Ezekiel**

The poem “Background Casually” written by Nissim Ezekiel tells about the struggle of the poet for identity in a country where he as well as his community (Jews) is considered to an alien.

The poem has been divided into three sections. The first section deals with the childhood of the poet. The second section throws light on his adult-age and third section deals with the old-age of the poet.

In the beginning, Ezekiel uses the third person for himself. According to him, he was born low. Being a member of the alien community he could neither eat nor could sleep and thus became quite weak. Due to this feeling, he could not fly a kite. Even the top also failed to spin in his hands.

In the next stanza, the poet describes his childhood by using the first person. He was sent to a Roman Catholic School where he, according to him, was like prey before wolves (referring to Hindus and Muslims).

He was often taunted by the Hindus and Muslims who accused him of the murder of Christ. They compare him to Judas who betrayed Christ. The same year he won Scripture prize depicting that he was quite good in his schooling. He was often beaten by a Muslim boy and hence terror reigned in his mind during that stage.

Not only Muslims but Hindu boys also repelled him away with their wrong accent and use of language. Being enraged he even thought of becoming violent and used his knife, though he did not mention where, how and why he used the knife.

One night he heard prayers that made him believe that he is not morally so good (as he heard of Yoga and Zen). He thought if he could still become a Rabbi (a saint). Being curious he tried to find the answer but the deeper he went the more confused he was.

In the second section, Ezekiel talks about his adult-age experiences. His family desired to send him to England for higher studies but being financially poor they could not effort his expenses. However one of their friends paid for him and he was able to go to England.

There he was alone and considered poverty, poetry, and philosophy of his friends. Time passed and even after two years he was alone. A woman came and tried to motivate him and henceforth he tried to make his life a little bit better.

Later he recognized his failure which became an unbearable thought. After spending some years he desired to go back to India. However, he was too poor to do so.

Hence he started working on a cargo ship that took French guns and mortar shells to India and China. He was finally able to go back to India on the same ship.

After coming back to India Ezekiel tried to be happy and feel at home again. However, he was still an alien. His father often told him that all the Hindus are violent. Nissim and his family were often humiliated by their neighbors. Hence he prepared to endure the worst.

He married and even changed his job. Doing such things he acknowledged that he was a fool. He started writing poetry and knew well that he has ample to write. He explains how low their community was. His ancestors did the job of crushing seeds which were not a good job.

In the 3rd section, Ezekiel explains his experience as an old person. He says that one of his friends told how he fought in the Boer War. Hearing the stories started fearing

from the Indians. He recognized that writing poetry is also not safe and even the words can harm a person.

He wrote poems and gave up his sufferings. Now he tried to write wisely without giving free play to his thoughts. He expresses his inner and outer suffering that he ultimately failed to defeat. He says that now he has become an integral part of India.

The foreigners consider him to be an alien on that land (India). But he decided now he will consider himself as an Indian. He has to stay there though it is a backward place for the other Jews living outside of India.

### **"Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher" Nissim Ezekiel**

In "Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher," the speaker describes the process of writing poetry and compares it to being a lover or a birdwatcher. The speaker notes that "to force the pace and never to be still" will not get one very far if one wants to "study birds / or women" (lines 1-3). The speaker then reveals the point of these comparisons: "The best poets wait for words" (3).

The speaker notes that this waiting should not be strenuous and instead should be as peaceful as "patient love relaxing on a hill" (5). From this relaxation, the poet/lover/birdwatcher can notice details, like a bird's wing or the moment a woman gives in to love.

The speaker moves on to say that he finds much more meaning from "slow movement" (11). In order to find the rarer birds, the speaker advises, one must go off the beaten path toward areas that are "remote and thorny" (15). Once one arrives at such a location, the bird or woman one was chasing will "slowly turn around" (16). Poetic creativity is discovered in this place, a power so transformative that because of it, "the deaf can hear, the blind recover sight" (20).

#### **Analysis**

"Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher" is known as one of Ezekiel's more 'serious' poems, as is evidenced by the content and the form. Ezekiel does not use an ironic tone at all in this poem, which is relatively rare for him. The seriousness of the content is reflected in a strict meter and rhyme scheme. The capitalizations at the beginning of each line have returned. Additionally, the poem is broken up into two stanzas with two lines each, which visually signals symmetry and perfection for the reader. All of these formal elements slow the reader down and force her to digest that which she is reading and in turn take it more seriously.

Because this poem is essentially about writing poems, it can be classified as an *ars poetica*. Ezekiel has written many an *ars poetica* throughout his career, but "Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher" is by far his most famous. Perhaps this is because it is only partly about the writing process; the rest of the poem is about nature and love. In fact, the transition from one image to another is so seamless in this poem that the poet (and his poem), lover (and his woman), and birdwatcher (and his birds) melt into one persona in order to carry the poem to the end.

This poem contains the theme of self-examination, which pops up again and again throughout Ezekiel's work. He notes that his process is hardly orthodox: "and sense is found / By poets lost in crooked, restless flight" (18-19). It is this "restless" flight that the poet is forced to complete in the search for inspiration. Likewise, the bird in the poem is symbolic for the quest for self-knowledge, which turns out to be elusive, restless, and often rare in Ezekiel's writing. In the same vein, the female image can be read as

representing a fertile creative impulse. No real advancements are made in the poem, however, until the poet, lover, and birdwatcher become one.

### **“Obituary” By AK Ramanujan**

The poem “Obituary” written by AK Ramanujan is about quite ironical. The word Obituary means a notice of death in a newspaper including a brief biography. The poem is written on the death of his father. The poet explains how his death has affected his family and what he (his father) has achieved in his life.

The poet says that when his father died he left nothing for the family but problems like dust on a table of papers, debts, unmarried daughters & a bedwetting grandson whose name is a little bit similar to his father’s name.

The poet continues that his father has left a house that leaned slowly through our growing years on a bent coconut tree in the yard. The line means that they have inherited a house from his father which is leaning on a coconut tree and thus in bad condition.

The poet calls his father as the burning type indicating that he was a bad-tempered man and would never have behaved properly with him or the other family members. Being hot-tempered he burned properly at the cremation. The phrase gives the message of tit for tat.

The line continues from the previous one (enjambment). He is burnt very easily from both the sides. except his eye coins (coin either signifies his anger or his greed for money) which didn’t look one bit different even after burning and also several spinal discs though some of them burnt to coal.

This stanza continues from the previous one. According to the poet, the remains of his father’s pyre are left for sons to pick as the priest said, facing east where three rivers met near the railway station.

The lines show that the priest forces the sons to perform the Hindu Rituals. The poet is in no way ready to do it. His father has no grave (as his ashes and remains are thrown in the river) with his full name.

In addition, there also no two dates (his birth and death dates) to show throw light on his life. The poet calls him incapable as he didn’t do anything on his own. His birth was Caesarian in a brahmin ghetto and his death by heart failure in the fruit market.

The lines, in my views and as quoted in this article question the genius of Brahman. In Hinduism, the Brahmans or the Upper Casts are worshipped as Avatars of Gods.

However, the poet shows that his father took birth as a Brahman yet his birth was ordinary and even his death could not be controlled by him. In spite of being educated, he died in the market of heart failure and he couldn’t save himself.

However, the poet comes to know that two lines were written for him in an inside column of a Madras newspaper which is sold by the kilo (as junk) after four weeks of his death to street hawkers. These street hawkers sell it in turn to the small groceries. From these groceries, the poet buys salt, coriander, and jaggery in newspaper cones which he reads for fun. The poet says that he began to buy more of these things in the hope of finding these obituary lines which were written for his father. In the end, he says that his father left with them with a changed mother (she remains sorrowful) and more than one annual ritual. The poet is showing his dislike for the ritual which is celebrated in the memory of his father for his peace.

Thus the poet says that his father achieved nothing in this world except those two lines (obituary) which were written in the newspaper he could never find out. On the

other hand, he left an unbearable burden on the poet. The poem is hence a critique of the poet's father and his incapacabilities.

### **“My Grandmother’s House” Kamala Das**

The poem My Grandmother's House is written by Kamala Das. The poem has been written in the memory of her grandmother with whom she had spent her childhood.

The poet considers those moments to be the best moments of her life and desires to get them. She also mourns their loss. Like her poem An Introduction, this poem also falls into the category of confessional poetry.

At the beginning of the poem, the poet says that there is a home that is now very far from her where she received love. It was the house of her grandmother in which she spent the days of her childhood.

However, that woman, (her grandmother) is dead now and the home “withdrew in silence” i.e. is without any life because her grandmother was the very soul of it.

Grandmother also had books which she could not read as he was quite young and she would read stories for her (poet). But now the snakes are moving in those books. All these things made the house quite horrible and the poet “like the moon” i.e. quite unhappy. She is now without any life and warmth.

The poet expresses her desire to go to her grandmother's house because she is emotionally attached to it since her childhood. She wants to look through the “blind eyes of windows” of her grandmother's house.

The term “blind eyes of windows” means that there is no one (in other words, her grandmother) in the house to look for. She also desires to listen to “the frozen air” of that house. “Frozen Air” probably means that that the house is locked and the fresh air has not moved in.

The poet desires to move into her thoughts which are buried deep inside her heart and no air has blown into it. Thus the grandmother's house here is rather a sweet memory that she wants to recall.

The poet further says that she wants to bring the darkness of her grandmother's house with her “in wild despair” i.e. in her troubled life.

The line makes it clear that her grandmother was very protective. And now that she feels insecure, even the darkness of her grandmother's house, which is though unpleasant like cold moon comforts her.

In the final lines, the poet is in conversation probably with her husband or her readers. The poet says that one won't believe that she had some of the best memories of her grandmother's house and she is quite proud of it.

Now that she has lost her grandmother, she begs at strangers' doors for love. She knows well that you won't be able to get that much love but she still hopes for at least a part of it.

Hence the poet ends with hope and despair. In her poem, My Mother at Sixty-Six the poet is struggling with similar feelings. Please refer to this doc for further reading. Here are some important questions and answers to this poem.

### **Calcutta If You Must Exile Me**

“Calcutta If You Must Exile Me” is the best known single poem of the renowned Indian English poet and media personality Prithvi Nandy. The poem is widely anthologised in major Indian English poetry collections and is regarded as a pioneering classic in modern Indian English writing.

The poem is remarkable for its breathless tempo, vivid imagery and unsuppressed angst at societal decadence. The poem is addressed to the Indian city of Kolkata, although not in eulogical terms.

Calcutta if you must exile me wound my lips before I go

...

lips Calcutta burn my eyes before I go into the night  
the headless corpse in a Dhakuria bylane the battered youth his brains  
blown out and the silent vigil that takes you to Pataldanga lane  
where they will gun you down without vengeance or hate  
I will show you the fatigue of that woman who died near Chitpur out  
of sheer boredom and the cages of Burrabazar where passion hides  
the wrinkle of virgins who have aged waiting  
for a sexless war that never came

...

and I will show you the hawker who died with Calcutta in his eyes  
Calcutta if you must exile me destroy my sanity before I go

The poem was written in the late 1970s or early 1980s. The poet himself reminisces in a 2009 interview that the poem describes his feelings of a city he left 27 years ago.

The poet was a resident of Calcutta (now Kolkata), and in the poet's own words, the poem is based on his direct real life experience of the city. The poem evokes the mood of a man born in Calcutta, bred in Calcutta and living in Calcutta.

The poem is notable for its fast tempo, impassioned conversational diction and sharp images depicting the "brutalities of city life. The most unusual feature of the poem is that it does not have a single punctuation mark - no comma, fullstop or hyphen. In fact, the entire poem is composed only of words, without any hyphenation or fancy spacing, almost as a rebellion against regimentation of any poetic structure. Such a style was a trendsetter during the period of its composition.

In the poem, although Nandy portrays the ruthlessness prevalent in the city, he loves the city so much that he does not want to leave it.

The unique style of the poem has inspired many modern Indian poets. The poem was harbinger of a new style of realistic writing on urban life in fast paced tempo. Although the poem has spawned many imitations, none has equalled the power and majesty of the original. This poem brought a breath of fresh air, almost true in an Indian environment and starkly different from the mainstream Indian writings of the day.