

## SCHOLARLY ARTICLE

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# **Nissim Ezekiel: English Language, Indian English and Decolonization**

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### **Abstract**

India as a country has experienced multiple shifts of identity. Like all the other nations, India, too, had a change of identity every time the ruler changed. The new ruler brought a new set of ideas and implemented them upon the masses. During the time of the English rule in India, the same thing happened. Today, even after several decades of independence, we cannot free ourselves totally from the clutches of the Whites. The foreign fantasy continues to grab us. But some people have tried to decolonize. One of those people is Nissim Ezekiel. Language is one of the primary and most effective sources of dominance as pointed out by multiple postcolonial critics. Ezekiel uses the English language to decolonize. He celebrates the Indian English by embracing it and somewhere forcing the world to accept it.

**Keywords:** Decolonizing, Language, Indianness, English, People

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## **Introduction**

The English language could be seen as the effect of the long colonial period that India went through. The countries which go through a phase of colonization tend to consciously or subconsciously imbibe some colonial aspects. The English language could be seen as one of the colonial aspects that India imbibed. As Dasgupta writes, “The sixteenth century English poet Samuel Daniel anticipated that Britain would rapidly emerge as an imperialistic power and very soon the language would overwhelmingly influence the colonized” ( Dasgupta 207).

The language played a large role in influencing the literature. English literature like any other literature has multiple forms of writing. These different forms of writing include poetry, dramas, novels, etc. Poetry, amongst these forms, is one of the oldest forms of writing. The writers have seen poetry as one of the most expressive forms of writing. Many writers have used poetry as a powerful tool not only to transmit their emotions but also to make bold statements signaling a big change. One such poet was Nissim Ezekiel from India. He played a vital role in introducing modern themes to Indian poetry.

The poems of Ezekiel revolve around the themes of alienation, loneliness, urban life, etc. Along with exploring all these themes, Ezekiel also helps decolonize through his poems. India was ruled by the Whites for almost two hundred years. After India became independent, the main concern was to decolonize. The poems of Ezekiel seem to contribute largely when it comes to decolonizing. The Indianness reflected in the poems of Ezekiel could be seen as a major step towards the decolonizing journey. Poems such as “The Patriot,” “Goodbye Party

For Miss Pushpa T.S.," and "Soap" celebrate the Indian way of handling the English language. Ezekiel to decolonize, decolonizes the English language itself.

### **Ezekiel's way of decolonizing**

The selection of language and its use indicates a lot about any writing. The language also decides the reach of any particular work. It also reveals a lot about the poet and poem in itself. Ezekiel by using English in an Indian way in his poems makes multiple statements; one of those statements is regarding decolonization. Many writers and critics have handled the topic of decolonization in their own unique way. The traditional approach towards decolonization by Fanon is:

In order to ensure his salvation and to escape from the supremacy of the white man's culture the native feels the need to turn backwards towards his unknown roots and to lose himself at whatever cost in his own barbarous people. (175)

Fanon here talks about turning back to the native roots. But how can one turn back to the origins when after two hundred years of rule, we do not have any trace of it. Ngugi wa Thiong'o comes forth with a different solution. He asks people to renounce the use of the English language in order to decolonize. As he writes,

The choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people's definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe. Hence language has always been at the heart of the two contending social forces in the Africa of the twentieth century. (Thiong'o 4)

Following this principle and his belief that language plays a vital role in definition of an individual, Ngugi wa Thiong'o himself renounced the use of the English language and now

writes in Gikuyu, one of the local languages of Kenya. He even changed his name from James Ngugi to Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Thus, highlighting his approach to decolonization.

Ezekiel seems to walk on a different pathway from these two. He neither staunchly looks back at the conventional Indian roots nor renounces English. He finds a mid-path. He adopts the English language which is a result of colonial rule but in a localized way without stressing too much on the grammatical aspects of the language. He celebrates the English of India or Indian English as we refer to it, thus adding an altogether new and different dimension to the entire process of decolonization. Dulai in one of his works writes,

Nissim Ezekiel may be justifiably called the father of post-independence and modern poetry of India and, through the influence of Indian literature on the entire subcontinent, the father of the postcolonial South Asian poetry as well.  
(123)

### **The Use of English in an Indian Way**

Ezekiel in some of his poems does not use English in a very staunchly grammatical way. The language used by him from a conventional English perspective could be referred to as grammatically incorrect. He tries to use English in a very Indian way. Using English in an Indian way refers to the English language used in a way that does not conform to the standards of using the language as done by the Whites. The language here is spoken with a very basic knowledge as reflected in the poem "Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S." as Ezekiel writes:

You are all knowing, friends,  
What sweetness is in Miss Pushpa.  
I don't mean only external sweetness  
but internal sweetness.  
Miss Pushpa is smiling and smiling

even for no reason but simply because  
she is feeling. (“Miss Pushpa T.S.”)

In these lines, we can see how the grammatical structure does not conform to the standards of what is referred to as proper or correct English. But despite that, the meaning remains lucid. The readers can easily understand what the speaker in this line wants to convey. The Whites have always tried to dominate by highlighting their fluency and command of the English language. They could only respect their own sentence structures and pronunciations demeaning the others. The Indians did not have such access to fluent English. But they gathered the courage to speak. This is what exactly Ezekiel seems to point out. This representation of the English language by Ezekiel carries a major relevance because he knows the correct way of writing in English but still chose to write in the local Indian way. As if highlighting a statement that this too is a way of speaking English and that the Indians have to be accepted when they speak English in such a way.

### **Celebrating India in Indian English**

The citizens of India have always seen India and Indianness as a matter of pride. People are opting for the Western idea and Western style of living. But even today a large percentage of people believe in living their life in an Indian way. This in itself is a decolonizing element. But along with that Ezekiel's use of the Indian English language to highlight this point of view is also something that needs to be appreciated. As could be seen in the lines of the poem “The Patriot” where he writes:

I am standing for peace and non-violence.  
Why world is fighting fighting  
Why all people of world  
Are not following Mahatma Gandhi,

I am simply not understanding.

Ancient Indian Wisdom is 100% correct,

I should say even 200% correct,

But modern generation is neglecting -

Too much going for fashion and foreign thing. (“The Patriot”)

India has often been referred to by the Whites as a country of snakes and sages. The idea of the Whites to spread English education was also due to the fact that they found India as a country with insufficient knowledge for progression. According to them the introduction of the English language is the major tool of enlightenment that the Europeans are bestowing upon India. But Ezekiel through these lines seems to answer back to all those claims. As he makes it clear how India had rich ancient wisdom. This makes it clear that we were never insufficient of knowledge as presented by the Whites. These lines too could be seen as a way of decolonizing. Ezekiel as a writer is forcing us to turn to our roots which is somewhere forgotten by us due to our foreign fantasy. In these lines, it is evident how Ezekiel is celebrating India. The lines begin with the mention of the Indian ideologies of “peace and non-violence” and eventually he moves further to celebrate the freedom fighters. It was only due to the active role of the freedom fighters that we became free from the shackles of colonialism. And needless to say, Gandhi played a big role in this freedom struggle. Then Ezekiel moves forward to celebrate the “Ancient Indian Wisdom” which he refers to as being “200% correct.” Along with praising all these aspects, he disregards the Indians for following the Western style and trend.

### **Exploring India and Indian concerns in Indian English**

India was perceived as the “other.” Even the Indians were initially viewed from the eyes of the Whites. But Ezekiel gives proper respect to India as a country. He not only highlights the major concerns but also highlights small everyday problems. Drawing our attention to how these

everyday problems are explained by Indians in Indian English. In his poem “Soap” he shares the experience of a person who received a defective “Soap” from the shop and his struggles to exchange it. The poem begins with the lines:

Some people are not having manners,  
this I am always observing,  
For example other day I find  
I am needing soap  
For ordinary washing myself purposes.  
So I'm going to one small shop  
nearby in my lane and I'm asking  
for well-known brand soap.

That shopman he's giving me soap  
but I'm finding it defective version.  
So I'm saying very politely — -  
though in Hindi I'm saying it,  
and my Hindi is not so good as my English,  
Please to excuse me  
but this is defective version of well-known brand soap. (“Soap”)

The poem revolves around the theme of the suppression of a customer by a seemingly powerful shopkeeper. The shopkeeper, as claimed by the speaker, tries to sell him a “defective version” of the product. It is unclear whether the “Soap” was a duplicate one or a defective one. However, there are several important statements embedded in these lines. The poet, despite speaking grammatically incorrect English, claims that “my Hindi is not as good as my English.” This line is not a mere comical statement rather it could be seen as a bold argument. The line

signifies the confidence of the speaker, who is not ashamed of how he speaks but has confidence in his way of speaking. Through these lines, Ezekiel motivates the Indians to speak English in their way, by shifting aside from the conventional and standard parameters. Along with stating that this version of English has to be accepted by the world because this is how we Indians speak English and this can't be labeled as wrong.

### **The foreign fantasy versus the Indianness**

India as a nation has been independent for almost eighty years now. But our mentality of being colonized seems to be genetically transferred to us. The master- slave dynamics still continues. But the major question is how and why. The Whites are no longer controlling us directly as they used to back then. The indirect ways of control still continue. But the fact that the indirect ways of control are becoming successful is our fault. Because we are somewhere letting those ideologies and ideas rule us. Thus becoming victims in their hands by letting them control us. Despite the fact that we now have choices and entire liberty to free ourselves from these ideological shackles. The English language remains one of the strong parts of this ideological shackle. Though the way in which we justify one's ability to speak English now has changed. Now speaking English is no longer about power possession as it used to be. But now it is more about necessity.

Immediately after independence the English language was only accessible to the elites who were fortunate enough to have good exposure and resources which allowed them to speak grammatically correct English. But the common masses did not have such access. But still they spoke in whatever way they could, which made them a laughing stock. But no one thought of appreciating them and motivating them. The question of someone representing them is something which does not even arise. But Ezekiel filled that gap. Despite being an individual



who could speak grammatically correct English he chose to represent the Indian masses. He not only represented these masses who lacked representation but also put them on the map.

Ezekiel almost emerged as a ray of light for the common masses of India. He not only did a job of validating the way in which English was spoken in India. But somewhere he made the claim that the Indian way of speaking English needs to be accepted and respected too.

### **The importance of Ezekiel's contribution**

The fact that the intensity of his contribution could not be understood back then made the poems an undiscovered one for a large period of time. Also, the people were unaware about the fact that someone was thinking for them. But when the terms like decolonization are spoken even today Ezekiel remains a name that can't go unmentioned. Proper recognition and respect needs to be made for someone who chose to move away from making fun of those who couldn't speak proper English but thought of representing them.

It is today when the dimensions of the margin and center are blurring and we're learning that all are important in their own way. We have started to respect the Indians who try to speak English irrespective of the fact that they lack fluency. But the time in which Ezekiel wrote these poems such a thought process was almost impossible to imagine. As people were drenched in the river of foreign fantasy and were trying to be the perfect English speaking gentleman which would earn them a lot of respect, recognition and most importantly social validation.

Thus, Ezekiel could be seen as one of the most important writers that India as a nation ever witnessed. In the time when people were running and craving to be perfect. He celebrated the flaws. Highlighting them not as flaws but altogether as a new way of speaking English.

### **Different opinions regarding Ezekiel' portrayal of Indianness**

On one hand we see Ezekiel's poems advocating the Indianess. But on the other hand there have been critics who have opinioned differently regarding the use of Indian English in the poems of Ezekiel. As Ahmed writes,

It has been very naive on the part of some readers to valorise this kind of writing as an instance of 'Indian English' and call Ezekiel its champion. He was in no way its advocate. He did not put up any theoretical defence of this brand of English in the manner of Kachru because he did not believe in it as a complete and autonomous linguistic entity. A professor of English in the University of Bombay he was not completely without Anglophilic leanings and was influenced by T. S. Eliot in the formative part of his poetic career. (164)

But it was Ahmed himself who immediately after writing these lines wrote "He propagated the use of good, standard English which certainly did not take away from him the 'Indianness' of his poetic sensibility" (Ahmed 164). This somewhere points out the disagreement of Ahmed with himself as the two statements appear quite contradictory. There can be multiple opinions on a particular topic. We have to respect all the opinions equally. On one hand some critics like Ahmed believe that Ezekiel "was in no way" an "advocate" of "Indian English." But on the other hand critics like Bruce King take a different stance. As Bruce King in the very beginning of his book *Three Indian Poets: Ezekiel, Moraes, and Ramanujan* writes that

They may be considered the founders of modern poetry in English; the first three post-colonial poets who created a body of work of international standard, who established reputations, who continued to develop as poets and whose work either directly or indirectly expresses some of the tensions of Indian writing in English. (1)

Thus, it becomes clear that the critics have been quite ambiguous regarding the significance of the contribution made by Ezekiel. But our study and observation forces us to see Ezekiel as the advocate of Indian English. As he tries to establish the reputation of Indians who speak English in an Indian way by claiming the respectable attention of the entire world towards it.

### **Conclusion**

Ezekiel as a writer could be seen as one of the revolutionary writers. But what is unfortunate is that he remains unnoticed and not as celebrated as he should have been. His attempts to prove that all are good in their own way, something that we are celebrating today, was way ahead of its time. People could not understand its intensity back then. The English language has always been something on which the Whites had their constant monopoly. The language which was used by them as a tool of domination soon became the medium of breaking the shackles by the natives, and all the credit goes to people like Ezekiel who took the responsibility to change the perception one had towards the English language. Along with that he also showcased how this master language could become a tool of decolonization in a very unique way. Thus, making the English language a powerful tool of decolonization and claiming for recognition.

The poems of Ezekiel come forth with statements. He makes a statement that a language cannot be bound in the shackles of grammar and pronunciation. It needs to be something over which all can have an equal access without any rigidity. Through his poems he brings the English out of its shackles by using it in Indian ways to highlight Indian mentality, situation and circumstances. His poems make it very clear that India is giving birth to a new kind of English language which has to be accepted by the world. This language might not cater to the English as the Whites think it should. But it does the job of transferring the Indian emotions and feelings well, making it lucid enough for all to understand and drive a proper meaning out of it.

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## **About the Author**

**Battula Sneha** is currently pursuing her M.A. in English. She is a passionate student who believes in not only reading but living literature. She is very keen to come up with new interpretations and fresh takes on various topics and ideas that have been conventionally studied for a large period of time. She aspires to make some significant contribution in the literature so that it creates a positive impact on the lives of the people.