

NISSIM EZEKIEL

NISSIM EZEKIEL, (b. 1924) Professor of English at Bombay University, comes of a Jewish family in Bombay. His first book of poems, *A Time to Change* was published in London in 1952. His other volumes are *Sixty Poems* (1953), *The Third* (1959), *The Unfinished Man* (1960), *The Exact Name* (1965), *Hymns in Darkness* (1976) and *Latter-Day Psalms* (1982) which won him the Sahitya Akademi award. He has edited several books, including *A Martin Luther King Reader* and *Writing in India*; and also at various times, journals such as *Quest*, *Poetry India*, and *Freedom First*.

He considers himself a modern but not *avant garde*. He has written both in traditional verse forms and free verse. He acknowledges in a letter to the editors (dated 18 August 1984), that Pound, Eliot, Yeats, Rilke, MacNeice, Spender, Auden and modern American poetry in general have been the major influences on him. The central themes of his poetry are lore, personal integration, the Indian contemporary scene, modern urban life and spiritual values. He says: "I am at clarity, above all, claim never to have written an obscure form. I like to make controlled, meaningful statements, avoiding extremes of thought and expression." (ibid.)

In fact his poetry registers a development from the predominantly external world of 'flesh and bone' to 'myths of light'. There is a further deepening of the heart's mysteries to a profound and fruitful knowledge, beyond meaning and understanding. In craft and language also, there is a movement from lucidity, creativeness and satisfying sensuality to controlled directness, and perfect diction. His later poetry shows the creative involvement of man's intellect with language; it seeks the essence of expressions.

NIGHT OF THE SCORPION

I remember the night my mother
was stung by a scorpion. Ten hours
of steady rain had driven him
to crawl beneath a sack of rice.
Parting with his poison-flash
of diabolic tail in the dark room—
he risked the rain again.
The peasants came like swarms of flies
and buzzed the name of God a hundred times
to paralyse the Evil One.
With candles and with lanterns
throwing giant scorpion shadows
on the sun-baked walls
they searched for him: he was not found.
They clicked their tongues.
With every movement that the scorpion made
his poison moved in Mother's blood, they said.
May he sit still; they said.
May the sins of your previous birth
Be burned away tonight, they said.
May your suffering decrease
the misfortunes of your next birth, they said.
May the sum of evil
balanced in this unreal world
against the sum of good
become diminished by your pain.
May the poison purify your flesh
of desire, and your spirit of ambition,
they said, and they sat around
on the floor with my mother in the centre,
the peace of understanding on each face.

More candles, more lanterns, more neighbours,
more insects and the endless rain.
My mother twisted through and through
groaning on a mat.
My father, sceptic, rationalist,
trying every curse and blessing,
powder, mixture, herb and hybrid.
He even poured a little paraffin
upon the bitten toe and put a match to it.
I watched the flame feeding on my mother.
I watched the holy man perform his rites
to tame the poison with an incantation.
After twenty hours
it lost its sting.

My mother only said
Thank God the scorpion picked on me
and spared my children.

POVERTY POEMS—2

I lifted up my eyes
near the railway station
and saw a leper standing
against a poster-ridden wall.

Silent, a beggar,
he did not beg.
Offered a coin
he took it
without a glance at me
nor made the slightest gesture
in acknowledgement. Perhaps
he was dumb and deaf as well.

Dumb and deaf
I walk along,

song, it expresses excellently the Indian faith that God lives within one's self. Tolstoy also realised that 'Kingdom of God is within.'

Ghanshyam is another name for Lord Krishna.

I am of thee, as thou of me bears the influence of the *Gita* wherein Krishna says that he is in everything.

In Salutation to the Eternal Peace

The poem is a bold and beautiful assertion of faith, an everlasting affirmation of life. The poet does not care for hate, fear and relentless fate and is unmindful of the world's desire and pride. She rebuffs the fret and fever of time and doom because her heart is drenched in the intimate essence of eternity.

The poem is conceived in the metaphoric mode. The imagery drawn from Nature and the bird's world is suggestive of both this world of beauty and gloom as well as of the mystical world of eternity. The central experience of the poem is mystical. It has been included in the *Oxford Book of Mystical Verse*.

Golden orioles are golden-yellow birds with black wings. It is an apt metaphor.

Homing pigeons stand for eternal peace.

Night of the Scorpion

Though Ezekiel is a poet of city, in this poem he gives a living, truthful rural picture. The scene of a mother stung by a scorpion on a rainy night in the village brings in its wake two worlds of superstition and scientific temperament. The neighbours swarming like flies and trying to mitigate her pain by various methods reveal the essence of community life. The father embodies the sceptic, rational approach. A telling effect is achieved in the last lines when the mother heaves a sigh of relief on her children being spared. The experience is distinctly Indian and the imagery vivid and sensitive.

The neighbours' concern for a speedy recovery is expressed through lines that are incantatory in effect.