



# MA ENGLISH

## Semester III

Indian English Poetry after Independence

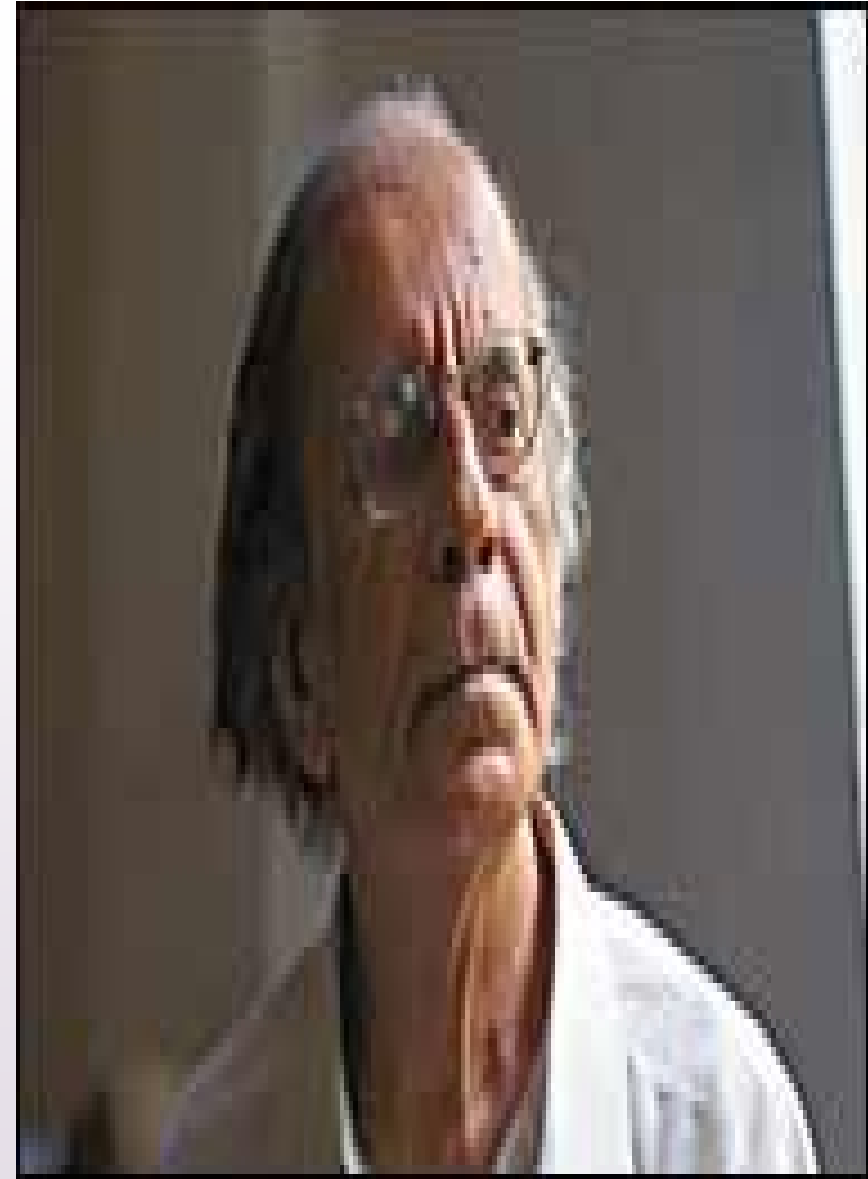
Course code: ENC 230

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# NISSIM EZEKIEL

**Father of modern Indian  
English poetry**

A former Professor of English at  
the University of Leeds in England



# PROFILE (1924-2004)

- **Born on 16 December 1924 in Mumbai**
- **A *Indian Jewish poet*, playwright, editor, and critic**
- **A foundational figure in postcolonial India's literary history, specifically for Indian Poetry in English**
- **Awarded the *Sahitya Akademi Award* in 1983 for his poetry collection, *Latter-Day Psalms***
- **Honoured with the *Padmashri* in 1988**

# Salient Features & Contribution

- ▶ Harbinger of modernism in Indian English poetry
- ▶ Influenced by the works of T S Eliot, W H Auden and Ezra Pound
- ▶ Uses prose forms, rhymes, rhythms, imagery, sensuality, irony, variants of sonnets, symbol and various figures of speech
- ▶ Reveals the imprint of a keen, analytical mind trying to explore and communicate on a personal level, the feelings of loss and deprivation
- ▶ His poetry is known for various aspects of Indianness
- ▶ Voiced new Indian ethos of modern techno-crazed world
- ▶ Engages in multiple themes, employs evocative imagery

# Notable Works

- **Time To Change (1952)**
- **Sixty poems (1953)**
- **The Discovery of India (1956)**
- **The Third (1959)**
- **The Unfinished Man (1960)**
- **The Exact Name (1965)**
- **Snakeskin and Other Poems (1974)**
- **Hymns in Darkness (1976)**
- **Latter-Day Psalms (1982)**
- **Collected Poems (1989)**

# NIGHT OF THE SCORPION


Published in *The Exact Name* (1965)

Recollection of Early  
Childhood  
Experience in free verse  
through conversational tone

- Narrative poem
- Evokes superstitious practices that have not outgrown or vanished from human consciousness
- Abounds in self-criticism, mild satire
- Exposes evils of urban society
- Employs images of frustration of young child
- Shows warmth of human relationship

# 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 mud-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 all 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.

# Night of the Scorpion

- A strong yet simple statement on the **power of self-effacing love**
- Captures a well-detached black and white snapshot of Indian village life with all its superstitious simplicity
- Dramatizes a battle of ideas fought at night in lamplight between good and evil; between darkness and light, between rationalism and blind faith
- **Epitomises the selfless love of a mother**

# Analysis

- **Recounts the night the speaker's mother was bitten by a scorpion**
- **The townspeople try to help her by following superstitions and explaining that the bite cleanses her soul or relieves the amount of pain in her next life**
- **The speaker's father listens to their advice despite being sceptical**
- **By the poem's end, as the mother's pain has subsided, she says she is grateful it happened to her and not her children**

# Poetic Devices

- Images of the dark forces of evil abound in *Night of the Scorpion*
- The diabolic tail of the scorpion, giant scorpion shadows on the sun-baked walls and the night itself point to evil
- Analogy seems to run between the swarms of insect and the swarms of the villagers (parallelism)
- Image of the flame preying on the mother
- **Night as an archetypal symbol of ignorance / evil**

# ENTERPRISE

From the anthology *The Unfinished Man* (1960)

**title is from W B Yeats' famous poem –**  
*A Dialogue of the Self and Soul*



# ENTERPRISE

- A symbolic statement of the efforts, failures and frustrations of human life on earth
- Presents life as a quest for wholeness and maturity
- Didactic in nature and reflects how to live happily, calmly, ethically as an integrated human being


# ENTERPRISE

It started as a pilgrimage,  
Exalting minds and making all  
The burdens light. The second stage  
Explored but did not test the call.  
The sun beat down to match our rage.




Cont....

We stood it very well, I thought,  
Observed and put down copious notes  
On things the peasants sold and bought  
The way of serpents and of goats.  
Three cities where a sage had taught



But when the differences arose  
On how to cross a desert patch,  
We lost a friend whose stylish prose  
Was quite the best of all our batch.  
A shadow falls on us and grows




Another phase was reached when we  
Were twice attacked, and lost our way.  
A section claimed its liberty  
To leave the group. I tried to pray.  
Our leader said he smelt the sea



Cont....

We noticed nothing as we went,  
A straggling crowd of little hope,  
Ignoring what the thunder meant,  
Deprived of common needs like soap.  
Some were broken, some merely bent.



When, finally, we reached the place,  
We hardly knew why we were there.

The trip had darkened every face,  
Our deeds were neither great nor rare.  
Home is where we have to gather grace.

# Analysis

- **In first person narration**
- **talks about the test of man's faith**
- **An analogy on life**
- **Talks about the idea of salvation**
- **Reflects the concept that one should listen to his own inner voice and not to that of priests who are supposed to lead their flocks towards salvation**



## Analysis

### Journey as a metaphor of life

"Home is where we  
have to gather grace"

- ❖ *Has multiple layered meaning*
- ❖ *Ends in a paradoxical manner*
- ❖ *conveys the message that in the journey of life, home is symbolic of one's inner self which must be accepted and faced and not shirked away*

## Poetic devices- Symbolism

- **Every single element that the pilgrims encountered on their journey in this poem is a symbol for something else**
- **The sun symbolises all the obstacles put up by nature in man's path**
- **The desert symbolizes all the issues because of which man discriminates against others of his kind, especially religious differences**
- **The shadow that falls on the pilgrims symbolizes the doubt that man feels regarding his beliefs and superstitions**
- **Thunder symbolizes man's inner voice**
- **A symbolic statement of the efforts, failures and frustrations of human life on earth**

## Devices: Metaphor, Epigram & Allegory

- uses the device of extended metaphor - the pilgrimage as a symbol of both organized religion in particular and of life in general
- uses the device of epigram in the last line  
**Home is where we have to gather grace**
- teaches that piety begins at home and we can practice it by caring our loved ones if our aim is to serve God
- an allegory, but its purpose is satirical

# Personification and metonymy

- ▶ Sun is personified in the line

**The sun beat down to match our rage**

- Metonymy is used in referring to
  - **Serpent - as a mischievous person**
  - **Section – as a part**
  - **Sea – to mean sea breeze**

# URBAN

From the collection


**The Unfinished Man (1960)**

# Urban

- ▶ Lyrical poem referring to poet's life in Bombay, the city of poet's birth, the city with contradictions
- ▶ Tells us of the city man, metaphorically caught up in the phantasmagoria of sex and power and for whom there is no redemption
- ▶ explores the divergence between man's search for the nourished dream of a free, oppressionless existence and his perennial inability to achieve even a partial realisation of it
- ▶ Critical of urban man as he never sees the skies; he never welcomes the sun or the rain; his morning walks are dreams floating on a wave of sand


## URBAN

The hills are always far away.  
He knows the broken roads, and moves  
In circles tracked within his head.  
Before he wakes and has his say,  
The river which he claims he loves  
Is dry, and all the winds lie dead.



At dawn he never sees the skies  
Which, silently, are born again.  
Nor feels the shadows of the night  
Recline their fingers on his eyes.  
He welcomes neither sun nor rain.  
His landscape has no depth or height.





The city like a passion burns.  
He dreams of morning walks, alone,  
And floating on a wave of sand.  
But still his mind its traffic turns  
Away from beach and tree and stone  
To kindred clamour close at hand.

# Analysis

- **Describes the dehumanising influence of the city on human individuality**
- **Depicts the sordidness, ugliness, inhumanity, loneliness and frustration of urban life**
- **Expresses drabness and misery in contemporary Indian life**
- **Beautiful and suggestive imagery**
- **Communicates on a personal level feelings of loss and unhappy experiences in Bombay**
- **Epigrammatic language**

**The city like a passion burns**

- ▶ **City's unceasing traffic, strident noises, dubious night life suggested in**

*To kindred clamour close at hand*

- **As described by Bruce King, Ezekiel is**

*'a representative voice of urbanised, western educated India'*

**The dichotomy between man's hopes and achievements in the distressed city is suggested by the metaphor**

*"broken roads" and "circles"*

- **Poet's relationship with the city may be described as a love and hatred**



# Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher

From the anthology ***The Exact Name (1965)***

# Overview

- **Describes the process of writing poetry and compares it to being a lover or a birdwatcher**
- **Ezekiel draws a parallel between the poet, the lover and the bird watcher**
- **Examines common qualities between a poet, lover and a bird watcher**
- **Finds a similarity in their pursuit of waiting through silent perseverance**
- **Opines the fields of composing poetry, courting a beloved and watching birds require the quality of being patient**



# Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher

**To force the pace and never to be still  
Is not the way of those who study birds  
Or women. The best poets wait for words.  
The hunt is not an exercise of will  
But patient love relaxing on a hill  
To note the movement of a timid wing;**



# Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher

**Until the one who knows that she is loved  
No longer waits but risks surrendering -  
In this the poet finds his moral proved  
Who never spoke before his spirit moved.**



# Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher

**The slow movement seems, somehow, to say much more.**

**To watch the rarer birds, you have to go  
Along deserted lanes and where the rivers flow  
In silence near the source, or by a shore  
Remote and thorny like the heart's dark floor.**





## Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher

**And there the women slowly turn around,  
Not only flesh and bone but myths of light  
With darkness at the core, and sense is found  
But poets lost in crooked, restless flight,**

**The deaf can hear, the blind recover sight.**



# Analysis

- **Multi-layered in meaning and contains the theme of self-examination**
- **The poem captures journey of poet, lover and birdwatcher to reach their final destination, their pathways are different but have a close connection in their search of words, love and birds**
- **Attaining perfection in life needs lot of struggle**
- **highlight the quest of every individual for the perfection in their lives**
- **Bird is symbolic for the quest of self-knowledge**

# Philosophy

- From the collection *The Exact Time* (1965)
- Reflects Ezekiel's interest in philosophy quite early in life when he was living in a basement room in London
- The poet says that there is a place to which he often goes. He never plans to go but is driven by the flow of his thoughts and imaginations that take him there. The place described is not another city or world but the poet's *own imaginations*
- Describes that place as a place without the warmth of human emotions and feelings



# **Philosophy**

**There is a place to which I often go,  
Not by planning to, but by a flow  
Away from all existence, to a cold  
Lucidity, whose will is uncontrolled.  
Here, the mills of God are never slow.**



# **Philosophy**

**The landscape in its geological prime  
Dissolves to show its quintessential slime.  
A million stars are blotted out. I think  
Of each historic passion as a blink  
That happened to the sad eye of Time.**



# **Philosophy**

**But residues of meaning still remain,  
As darkest myths meander through the pain  
Towards a final formula of light.  
I, too, reject this clarity of sight.  
What cannot be explained, do not explain.**



# **Philosophy**

**The mundane language of the senses sings  
Its own interpretations. Common things  
Become, by virtue of their commonness,  
An argument against their nakedness  
That dies of cold to find the truth it brings**

# ANALYSIS


- The landscape of that imaginary place appears to contain each and everything that exists on earth and it dissolves everything to show a perfect mud or mixture of everything
- The poet describes how various emotions in human mind create a mix of passions that thousand of sorrows and griefs of the past appear before him in a blink (personifies **Time**)
- This is why he rejects this clarity of sight i.e. quest for the meaning in Philosophy---**what cannot be explained, do not explain**



# ANALYSIS

**rhyme scheme of the poem is AABBA**

- **One of Ezekiel's most abstract poems**
- **In the last line, the poet talks about mills of God which are never slow**
- **God here refers to the mind and mills are its production houses- human mind**
- **According to the poet, the mundane language of the senses sings its own interpretations----discusses the poetry and its superiority over the Philosophy**
- **Residue left in the thought process has been described as philosophy by Ezekiel, which is complicated and beyond human understanding**



The mundane language of the senses sings  
its own interpretations. Common things  
become, by virtue of their commonness,  
an argument against their nakedness  
That dies of cold to find the truth it brings

**Describes the greatest truth of human life**

Shows how religion and rationalism become futile

# Topics for critical essays

- Critique of “Night of Scorpion”, “Urban” and “Enterprise”
- Journey as a quest for life/spirituality in “Enterprise”
- Indian sensibility in Ezekiel’s poems
- Social criticism in Ezekiel’s poems
- Thematic analysis of Ezekiel’s poems
- Imagery in Ezekiel’s poems
- Obsessive sense of failure in Ezekiel’s poems