

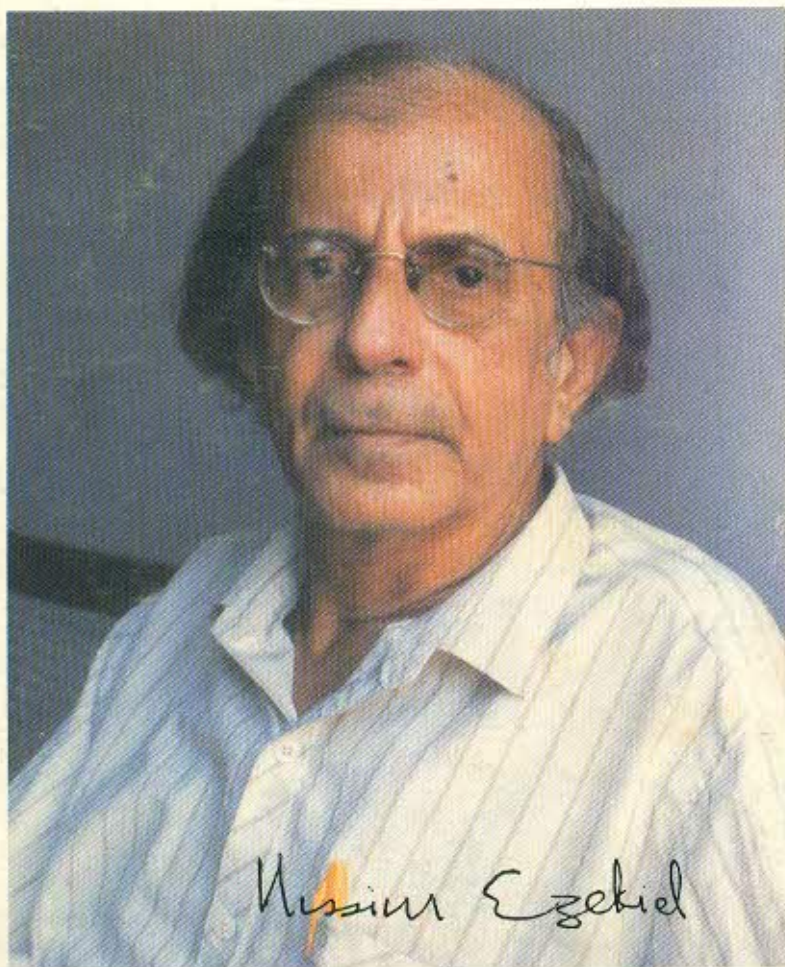
4 April 1992



Sahitya Akademi

# meet the author

Nissim Ezekiel





*Except the Lord build the house-  
and not even always then-  
they labour in vain that build  
it. Yet, it is better to build  
than to abstain from building,  
and no labour is altogether  
in vain*

*It is not vain to rise  
up early, to sit up late,  
to eat the bread of sorrow.*

*Psalms 9,*

*Latter-Day Psalms*

**P**oet, playwright, editor and critic of literature and art in India, NISSIM EZEKIEL, was born in 1924 in a Jewish (Bene-Israeli) family. Religious tolerance in India was a boon to Bene-Israeli families and they not only adopted Maharastrian social customs, they also accepted Marathi as the community language. However the first name of each Bene-Israeli was carefully chosen from the Bible.

Nissim Ezekiel studied English at Wilson College, Bombay and Philosophy at Birkbeck College, London. A former Head of the Department of English, Bombay University, and a Visiting Professor at the University of Leeds, he is easily one of the most notable Post-Independence Indian English poets of verse. Ezekiel's poetry is shaped by his family background and thus substantially distinct from some aspects of Indian ethos. The alienation

theme is central to Ezekiel's works. In his own words, the poet, like a woman, must labour to be beautiful. In his poems, he uses apt images and incorporates the heat and dust, the sense of poverty and deprivation into the texture of his works. His religious/philosophical poetry arises out of a tension within his own personality. His reputation as a writer of secular and divine poems is quite secure.

Dr. W. U. Malik, Vice-Chancellor of Allahabad University has assessed Ezekiel's poetry in a memorable way.

"Ezekiel's poems come from the truth of life and from the felt experiences of his own life. He is an interpreter of the heart and its emotions, a lover of his surroundings, and a believer in the concept that all life is one. To him the man who writes and the man who suffers are often one and the same. That is why he 'feels the flesh of the poem'. He penetrates deeper into new areas of life and tries to see the extricate web of circumstances of human existence, the inner core of reality."

Ezekiel's poetry reveals technical skill of a high order. His mastery of the vernacular idioms is matched by some command of rhythm and rhyme. In his poems, one finds the imprint of a keen analytical mind trying to explore and communicate on a personal level, feelings of loss and distress.

Ezekiel is a serious poet, perhaps the most serious of them all. What distinguishes him from a crowd of versifiers is a genuine sophistication in the use of language born of fine insights into life.

In his *A History of Indian English Literature* M.K. Naik writes:

'With Marathi (on his own admission) as his 'lost mother tongue' and English as his 'second mother tongue', Ezekiel's quest for integration made for a restless career of quick changes and experiments including



Receiving Sahitya Akademi Award from Prof. V.K. Gokak

'philosophy/poverty and poetry', in a London basement room and attempts at journalism, publishing and advertising — and even a spell of working as a factory manager — before he settled down as a university teacher in his bitter native city.'

*Latter - Day Psalms* (1982) which won him the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1983, has been acclaimed as a valuable contribution to contemporary Indian Literature in English, for its poetic sensibility and thematic variety.

His *Night of the Scorpion* is one of the admirable poems in modern Indian English Literature. The tale is told by an onlooker who is neither impertinently ironical nor clearly detached. In this poem, Indian reality is expressed in a quiet personal voice, and it stands out in the reader's mind as a signpost indicating the direction poetry in English is likely to take in the future. Together with A.K. Ramanujan, Ezekiel invented the idiom and metre of Post-Independence Indian English verse. *Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher*, epitomizes his search for a poetics which would help him redeem himself in his eyes and in the eyes of God. With him, Indian English Poetry has become a part of the

mainstream of the literature of India.

According to Nissem Ezekiel 'Good Poetry is not always clear and lucid: nevertheless, the amateur poet ought to aim at clarity and lucidity. Concrete and relevant images are usually superior to vague immensities. Simple, disciplined forms, within which much freedom can be exercised, help the poet to discover what he feels, more than sprawling accumulation of lines. Rhyme and other devices may be discarded only if structural compensations and very special effects are provided instead. Development within a poem is a sign of maturity in the poet.'

He was the Editor for *Poetry India* for some time. Prof. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar writes in his *Indian Writing in English*:

'An artist who is willing to take pains, to cultivate reticence, to pursue the profession of poetry with a sense of commitment, Ezekiel's poems are as a rule lucid - a merit these days - and are splendidly evocative and satisfyingly sensuous. In his first two volumes, persons and places, memories and situations, literary echoes and moments of vision, all inspired Ezekiel to poetic utterance. He was painfully and

poignantly aware of the flesh, its insistent urges, its stark ecstasies, its disturbing filiations with the mind. In his later poetry, however, there is revealed a more careful craftsmanship, a more marked restraint and a colder, a more conscious intellectuality, than in the first two volumes. There is a gain in quality and integrity, and he is able to achieve conversational directness and ease without losing himself in discursiveness.'

Ezekiel is rather fond of investigating the circuitous ways in which the human mind works. His first collection *A Time to Change* is unique in its display of a fine sense of structure with an inevitable self-evolving logic.

In his *Sixty Poems*, he rightly says that the symbols of nature mean what one can make of them at various stages in life.

*The Unfinished Man* is an inspired work, prolific in its proper fruits. Ezekiel here showed a mastery of song which he was never to match again.

*Enterprise* is another fine poem which shows lyrical gift of expression. Written as a generalised allegory of the pilgrimage theme, it treats a journey as a metaphor for life.

The memorable close of

Ezekiel's poem *Night of the Scorpion* deserves special mention.

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

Ezekiel has tried his hand in plays too. His *Three plays* (1969) include *Nalini: A comedy: Marriage poem: A Tragi-Comedy* and the *The Sleepwalkers : An Indo - American farce*. There is a skilful use of ironical fantasy in these plays. It is Ezekiel's commitment to the land of his birth that his verses so visibly sing of, and that too in such a manner as to make his poetry communicative and deeply moving.

Ezekiel's achievement is all the greater because he has not only been a competent critic but also a devoted poet. William Walsh was right when he said: 'Ezekiel's poetry more than that of any other of these writers seems to be generated from within and to have within it a natural capacity for development. It is intellectually complex, mobile in phrasing, fastidious in diction, and austere in acceptance.'

Ezekiel is one of the India's best known voices. He is a poet of pilgrimage. Today he remains the most celebrated Indian poet, writing in English.



Nissim Ezekiel, Mario Miranda and Dom Moraes

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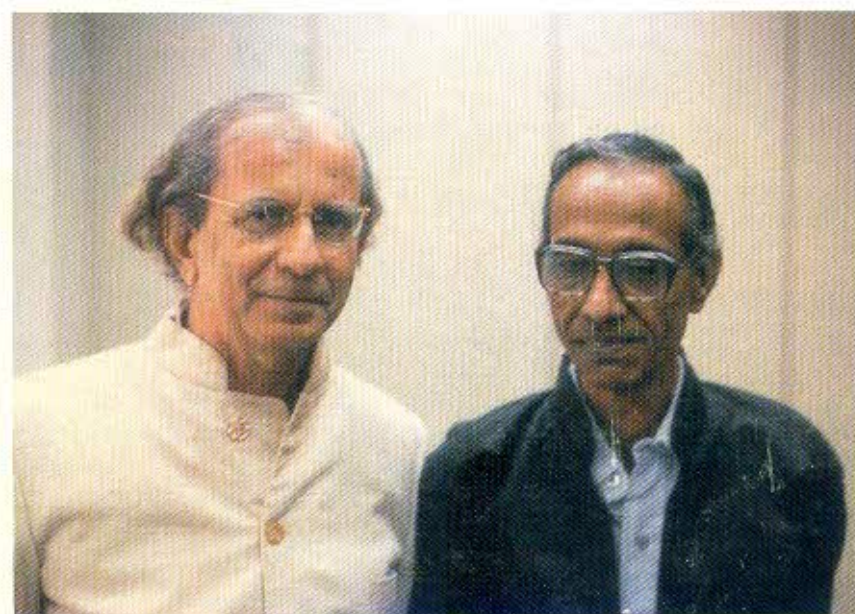


With an Australian Poet

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### A CHRONOLOGY

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| <p>1924 Birth</p> <p>1947 M.A. English Literature</p> <p>1948 Studied Philosophy at Birkbeck College, London</p> <p>1952 First book of Poems <i>A Time to Change</i> published</p> <p>Married Daisy Jacob</p> <p>1953 Second Book of verse <i>Sixty Poems</i> published</p> | <p>1974 Visited United States on invitation from U.S.Govt.</p> <p>1976 Member, General Council, Lalit Kala Akademi and Sahitya Akademi</p> <p>1983 Sahitya Akademi award for his book <i>Latter-Day Psalms</i></p> <p>1988 Padmashri from Govt. of India.</p> |
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With Ashokamitran