

MAN'S ALIENATION FROM HIMSELF

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Man is a rational and social being, He is aware of his surroundings and as he grows he grows aware of his own being. To find answers to questions about the self, man goes to his external as well as the internal world. He goes to his society, his environment, his memory and his awareness. In short, man takes recourse to himself and the medium, in which he lives, breathes and talks. And there, he finds himself sometimes in conformity and quite often in conflict with his society. Often-enough, his sense of individuality and selfhood does not conform to the patterns, demands and designs of the society. This encounter between the individual self and the society triggers off a process of tension and conflict. Confusion, bewilderment and chaos follow in which the individual's sense of identity is staggered and might as well be lost. The individual strives to find a way out and goes about in search of worthy and valuable. On the other hand, he does not leave off orbit of his inherited religion, mythology and traditions deeply embedded in his psyche right from his childhood. In a way in his own country and society he feels estranged, alienated, rootless and partly lost. The struggle to keep the balance goes on.

Situated as he is, the modern Indian writer sets out in search of identity, a voyage of self-discovery. In the process, he tries to explore and interpret the meaning of life afresh. He read just his sense of individuality in relation to society and evolves his own value system and his own equation. And as Ayyapa Panicker remarks, "For the truly creative artist identity is not something readymade; he is to invent and not just discover what is there to create his identity, his individual, personal selfhood i.e. his uniqueness, realized however in terms of the values of his personal beliefs shaped, controlled by the shared mythos and ethos of his country, his people and time." ¹

On the social front, the modern Indian poet seeks to assert his unique personality with his distinctive experience in the society of the common, the uniform, the standardized and the commercialized. He, invariably, protests against industrialization which has reduced men to mere machine and numbers. He raises his voice against a system culture that breeds mediocrity only. He tries, at the same time, to rise above the set patterns and conventions of the society.

On the cultural front, the modern Indian poet endeavors to evolve composite patterns of culture. Refusing to subscribe to any traditional inherited religion or mythological system he tries to reinterpret the old myths and rituals in the light of the latest scientific and psychological explorations. Abandoning codified religious; the modern Indian poet tends to re-discover an open religion and ethical value-system. This search or a composite culture is an integral part of his search for identity.

Closely related with the search for composite culture is his search for new roots and a new home. It is impossible for any poet or writer to write without being rooted and entrenched in the native soil and culture of the land. From villages to city and then from city to the metropolis: this has been the predicament of the uprooted villagers who earlier felt at home in the rural surroundings with their cultural rights and ceremonies. Living in a metropolis, the modern poet passes his life in the midst of almost unmitigated hideousness, having no direct acquaintance or rapport with the refreshing otherness and mystery of the natural world of his native village. In this state of rootlessness and alienation, the modern poet tries to make his way through this confusion and bewilderment to strike new roots, to arrive at fresh values and forms. Thus the search for identity is inclusive of this search for roots.

On the creative front, the modern Indian poet writing in English tries to weave and interfuse his complex and diverse, experience in a unified whole, innovating upon the existing forms and patterns. Both identity and idiom are organically related since identity requires a medium for its expression and idiom is to be shaped and brought into crystallized form by identity and for identity.

In the case of Nissim Ezekiel the pattern suggested above of identity and idiom has to be extended. His situation is slightly different from that of an ordinary Indian poet writing in English primarily for three reasons. In the first instance, his Jewish background accounts for the difference. For him the crisis of identity becomes deeper in the sense that he is supposed to assert himself in a predominantly Hindu environment. In the second place, he does not suffer from any bilingual hangover such as, for instance, Kamala Das and R. Parthasarthy do. He has at his disposal three medium – Marathi, Hebrew and English – to communicate his poetic urges. He picks up English because it is the language he knows best by his education, training and circumstances. As N. Sharda Iyer comments in this connection: “Ezekiel unlike Jayanta Mahapatra, Ramanujan or Kamala did not make an effort to acclimatize an indigenous tradition to English language instead he seeks to relate himself to contemporary India. Typical Indian beliefs, situations and contemporary society attract him most and he creates a new kind of poetry in Indian English idiom.”

In the third place, Ezekiel being an inhabitant of a metropolitan city (i.e. Bombay) is placed in a more challenging and complex environment than most of the Indian poets writing in English. In his case the sense of alienation of his quest for identity is bound to be deeper and stronger.

In spite of these three factors, Ezekiel’s basic situation is not much different from that of an Indian poet writing in English. Like other poets, he also, seeks to assert his individuality; like them he is also in search for roots and a home. He wants to evolve his own value-system, and creates his own idiom to express the process of his search.

Man today has not only been alienated from external nature and become a stranger to his fellow beings in society, but he has also started feeling alienated from himself.

In spite of speedy physical change and development, the last two or three centuries have shown that modern man is invaded by gloom and despair. The western civilization has gone through an inner crisis. The individual today feels that he is an unimportant entity. If we want to know the basic cause of alienation of man from himself, a question automatically arises. Is man a harmonious personality today and does he get a chance to develop his personality fully? Well up to the end of the Victorian era, there prevailed a belief in the greatness of man. Man was the crown of things. But with the new discoveries of science and technology, the entire concept of man and his place in the universe has undergone a change.

The individual today realizes that he is ruled by society over whose functioning he has hardly any control. The psychological studies undertaken by Freud and others have shown that man is not at peace with himself. It is the awareness of these facts that has tended to alienate him from himself. Romanticism provided man with an idea to escape into nature but modern man is oscillating between escape and confrontation.

George Simmel has expressed the mood of scepticism which arose with the beginning of the twentieth century. His essay "Der Konflikt Der Modern Kulture" tells us about the growing fear that man cannot be himself – he is destined to remain a stranger in the modern world. This emphasis was later picked up by the existentialist also. All of us are caught up in a frightening condition. We have become such selfish persons that we do not identify ourselves with things which do not touch us immediately. We have become either indifferent observers or passive victims of the world at large. In order to assert our individuality, we are mainly concerned with those phases of reality which are directly connected with our immediate needs. And an individual who splits the external world into two parts in this way, himself becomes a divided self.

This awareness of a personality which divides against itself constitutes the essence of modern man's self-alienation. This awareness makes the individual a stranger to himself. Fritz Pappenheim in his book "The Alienation of Modern Man" says:

"There is something uncanny in the condition of man when he has become a stranger to himself, but it is a fate which shapes the life of many of us. We seem to be caught in a frightening contradiction. In order to assert ourselves as individual we relate only to those phases of reality which seem to promote the attainment of our objectives and remain divorced from the rest of it. But the further we derive this separation, the deeper grows the rift within our selves."³

There is a perpetual conflict within the individual today, between the head and the heart, or between reason and emotions. This dichotomy leads to self-alienation and as can be seen in a poem like Eliot's "Prufrock" where the protagonist is divided into two selves, 'you' and 'I', the

public self and the private self. In fact, all men today have divided selves on the same pattern. They have become similar to Shakespeare's Hamlet in this respect. Every person is confronted with the same question 'to be' or not 'to be'.

The basic cause of man's alienation from himself may be excessive mechanization of modern social life. The emotional impact of war may also have intensified the sense of alienation among many persons. Concern about man's alienation is expressed by many theologians and philosophers who have warned us that technological advancement in modern times has not enabled man to penetrate deep into the mystery of being. Men today are like those psychiatrists, who in trying to help their patients to return from the world of illusion to reality serve only to fix them there. This critic who challenge the optimistic claim that technological progress automatically leads to the enrichment of human life, point out that the ever-increasing mechanization of life in big cities has served to make the feeling of alienation more and more intense.

The rapid mechanization of modern life has led to horrors of war and the glory of man has been shattered. Modern life is full of such hectic hurry and feverish activity that all the senses of the individual have been dulled. His sensibility has been dried up to such an extent that he is not left with the power to seek comfort even in a world of imagination since that too requires a certain minimum wholeness of being which is lacking today.

The hypertrophy of self-consciousness in modern man has given him a deep sense of inner division. The dichotomy between his intellect and passions creates a sense of alienation that oppresses him continuously.

Nissim Ezekiel, in some of his very good poems, has presented the psyche of modern man who has fallen on the thorns of life. He is very much perturbed by the problem of making a choice. When man is entangled in this problem, he feels double-minded and his dual personality is always, in a conflict to go this way or that way. The man who used to be a 'harmonious personality' in the past has become a divided self, one part of which is alienated from the other.

Ezekiel poetry shows his awareness of simultaneous pull towards the physical and the spiritual. Ezekiel strikes a modern note with his unleashed rendering of the manner in which man is pulled at the same time by the physical and the spiritual urges. His poems record the simultaneous presence of the emotional and the spiritual. Ezekiel's poetry incorporates tension between the opposites; an emotional plunge into life and desire for detachment from it; a sensuous perception of the physical world and a spiritual abstraction out of the world. The protagonist in many poems reveals his indulgence in the physical, the sensory and the immediate. At the same time we also find a hankering after the spiritual, the metaphysical and the abstract in his poetry. A very good example of his modern awareness of contrary pulls is found in *Happening* which has not merely "upsurges explosions, abysses, paradoxes"⁴ – all from the realm of experience and also "things transcended". The contrary pulls are towards "signs and symbols" and "the source of signs and symbols", "making love upon this bed" and "a fire from

heaven” which lies at the back of love-making. In “Tribute to the Upanishads” there is, on one hand the skin or the flesh or the seed of the fruit and to contrast with it the “nothingness within the seed” on the other hand. In the *Island* too, the poet confronts the “Slums and the sky scrappers” on the one hand and “distorted echoes of my own ambiguous voice” on the other. He cannot leave the island, for he was born there and he belongs there but his imagination soars in the wake of “bright and tempting breezes”. The awareness of the contrary pulls within his own self strikes a typically modern note in Ezekiel’s poetry. This split personality accounts for alienation of man from himself.

The poem *The Double Horror* presents man’s alienation from himself and the world. The poet persona admits:

Corrupted by the world I must infect the world
With my corruption. This double horror holds me
Like a nightmare from which I cannot wake, denounced
Only by myself, to other harmless, hero,
Sage, poet, conversationalist, Connoisseur

(The Double Horror. 8)

The poet persona feels ashamed of himself whom he finds, “Being unwanted, unloved, incompetent/As leaders, disloyal servants, always alone”

(The Double Horror. 8)

The poet persona experiences a sense of rootlessness, loneliness and disgust at his situation in the world. He is pained to see himself infecting others.

In “*Nothingness*” again we are exposed to the sense of alienation in poet- persona. His escapism is evident in the following stanza:

At last I have been reconciled
To simple nothingness, and catch
Myself, hour after hour,
Free from any need to live at all-
Small ambition sick at the roots,
Shabby cures for dissolution,

Twenty thousand abysses
Encountered on an aimless day,
Humiliated by he truth
Of nothingness, mortality

(Nothingness. 50)

The poet persona is disappointed by mortality of man, the abysses of human life, the uncertainty and nothingness of human life. “Time, the great consumer, cancels all”. This aimlessness of life and its futility only leads to “the final void”. The poet feels dejected by this insecurity of life and experiences a sense of alienation from him.

In *What Frightens Me* the poet expresses again the fear of uncertainty and the inner conflicts of life which leads to man’s alienation from himself. There are conflicts and endless silent dialogues going on “Between the self-protective self / And the self- naked” and “the mask / And the secret behind the mask”.

The result of this illusion versus reality is probably uncertainty that frightens the poet – persona. The poem *What Frightens Me* presents Nissim Ezekiel’s self analysis as how “with hidden weakness in the bone” we make vows and are “Crushed, Compromised and Consummated” in “Remotely doing what I had to do”.

Again in the poem *Lamentation*,’ Ezekiel gives voice to his sense of alienation and rootless ness and his failure in life:

lips lack prophesy
My tongue speaketh no great matters
The World of he Wise are wasted on me
Fugitive am I and Far from home
A Vagabond and every part of me is withered

(Lamentation. 72)

American Poet, Robert Frost in his poetry also shows this feeling of alienation of modern man. Frost’s “Stopping by woods on a snowy Evening” presents a man who struggles within himself, whether he should enjoy the mysterious beauty of Nature or fulfill his duties first. On the surface level, the man has halted in the midst of snowy woods to enjoy the beauty of the woods when snow is falling. But his mind holds him back. The poem expresses the conflict, which almost everyone feels today between the demands of practical life with its obligations to

others and the poignant desire to escape into a land of reverie. So we can see how man gets alienated from himself. One self asks him to enjoy the natural beauty and the other reminds him of his obligations and promises. Frost's 'A leaf – Treader' similarly deals with the conflict between the death-wish and life-instinct. Still the human will dominates the ever-present latent wish to retire from the struggle into an easeful oblivion. But this triumph of the will is temporary and the under-current of melancholy generated by self-alienation continues.

Man is a divided self; in his one self is alienated from the other.

In modern times, every man has to face such crucial moments in life, when one part of his personality can be realized only by sacrificing another part which is equally important. This inevitably generates a sense a self-alienation.

We are compelled to make-choice every moment of our life from the limited possibilities available to us at the time. And this impossibility of making a satisfactory choice has alienated man from himself. Modern men are dual personalities. Like Eliot's Prufrock, they feel an inward rage going on in their mind. The division of the Psyche into "two friends" remind us of Eliot's The Love Song of J.Alfred Prufrock in which the divided self has been carried on through the creation of two fictitious characters- "You and I"⁵ belonging to the same self.

In this poem *Transmutation*, Ezekiel finds that "A change of heart requires this transmutation" of man. He advises to "Leave no more the flesh of deed unfondled /Attempt the enterprise".

He asks that man should be asserted in the common dance of mind, body and soul. He should participate entirely making an end of separation. He encourages the merging of mind and marrow:

"Into a wider, warmer meaning" since "Holiness reveals itself in everything".

(*Transmutation. 56*)

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3. Fritz Pappenheim, *The Alienation of Modern Man* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1968), p.12

4. Nissim Ezekiel, *Collected Poems: 1952-1988* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p.163. All the subsequent references from the text are from the same edition hereafter cited with the name of the poem in italics and page number in parentheses in the text itself.
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