

# Nissim Ezekiel's *The Railway Clerk* : Escapism Amidst Hardship

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## Abstract

Nissim Ezekiel's famous poem *The Railway Clerk* is a poem on hardship in the life of a lower middle-class clerk, who through his monologue conveys the problems prevalent in government offices in India, during nineteen seventies and eighties. This short and simple poem stands as a fine example of social realism in the annals of literature. This period is known for its popular commercial genre *masala* movies in Bollywood films, which became the best, accessible medium for the common-man to escape from the harsh realities of the day-to-day life and to relieve his pent-up soul. Here we can see the railway clerk, adopting the romantic attitude of escapism from the hardship of life, through watching films and indulging in gossips with friends, which is the typical Indian temperament of the common people in India.

**Keywords:** Ezekiel, Railway Clerk, Escapism, Hardship.

### Introduction

Literature essentially reflects the life and the thoughts of the era out of which it springs. It germinates out of life experiences, it responds to life, and is nurtured by life. There is a deep reciprocal relationship between literature and society. The changes in the form and content of literature occurs because of the changes in the society, due to the emergence of new ideas; and on the other hand, the mindset of people keep changing because of the thought-provoking ideas established in the literary works. Such relationship is prominent in the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel, who is considered to be the father of the post-independence Indian English poetry. He is generally acknowledged to be the first 'new poet' in Indian English literature to express a modern Indian sensibility in a modern idiom, and his first book *A Time to Change* (1952) is said to be a landmark in the history of Indian English poetry.<sup>1</sup>

*The Railway Clerk* is a new kind of poem—new in Indian English idiom, where Ezekiel tries to re-create the character in his typical Indian colours. It belongs to the category of *Very Indian Poems in Indian English*. The collection of poems in this category reveals Ezekiel's Indianness and the use of typical Indian English. Bruce King says, "Ezekiel's poems might be seen as a step towards using local speech in serious verse. . . Language reveals the speaker's mind and social context; cliches, triteness, unintended puns are among the devices used to imply hypocrisy, pretence, limited opportunities and confusion."<sup>2</sup>

While depicting the pathetic condition of the Indian clerk, a poor creature surrounded by an almost immoral and rotten system, the poet brilliantly throws light on the escapist tendencies of Indian people, for whom films and friends are the only source of entertainment that gives some respite from boredom, at least for a short span.

### Objective of Study

The objective of my study is to show the strength of the spirit of the ordinary Indians, to cope with any situation, for any length of time, by simultaneously finding out means to enjoyment through their homely joys and world of fantasy. My study highlights the sufferings that take a toll on the people of the lower middle-class who try their level best to keep themselves and their family happy. Ezekiel's clerk, who is serving the railways of India, is a fine example of consistent adjustment against hardships caused by the socio-political inaccuracy and imbalance in the power structure of Indian society and the government offices.

### Discussion

Ezekiel's major concern in poetry is to live quality life happily, peacefully and ethically. Bruce King opines, "Of the group of poets attempting to create a modern English Poetry in India, Nissim Ezekiel soon emerged as the leader who advised others, set standards and created places of publication. . . Others wrote poems, he wrote poetry. The difference is reflected in his craftsmanship and purposefulness; this is as much a matter of will as of talent. Ezekiel brought a sense of discipline, self-criticism and mastery to Indian English poetry. He was the first Indian poet to have such a professional attitude."<sup>3</sup>



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The poem, *The Railway Clerk*, is the first of the Indian English poems in *Collected Poems* (1952-1988) which begins with the confession of the innocent clerk, who is complaining that always he is being blamed in the office for something or the other, though it is never his fault:

It isn't my fault.  
I do what I am told  
but still I am blamed. . . .

Here, in the very beginning of the poem we can see the sense of guilt found in the clerk, which is making him feel miserable, so much so that, he is giving explanation for proving his innocence and justifying his stand. Now, this is a typical Indian tendency to feel guilty all the while because people are living in, almost a dystopian world, where everyday living becomes a survival of the fittest. To quote Bruce King, "The Railway Clerk is a more complex poem which moves from satire to sympathy. The poor English is the reflection of the half-educated clerk's social and economic situation. After reading the poem we are likely to see the opening lines in a new light although resentment is part of the psychology."<sup>4</sup> Look at the genuine complaints of the speaker:

This year, my leave application  
was twice refused.

Every day there is so much work  
and I don't get overtime.

Doing the monotonous work in the office, without any motivation or interest in the work, is almost like drudgery. The office administration is also to be blamed for this. It should ensure the physical and mental well-being of the employees by finding out innovative methods for making the work more interesting. To elevate the mood of the employees and to keep them always positive and in high spirits, there should be regular hikes in the salary, certain perks and incentives with additional motivational seminars for good performance. Instead of that, as the complainant states, there is no remuneration for overtime and neither is the clerk getting leave for his personal work. The clerk further protests:

My wife is always asking for more money.  
Money, money, where to get money?  
My job is such, no one is giving bribe,  
while other clerks are in fortunate position,  
and no promotion even because I am not  
graduate.

Bribery in public services is plaguing the government offices in India. We get a glimpse of the fact in the poem, where bribery is a custom in the railway department. Living in bare minimum also makes life hard to live and dull. In nineteen seventies and eighties in India, government salary was very meagre and families were big with more than two children. For the sake of their studies, there had to be two places of settlement—one house for the wife and children, and another house with minimum essentials, for the head of the family, himself. That is why the clerk's wife keeps on demanding more money to meet the expenses which keeps on growing due to inflation. She is not

greedy by nature, but very easily we can understand that she is the victim of her circumstances, living in urban India which was rapidly becoming materialistic because of the fast development.

The railway clerk has got no future prospects for promotion because he is not a graduate. This means he couldn't complete his studies which he will keep on regretting throughout his life. Thus, regret and guilt become the Indian way of one's autobiography. This strain of Indianness is found in Ezekiel's poem *The Railway Clerk*. The clerk utters in a long soliloquy the other problems existing in the office which is affecting him adversely, causing dissatisfaction and frustration in his normal life:

I am never neglecting my responsibility,  
I am discharging it properly,  
I am doing my duty,  
but who is appreciating?  
Nobody, I am telling you.

Soon follows other complaints in quick succession:

My desk is too small,  
the fan is not repaired for two months,  
three months.

I am living far off in Borivili,  
my children are neglecting studies,  
how long this can go on?

The sensitive poet can sense the humiliation and discomfort felt by the clerk acutely whereas, for others it is the normal way of the functioning of all the government offices. The plight of this clerk is similar to the other clerks working in various government offices. The anarchy in which the clerk finds himself entrapped, hard to cope with, where the table is too small, fan dysfunctional and working conditions extremely pathetic, is a normal occurrence in corrupt offices.

Staying away from children is risky for their career because without the fear and strict discipline of the father, children don't take their studies seriously and do not perform well in their examinations. At the time when Ezekiel had composed this poem, Indian urban society was patriarchal to the core. Children grew up under the influence of the idea that father is the breadwinner, therefore, should be respected and feared more than the mother; and that the mother could be taken for granted because she had no say in the career of children, excepting her role as a care provider. She was simply a housewife whom children neglected and didn't obey. Hence, the clerk is worried as to how long he will be able to adjust to this state of bondage. Lakshmi Raghunandan observes, In the "*Railway Clerk* the protagonist is a dissatisfied employee whose paranoiac resentment towards an unappreciative authority is crystallised around his chief grouses namely, his leave application being twice refused, no overtime payment, no opportunity to accept bribes, and no scope for promotion as he is not a graduate."<sup>5</sup>

In the midst of all these tensions, Nissim Ezekiel has succeeded in showing the romantic

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nature of the railway clerk. The clerk takes the help of escapism to shun the hardships of his life. The clerk's romanticism gets revealed in his wish to become a bird. He exclaims: "I wish I was bird." This wish voices a lot more than the clerk could express it. It shows how severely the clerk was affected by his predicament. He is longing for freedom, and desires to be changed into a bird. He aspires to fly in the sky, cutting all his ties from the earthly world, as Keats wished in the poem *Ode to a Nightingale*. The clerk was not well-educated, so he couldn't express himself like the romantic poet did, who escaped "on the viewless wings of Poesy":<sup>6</sup>

"Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget  
What thou among the leaves hast never known,  
The weariness, the fever, and fret."<sup>7</sup>

Keats' reflection, "Here, where men sit and hear each other groan",<sup>[8]</sup> is absolutely applicable to the railway clerk because we hear him groaning endlessly about his miserable condition for which he is not to be blamed. For him, happiness seems to be an occasional episode in the general drama of pain, similar to Hardy's philosophy of life. But escaping the harsh realities is not possible for a long time. Ultimately, we have to return to the despotic realities of life. Returning makes the pain bitter. Keats admits, "Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well/ As she is famed to do, deceiving elf."<sup>[9]</sup> Though, in psychology, escapism is a negative tendency to seek relief from the unpleasant truths, but it is at times a healthy technique to get respite from the sour actualities of life and feel recharged to confront adversity, afresh. All sorts of entertainments are means of escapism. It is an absolutely normal thing to do so, and helps in rejuvenating the body and mind. The faculty of the mind to partake in escapism, is the best gift of God to we human beings. The mental capacity to escape hardship and inexorable darkness by flight is akin to Keats' Negative Capability, an ability to negate oneself and become one with the object that provides pleasure.

The railway clerk has invented his own ecosystem of escapism:

Once a week, I see film  
and then I am happy, but not otherwise.  
Also, I have good friends,  
that is only consolation.  
Sometimes we are meeting here or there  
and have long chat.  
We are discussing country's problems.

The railway clerk seems to be the contemporary of Salim-Javed, Rajesh Khanna, Amitabh Bachchan, whose films dealt with the relevant themes of socio-economic, socio-cultural and socio-political climate of the time. Suppressed rage against urban poverty, urban corruption and urban crime is seen in the films of that time. The railway clerk must have escaped his austerity by watching these superhit films and getting lost in the world of fantasy. This must have had a cathartic effect on his soul, too.

Indian cinema has always been an escapist experience for the common folk hence, the railway clerk is no exception to it. Majority of the

masses have to deal with daily stress which makes them feel gritty all the time and are always in search of escape from the churning process of life. Therefore, escaping into the world of fantasy helps miserable people, like the railway clerk, to come out of their dark world. Watching films, talking to friends and discussing politics and issues of human concern, keeps a person's mind engaged in the mainstream. This often helps a person psychologically. Bollywood is the largest entertainment industry which directly influences people. It has a massive socio-political impact on the country. It is a significant form of soft power for India.

The railway clerk further discloses that he has good friends, which is the only consolation in adverse circumstances. This shows that the clerk is a good-natured man and has an understanding of maintaining relationships, which again are means of escaping the same nagging problem of corrupt workplace and corrupt society. Bacon's words in his essay, *Of Friendship* exactly match with the clerk's point of view. Bacon says "But one thing is most admirable (wherewith I will conclude this fruit of friendship), which is that this communicating of man's self to his friend works two contrary effects; for it redoubleth joys and cutteth griefs in halves. For there is no man, that imparteth his joys to his friend, but he joyeth the more; and no man, that imparteth his griefs to his friend, but he grieveth the less."<sup>10</sup>

In the end of the poem the clerk tells us that his friends are thinking of going to foreign, but he cannot even imagine of going abroad because his wife's mother is bedridden and he is the only son-in-law, to support the wife's family. Therefore, the clerk cannot evade his social responsibilities.

Some are thinking of foreign  
but due to circumstances, I cannot think  
My wife's mother is confined to bed  
and I am only support.

To summarize the narration of the clerk's groaning it can be said that he is feeling the same way as P.B. Shelley did in the poem *Ode To The West Wind*:

"I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!  
A heavy weight of hours has chained and bowed  
One too like thee: tameless, and swift, and proud."<sup>11</sup>

Bruce King says, "In his poetry there is a truth of acknowledging what is felt and experienced in its complexity, contradictions, pleasures, fears and disillusionments without preconceived ideas of what poetry should say about the poet and life. The opening up of Indian English poetry to reality in its many guises is perhaps Ezekiel's most significant influence."<sup>12</sup> The free verse and monologue style brings the poem close to everyday life and makes it realistic by expressing the truths of social ethos. What distinguishes Ezekiel's English from other writers in English is "the idiom in which he writes and the vocabulary he chooses for creative expression. . . . The tone may appear to be mocking as the poet becomes an ironist or even a parodist

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but he faithfully recreates these characters as they appear in their real life.”<sup>13</sup>Gieve Patel says that Ezekiel's friendliness and sympathy with the poor redeems the *Very Indian Poems in Indian English* from being caricatures of people who “do not know the language they use, in fact gives their language warmth and a kooky status.”<sup>14</sup>

### Conclusion

To conclude, Nissim Ezekiel's poem, *The Railway clerk*, is an excellent piece of social-realism, satirising the corruption, dishonesty, callous attitude towards work and workplace of the officials and the staff; and the inevitable predicament that arises out of the tyrannical system making individual's life miserable. In the malfunctioning system, the railway clerk finds out his own peculiar ways of keeping himself and his family contented, despite all odds, though he fails in his effort. The typical Indian way of gossiping with friends on politics and to watch movies once a week, are the means to evade the mundane drudgery of the government offices. We can see a fine blend of humour, pathos and irony in this remarkable poem. The two important factors that make *Indian Poems in Indian English* vigorous and worth appreciating are the conversational tone and colloquial rhythm. Both are found in the poem, *The Railway Clerk*.

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