

## Social Realistic Portrayal of Indian Society in the Selected Poems of Nissim Ezekiel

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### Abstract

*Literature is a potential impetus for social change. It provides intellectual consciousness to dismantle the implacable foes of the society. Moreover, it acts as an opportunistic tool for the representation of social crisis. Social realism shows injustice, racism, class differences, and draws attention towards the struggle of middle and poor-class protagonists in the society. In addition, it highlights social conditioning of the people. The present study pinpoints social realities of Indian society in the selected poems of Nissim Ezekiel under the theoretical framework of social realism by Prakash Khuman (2010). It also exhibits the social issues of the middle and lower class. Qualitative content analysis of Ezekiel's selected poems sheds light on the realities of Indian society. Result of the study unravels hidden social realities and the indifferent attitude of the upper class towards the lower class. Findings of the current study reveal significant implications of the root cause behind the unjustified attitude of the upper class. It also shows a strong reaction of Ezekiel to the intimidating behemoths of the social system. Furthermore, the present study gives a pathway to future studies to find out the different social problems prevalent in other societies.*

**Keywords:** Middle class, Nissim Ezekiel, Social realism, Society, Upper class.

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### Introduction

Literature is a medium through which we can see the harsh realities of

life. In simple words, it is the reflection of life. It represents social norms and also highlights the evils in society to revamp social conditions. Hence,

literature is an imitation of human behavior that does not only reflect society but also acts as a potential tool through which people amend themselves (Duhan, 2015). Moreover, Dubey (2013) claims that literature works as a mirror to the society, what happens in society is shown in literary works in one way or another.

According to Baharati and Ahmad (2015), literature has two main functions. Firstly, literature deals with ideologies that increase individual motivations and actions. Secondly, it reflects social life and encourages those thought patterns which raise questions against social injustices and give awareness about social issues and situations. Similarly, Sujit (2018) opines that literature is a catalyst for the political, cultural, and social attitudes of the society. Hence, literary works in any form portray the social and ideological realities. In addition, Ezekiel is one of those writers who has exposed the harsh realities of societies through writing. He has used poetry as an intellectual weapon to bring social awareness in Indian society.

Rana (2012) observed that Indian poetry in English has a different and long tradition. Indian poetry in

English is old and writers have played a significant role in the development of this genre. Writers play an important role in the progress of any literature. Ezekiel is one of those writers who has played his part in Indian English poetry and the representation of his society in a realistic manner. In addition, Ezekiel was conscious of his people and their living conditions, therefore he has realistically portrayed his society through literature. Ezekiel's most significant influence was the introduction of reality in English poetry in India. This influence gave readers a new way to create a deeper understanding of Indian culture and societal norms (Goel, 2017). Furthermore, Ezekiel is one of those poets who have highlighted social distinctions and inequalities. Despite his Jewish background, he has committed himself to Indian culture (Pramila, 2015). Ezekiel successfully identified himself as a part of Indian culture and traditions (Kumar, 2014). Moreover, Ezekiel is a religious and philosophical poet whose purpose was to observe human life experiences in society (Ramya, 2019). Hence, it shows Ezekiel's contribution to his society, language, and social values.

Different theories can be applied to literature for the identification of social values in societies and every theory has its importance. In the same way, realism is one of them, as it highlights the real issues of mankind. The term social realism is derived from Russian-inspired beliefs about the function of literature in a social realist society. It is inspired in different ways by Russians, stimulated by the Russian revolution, Soviet communism, and international Marxism (Khuman, 2010, p. 81).

Social realism is a theory that emphasizes social injustice, racism, class differences, and depicts the picture of the struggle of middle and poor class. The identification of social conditions of the lower and middle class has provided a rationale to this study. Ezekiel's poems are rarely explored from the perspective of social realism. Therefore, the present study is an attempt to expose the harsh realities of Indian society through the lens of social realism in the selected poems of Ezekiel. Furthermore, it also highlights the response of the poet towards those social realities.

The findings of this study will inspire other researchers in the future to

further investigate the representation of Indian society through lenses of social realism and other theories related to realism. The current study is delimited to investigate social realities in the selected poems of Nissim Ezekiel through the lens of social realism.

### **Objectives of the Study**

- To explore the realistic essence of Indian society in the selected poems of Nissim Ezekiel
- To reveal the response of Nissim Ezekiel to the social life in India through his poetry

### **About the Selected Text**

The following poems are selected by the present study: "The Truth about Flood", "The Railway Clerk", "Under Trial Prisoner" and "Entertainment". In "The Truth about Flood", Ezekiel tells the plight of the ordinary people who are destroyed by the severe floods in the village. One villager mourns that he has left his two children to the mercy of God while his remaining children are begging to sustain their lives. All the houses are destroyed and they don't have any hope left because there is no help from the government. Ezekiel satirized the

government and their system in this poem.

“Entertainment” is about the monkey showman who, in the poem represents the hardships of the lower class. He entertains people to earn some money and is in search of money which is the essential requirement for living. In the poem “Under Trail Prisoner”, Nissim has portrayed the sufferings of a lower-class person who is a trial prisoner and is unable to pay for his bail. He remains in jail for the crime he committed five or ten years ago. In “Railway clerk”, he shows grievances of a railway clerk about his lower middle class that is full of hardships and difficulties.

## **Literature Review**

### **The Term Realism**

According to Khuman (2010), Realism started in France with the rejection of Romanticism in the 1850s. It can be seen as a major trend in French paintings and novels. It was based on the portrayal of nature and the contemporary life of ordinary people in a realistic way. In literature, Realism is described as a theory through which reality is represented in its actual form without the practice of idealization of

things. Furthermore, World literature has reached a new phase of development in the 19<sup>th</sup> century based on the method of realism. The work of realism displays the inner meaning of life events. Romanticism was dominated in art and literature, based upon the fact that emotions and imaginations were given the importance that had no concern with the real lives of common people. Realism rejects imaginative idealism and shows the life situations of common masses objectively (Zarnigor, 2019). Hence, result of the study shows realism in literature is a manner of depicting life as it is without idealism or romanticism.

Realism is the relationship between reality and literature and between what life is and how the world takes it (Taghizadeh, 2014). Moreover, realist's works can disturb, educate or please us by showing reality as not what we perceive we know but what it actually is in reality. It shows us those realities which we have never seen or dreamed of (Yan li, 2016). Such binaries are outlined by scholars to trace the relationship of literature and realism; however, the present study looks at it from the

perspective of social realism.

Social realism portrays social reality as it is in literature. The main difference between social realism and societal realism is the fact that social realism presents the reality the same way as it is in the outer world but societal realism suggests how it ought to be by using the term 'should be'. When it comes to social realism, it is necessary to have the complete knowledge of real situation so it's a barrier for realist writer because they have to represent social realities realistically. In short, they cannot exaggerate the realities (Khuman, 2010). Furthermore, when the industrial revolution came and scientific growth started, the way of living got changed.

Revolutionary writers of that time talked about all these difficulties and situations in their works as they rejected the works of Romanticism because of their unreal approach.

*In literature, realism is reference that gives an illusion of exact correspondence with reality in its limited aspects. It is not unlimited, ultimate*

*reality but the fragmented, flawed world of quotidian experience that literary realism seems to refer to; or, it may be something felt as borrowed from that kind of experience.*  
(Slattery, 1972, p. 55).

The above statement declares that realists give less attention to imaginations from their surroundings. It does not mean that realism provides the proper truth but the fragments from the outer world. Moreover, Realism does not only deal with the present situation but also exposes the hidden objectives that are affecting the lives of contemporaries. Realist artist and writers use their mental capabilities for keen observation of contemporary issues to give real lessons. There is no difference between art and reality, art is representative of reality. All artists' and authors' works are based upon the realities of the societies in which they are present, so, there is no dichotomy between art and reality. Realism uses both art and reality to highlight the common issues of the common man effectively (Todorovic, 2019).

Krystal (2013) displayed the views from Erich Auerbach's (1946) *Mimesis: Represented Reality* that the spirit of realism lies in the wholeness of real truth. It deals with everyday situations, incidents, and characters from the middle or lower-middle-class in the specific contemporary time. As mentioned earlier that realism tells the contemporary truth so it is worth mentioning that realism describes what life is i.e., presenting the real situation as it is, without the mixing of illusions and imaginations.

Realistic literature is completely devoted to the present world's situations and reality. As Prakash Khuman (2010) mentioned George Eliot's remarks in his article;

*I am content to tell my  
simple story, without  
trying to make things  
seem better than they  
were; dreading nothing  
indeed but falsity  
which, in spite of one's  
best efforts, there is  
reason to dread.  
Falsehood is so easy,  
truth so difficult  
(Khuman, 2010, p. 94)*

Keeping in view the above discussion, a reference in the study is made to highlight literature as a tool for the representation of social realities which is the core construction of this study.

### **Social Realism**

A type of realism that emphasizes the living situations of the middle and poor class of the society. The Industrial Revolution changed every aspect of life so the literature of that era also changed its ways of presenting things. The focus of the writers shifted toward the social issues of the society by putting more focus on the problems of the common men. They selected the protagonist for their works from the lower or middle class. Social realism emphasizes social injustice, racism, and class differences and draws accurate pictures of the life struggle of middle or poor-class protagonists (Khuman, 2010).

### **Nissim Ezekiel Poems**

Ezekiel opposed the idealism and romanticism of the earlier group of Indian writers in English and tried to look at any typical Indian situation with an Indian essence, and dynamic Indian insight. He cleverly manipulated Indian

English to bring out the Indian worldview. Indeed, Ezekiel's poetic intellectuality creates a complete Indian atmosphere by capturing the very Indian attitude expressed through the use of Indian English (Thorat, 2009).

Khan (2016) claims that Angelou and Ezekiel have to face a lot of discrimination but they never feared and thus struggled to rise and live in their motherland and serve the citizens and the nations of their birth continued in their life and thus alienation, racism, and identity crises are the themes which can be seen in their poems. He is a great writer who presented Indian ethos in his poetry because he also faced an identity crisis and racial discrimination in his native nation. These concepts of class difference and gender discrimination are relevant to the present study.

Ezekiel himself has gone through hardships therefore he knows his society better than anyone else (Phondani, 2016). Ezekiel is one of those writers who has played his part in Indian English poetry and the representation of his society. Patil (2012) states that Ezekiel has used simple language to present the conditions of his people realistically. In

addition, Santosh (2017) believes that Ezekiel was bold in the satirical representation of Indian society and people.

According to Hussain and Zaidi (2016), Ezekiel is known as the father of modern Indian poetry in English. Karmakar (2015) takes the previous idea further and argues, Ezekiel was a postmodern critic whose attitude towards the poor was sympathetic therefore, wanted to change the conditions of the lower class. The above discussions are relevant to the present study as it sheds light on the importance of Ezekiel's contribution as a changing paradigm for Indian society.

According to Chelliah (2018), the depiction of Indian reality was an important characteristic of Ezekiel's poetry. She further elaborates that in the poem "Entertainment" Ezekiel shows the true conditions of a lower-class family where the monkey showman tries his best to earn bread for his family, therefore he is entertaining people day and night. Similarly, the poem "The Truth about Flood" describes the harsh attitude of the government towards the victims of the flood.

Moreover, “The Railway Clerk” is a symbol of pessimism and desperation of the poor in India. This brings forth the terrible conditions of the poor. These poor people satiate their appetite by any means. Railway clerk works hard but doesn't get enough money to bear the expenses of his family. In the poem, “Guru”, he exposed the fake gurus who are loyal to the rich but behave badly with the poor (Beg, 2017).

### **Research Methodology**

The current study is qualitative. According to Cropley (2015), the core ideology in qualitative research methodology is to investigate the personal approaches of researchers which are based on real-life experiences. Qualitative research is a form of social action that emphasizes the way people interpret and make sense of their experiences to understand the social reality of individuals (Mohajan, 2018).

According to Creswell and Ivankova (2009), the qualitative method is defined as a potential model that occurs in a natural setting and facilitates the researcher to establish a level of detail from a high level of

involvement in the actual experiences. The present study uses the content analysis technique for the analysis of the selected texts. According to White and March (2006), content analysis is a systematic approach for the analysis of documents in research. This method is highly flexible and used all over the world in research. The data of the current study is collected from primary and secondary sources. The text of the selected poems is the primary source of the study. For secondary sources, different research articles, research papers, and books are utilized.

Social realism is selected as a theoretical framework of this study. The term social realism refers to the social realities of the middle and lower classes. Writers present sociopolitical conditions of their society through writing which plays a key role in changing the conditions of these lower-class people. In the same way, the present study is conducted to highlight those issues of common people through the framework of Social Realism in the selected poems of Nissim Ezekiel.



## Analysis and Discussion

### Social Realities in Railway Clerk

When it comes to the representation of Indian society, Ezekiel is very bold in depicting the realities through his poetry. In “Railway Clerk”, Ezekiel shows the situation of the middle class through a railway clerk. The clerk represents the bad conditions of lower-middle-class people who suffer from extreme poverty.

*My wife is always for money  
Money, money, where  
to get money  
My job is such, no one  
is giving bribe.  
(Railway Clerk, lines 8-  
10)*

The above lines show the pathetic condition of the railway clerk who symbolizes the lower middle class. He has no money to give his wife who is always demanding money. He further says that in the offices, everyone takes bribe but no one is giving him which is a satire on the government officers. Railway clerk is forced to take bribes because he has to fulfill the basic needs of his family. Ezekiel was a keen observer of his society and was a social

reformer who wanted to change the conditions of those poor souls. He has beautifully uncovered the situations of the middle-class family in his poem “The Railway Clerk”.

The poor railway clerk finds it difficult to make money because his job is of low rank and no one offers him a bribe. His other colleagues get bribes and enjoy facilities. His wife demands money for household expenses but he doesn't know how to earn extra money. Despite his hard work, he doesn't get any promotion because he is not a graduate. He has to face many difficulties at the workplace. He is overstressed and burdened but not paid for his overtime work. He doesn't get any facilities at the office even the leaves were not granted. This poem is remarkable for its realistic representation of lower-class hardships and sufferings. It is a mixture of satire and irony on society.

*My wife's mother is  
confined to bed  
And I am only support.  
(Railway Clerk, lines  
34-35).*

This line better illustrates the financial crises of a railway clerk. The mother is on her deathbed and he is the only

support of his family. He is unable to give her treatment. Ezekiel wanted the world to pay heed to these problems of the lower and middle class. He felt the pain of those common people because he himself was a common person. The clerk mourns that some of his friends are going to foreign countries for work, but he cannot go with them because his mother is ill and he is the only bread earner in the family.

*My desk is too small,  
the fan is not repaired  
for two months,  
my children are  
neglecting studies,  
how long this can go.  
(Railway Clerk, line  
19-24)*

In the above lines, the clerk complains again that the desk is too small and the fan has not been repaired for two months which makes it hard for him to work but still he is fulfilling his duties honestly. He further says that his children are not paying heed to their studies because he is far away from them. He is in search of money to feed his family and bear expenses.

*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. (lines 14-18)*

This poem “Railway Clerk” is a monologue in which the speaker only talks to himself. The speaker is talking about his hard work that he is a responsible person who completes his work on time but no one appreciates his commitment and dedication. They always blame him because he belongs to the lower class. This poem is an epitome of the struggle and difficulties of lower-class people. This condition of railway clerk is similar to any other Indian clerk of his class. The clerk is surrounded by tensions. Nissim Ezekiel who is considered a poet of social consciousness has bravely exposed the harsh realities of the lower class in this poem.

### **Representation of Lower Class in 'The Truth about Flood'**

“The Truth about the Floods” describes the agony of the rural victims where flood stampeded everything. A flood came which destroyed everything and jeopardized their lives. Ezekiel examines the present life, society, and

situation very carefully and describes social, economic, and political scenarios, realistically. He is conscious about the life of common people and their condition. He makes sufficient effort to depict the problems of contemporary society, its dark and harsh truths, and its pessimism. He shows the attitudes of government towards the poor class in this poem “The Truth about the Floods”.

*“but the villagers  
would not tell me  
anything  
until I convinced them I  
wasn't a government  
official” (32-33)*

The above lines show that villagers were so afraid of the intimidating behaviors of the government that they won't tell anything to a government official. The speaker has to prove himself that he is not a government official, to gain trust of the common public. The paupers were not given any attention from the government or its any representative who is meant to be a public servant and supposed to help people but in reality, the scenario is completely changed.

*A villager speaks:  
I have eleven children*

*Two I have left to the  
mercy of God  
The rest are begging,  
somewhere. (18-21).*

These verses show the miserable conditions of poor villagers who belong to the lower class. A villager speaks about his tragedy. He says that he has left his two children at the mercy of God while the rest are begging to fight for their survival. They don't have any money to sustain their lives and no one is helping them. People of the high class take advantage of their situations. All the houses have collapsed, and they don't have any optimism left because the government is not helping them. Nissim Ezekiel was a strong supporter of social reformation. He has this notion that class difference is the root cause of all problems. Ezekiel has used writing as a weapon to highlight the issue of middle and lower class realistically. It has been observed that his main goal was to reform the social norms of his society which is a doorway to all problems. He is a source of inspiration for the victims of a stratified society. Ezekiel wants to inculcate awareness about execrable social ills and has raised a voice for indigent souls to make their life better.

*The villagers ran to  
them they slapped their  
bellies and whined:  
'I have not eaten for  
three days.'  
My husband has been  
washed away  
My parents have  
abandoned me  
My son is dying I  
cannot find my  
daughter (47-51).*

The above-mentioned poem picturizes the indifferent attitude of the upper class towards the common people. He satirized the political and bureaucratic system. Ezekiel depicted poverty and its effects in the poem. Bureaucrats and politicians having power and status, don't care about the lower-class people who are dying of hunger. The villagers were slapping their bellies because they have not eaten for three days. One female victim of the flood says that her husband died in the flood and her son is dying of hunger, she further complains that her daughter is also missing. Ezekiel knew these harsh realities and portrayed them very realistically, because he himself has gone through all these destitutions in his lifetime.

### **Sufferings of the Lower Class in “Entertainment”**

“Entertainment” is the poem about a monkey showman, who represents a lower class and its hardships. He entertains people to earn some money but never gets the reward in return. Monkey showman is in search of money which is the essential requirement of a lower class.

*Anticipating time for  
payment,  
The crowd dissolves.  
some in shame, part  
with the smallest coin  
they have  
The show moves on.  
(22-26)*

These lines from “Entertainment” exhibits monkey showman in the poem who represents the lower class living in hardships. They are in search of money which is their essential requirement of life. The showman moves from one place to another in search of money. He entirely depends on the favor of the public. Even though, no one is willing to give him money, he continues his hard work to earn bread for their family. The lower class means the people who are living the life below poverty line. Ezekiel has shown his sympathetic approach to the same lower class and

opposition to the social ills of the society in the poem. That is why he is known as the champion of social reformation.

E z e k i e l ' s p o e m "Entertainment" is one of the best examples of perfection in his art. He has a keen observation of the Indian realities. He seems to be the master in showing the selfish aspect of the gathered crowd which gets dispersed when the monkey showman demands money for the street show, they have recently enjoyed. On the other hand, he shows the sufferings of the life of the performers, who do everything to take care of their families. The monkey showman becomes sad when the crowd betrays him.

*Naked to the waist,  
The Master of  
Ceremonies  
drums frenzy, cracks  
whip,  
calls the tricks  
to earn applause and  
copper coins. (9-13)*

The above lines highlight that the poor monkey showman is a poor rural entertainer who moves from one place to another in search of money. He completely depends on the public to

gain money. Monkey showman tries his best to earn some copper coins against his great efforts. Monkey showman symbolizes lower class people who fights to survive in the war of the survival of the fittest. Ezekiel's sympathetic interest in the poor class reflects his social concern. The upper class is enjoying the privileges while the poor class is struggling to earn a livelihood. Ezekiel is the master of ironic representation of Indian society.

### **Injustice in "Under Trial Prisoner"**

In this poem "Under Trial prisoner" Nissim has laid out the life of a trial prisoner who is incapable to pay for his bail. Nissim's intellectual wisdom has displayed many paths of optimism to the pessimistic heads of Indian society.

*"We have our rules  
made long ago  
he's got to wait, the law  
says so.  
it's not our fault he  
lives in jail." (Under  
Trial prisoner)*

Ezekiel rejects existing colonial Jail laws with their complex procedures to give justice to the people. The under-trial prisoners have to live in jails for

years together, before their trial comes. These prisoners mourn on their fate as the prisoner in poem says he doesn't have money to get himself out of the jail.

Ezekiel argues that the rules and regulations are made long ago before independence, therefore, it needs modification to provide justice. The poem emphasizes the quick way of justice to ensure that victims get justice at right time. Ezekiel has criticized the judicial system. This poem shows Ezekiel's desire of revamping social norms. Ezekiel has intentionally portrayed these images of Indian society and their culture to make his people aware of their bad consequences.

*“Thousands like him  
Who did something  
wrong five years ago  
or maybe ten  
They didn't know when  
They were offered bail  
but didn't have money  
so they live in jail”.*  
(Under Trial prisoner)

The above lines clarify the struggles of the lower class in Indian society. The prisoner claims that thousands like him were offered bail but they didn't have

money because they were from the lower-class so they remained there for five or ten years. The upper class is enjoying luxurious life while the lower class is not able to fulfill their basic survival needs. There is an elite class that rules over the middle and lower class who are considered backward. There is a lower class that falls below the poverty line and is the middle class which is a major part of society. Ezekiel promotes these people so they can improve their classes by doing hard work and through talent as well. The concept of hard work is always there for the improvement of standards or classes. In this poem, Nissim has portrayed the sufferings of a lower-class person who is a trial prisoner and is unable to pay for his bail. So, he remains in jail for the crime he committed five or ten years ago. Moreover, a man of the high class has power, high status and income and is able to use his power anytime but the lower class doesn't have the necessary tools to live life. Ezekiel ironically criticized the lower class too; he says everyone dreams about becoming a part of the elite class to obtain a high social standard but no one is willing to do hard work.

## **Conclusions**

Twentieth-century was a great time of social awareness. Writers took an initiative to highlight the social realities of middle and lower classes in society. Time has shown us a great revolution in the form of these writers. Different poets raised their voices against social injustice and discrimination and one of those writers was Nissim Ezekiel.

Ezekiel has become a protagonist of Indian society because he has realistically represented the social realities. Ezekiel is the one who has inculcated those thought patterns of awareness into the minds of pessimistic people through his poems. This study shows the successful attempt of Ezekiel's intellectualism in highlighting the social realities of Indian society. The selected poems of Ezekiel are realistically portrayed under the lens of social realism. Moreover, he has questioned the elite supremacy of his society; the issues of the middle class and lower class are depicted in his poems which show Ezekiel's consciousness towards the difficulties of poor people. The study also shows a strong reaction of Ezekiel towards those social situations. Ezekiel

wants to dismantle the dichotomy of the middle class and upper class. Therefore, he has criticized the corrupt system which is a hurdle in the way of revolutionizing society.

## **Recommendations**

These poems can be analyzed from the different perspectives of realism. The present study is limited to the only social realism of Indian society in the selected poems of Nissim Ezekiel but researchers can apply other theories of Realism as well. Furthermore, the Theory of Feminism also suits Ezekiel's poems because he has raised issues of women too. Researchers can also analyze the selected poems through the lens of Cultural Stratification. The study recommends paying more heed to the social issues of the entire world. It is recommended that the study can be applied to any culture.

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