



Exploring Indian Philosophy in Nissim Ezekiel's Poetry

Sayed Raj Askari

ORCID 0009-0003-2274-4297

Corresponding Author: Sayed Raj Askari, Assistant Professor of English at Integral University, Lucknow, U.P, India, sraskari@iul.ac.in

Abstract

Aims: *The presented paper entitled "Exploring Indian Philosophy in Nissim Ezekiel's Poetry" aims to elaborate the concept of philosophy originated in India. It also tries to showcase the vedantic interpretation of Nissim Ezekiel's Poetry. Tracing the link between modern philosophy and ancient philosophy in literature. The paper emphasis on vedantic concepts.*

Methodology and Approaches: *The paper is based on analysis of Nissim Ezekiel's Poetry. The use of devices showcase the insights of vedantic expression. It portrays the essence of Indian philosophy which is known as Advait Vedant. The method and approaches applied to write this paper are explanatory, analytical and comparative.*

Outcome: *This paper would explain the concept of Advait through a detailed analysis of Indian Culture and would reveal how it has been depicted in Indian English Poetry. The research would also prove the prominent instances of Advait*

through Cultural references and would support the Advaitic approach which is visible in Indian English Poetry.

Conclusions and Suggestions: *The research would be beneficial to study the cultural influence on writers and poets, hence Advaitic approach stands out to be the center of all logical arguments behind identity crises and so on. It would be a new study to explore Indian Philosophy through Indian English Poetry which originated in India and was used in the West by different philosophers.*

Keywords: Advait Vedant, Indian Philosophy, Indian English Poetry, Nissim Ezekiel

Volume 3 Issue 2 Monsoon Edition 2023

Paper Type: Research Article

Article History: Received: July 17, 2023. Revised: July 29, 2023. Accepted: August 25, 2023

The paper can be accessed online at: www.literaryherm.org

All through the years poetry has been inspiring people from different faiths and beliefs. Thus it has become a new approach to fall back on the ideas explored and experimented with by classical Writers and Poets. Perhaps there are chances that it can never be fully analysed, the understanding and passion the great writers imbibed from the history and culture. Though there are such possibilities that it would show up in their works. Advait Vedanta is a philosophical concept given by Shankar which means, 'Monism'. Some studies talk about what Advait is, and of course, western philosophy seems to be the base but 'Advait' is more ancient. This paper aims to explore the concept of Philosophy called 'Advait' in Nissim Ezekiel's Poetry

Advait Vedant is the most widely read philosophy in India. The most startling is its claim about the nature of the world and our perception of it. Volumes of literature have been written in defense and exposition of it. Samkara (788-820 A.D) was the greatest philosopher not only among Indian thinkers but among Western thinkers as well. Samkara belonged to the times when people used to believe in different types of faiths and worshipped God to either get rewards or to abide by the rules. India has been blessed with thinkers of all faiths. It is said that when the West was learning how to read and write, India had almost finished compiling Vedas. Advait Vedanta is a branch of knowledge to understand the world as a whole. Samkara, in his times was relentless in his criticism of the other systems and zealous and untiring in the exposition of his system which he called Absolute Idealism, (Monism). To understand in a better way we need to deconstruct the thought and understand the concepts related to Advait. With Advait comes the other concept or idea that is called Dvait, for example, Monism (Advait) and Dualism (Dvait). According to Samkara, the monistic tendencies of the Upanishads and tries to recollect the facts to develop the whole concept of Advaitvad (Monism), (79). He emphasizes the reality of an unconditioned and unqualified Brahman and regards Gods, individual souls, and the world as appearances due to cosmic nascence (Maya).

Samkara calls this world Mithya, which means beyond real or unreal. The world does not appear how it is, but differently. That is to say that there is only one thing that can be called real or true, and that is Brahma. Advait philosophy claims to stand alone when comparing the differences, it sublates the multidimensionality of the world. It implies that the whole world that we see is an illusion. It might mean that whatever we are doing or planning to do is only an illusion, nothing affects the cosmic Brahma that is how the world appears to us which creates an illusion around us and therefore, we take it as real. When Advait propagates that the world is false in the sense of illusory, that must not mean only

the physical world but the internal psychical world as well, since both are experienced as pluralistic; hence Advait claims that reality is unitary and absolute in their true sense. As Ras Vihari Das puts it in his article, "The Falsity of the World":

The world does not mean merely the external visible world with its sensible qualities. It means this and more than this... In fact whatever can be presented to us either externally or internally, to the mind or the senses forms part of the world which as a whole as well as every item in it is said to be false. Falsity is thus asserted of everything that we can sense or feel, think of or imagine as an object (89).

It is crucial to understand the terminology used by Samkara, For instance, he calls this world 'False', which doesn't mean by any imagination that the world does not exist, he believes in the existence of the world but he calls it Mithya, which makes the existent world like a mirage. Samkara uses the word *Sat* which means existence, by this, he emphasizes that only Brahma exists, and everything else is temporary and provisional. The half shlok is composed by Sri Adi Shankaracharya in his work *Brahmajnanavali Mala* follows, Shloka-ärdhena Pravakshyāmi Yad-uktam Granthakotibhih/ Brahma Satyam Jagan-Mithyā Jivo Brahmaiva Näparah.

The fact that the composer of the first line of the shlok is not known. Brahman alone is real and this Jagat is Mithyā, and the Jiva is non-different from Brahman.' The Brahman is beyond any logic and reason, not even language can comprehend what Brahman is, and therefore it is an indefinite source with no binaries attached to it. Hegel says, that if anything is nonexistent then it would be nothing. There's a famous aphorism used like a Vedic method to negate the definition of Brahma, "Neti Neti". It portrays the nuanced interpretation to express that neither this is Brahma nor that is Brahma.

Samkara distinguishes between ontological reality and empirical reality. He tries to make a distinction in the method of attaining knowledge. He categorizes two types of knowledge which he calls higher knowledge (Para Vidya) and Lower knowledge (Apara Vidya). According to Samkara Brahma can only be known by higher knowledge. It is trans-empirical consciousness that provides the real essence of the world and which is devoid of space, time, and casualties, which are empirical categories. True knowledge is intuition, which is supra-intellectual and can be gained by integral experiences. True knowledge transcends the knower and the known, it paralyzes the pragmatic differences of the world which is empirical, and takes the knower towards the ultimate truth which is free from all variations and dissimilarities. The whole argument is based on how to liberate ourselves from pain and sorrow. Samkara writes that ignorance is bondage, and true knowledge is liberation. Bondage is due to nescience (Maya) which creates a false world around us. To achieve peace and contentment we go after material things for satiation, but we should rather try to achieve true knowledge, that would be the end of suffering. There have been some aphorisms in all four Vedas, discussing the only true thing and that is Brahma (The Absolute). The aphorisms are as follows:

1. अहम् ब्रह्मास्मि
2. प्रज्ञानं ब्रह्म
3. तत्त्वमसि
4. अयम् आत्मा ब्रह्म

All four aphorisms are taken from the main Upanishads, for example, *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, *Aitareya Upanishad*, *Chandogya Upanishad*, and *Mundaka Upanishad*. Humans have always been trying to gain satisfaction from the empirical consciousness which provides the unreal essence of the world which unnoticeably creates nescience (Maya) around us. In terms of

Advait, there's only one entity that can be called real, and that is Brahma (The Absolute). So far we have discussed the elements of Advait, but the reason behind writing this paper is to bring Advait's relevance in Indian English Poetry, Nissim Ezekiel was an Indian Jewish poet, playwright, editor, and art critic. He was a foundational figure in postcolonial India's literary history, specifically for Indian writing in English. He was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1983 for his Poetry collection, "Latter-Day Psalms", by the Sahitya Akademi, India's National Academy of Letters. Ezekiel was born on 16 December 1924 in Bombay (Maharashtra). His father, Moses Ezekiel, was a professor of botany at Wilson College, and his mother was the principal of her school. The Ezekiels belonged to Mumbai's Jewish community, known as the 'Bene Israel'. In 1947, Ezekiel earned a BA in Literature from Wilson College, University of Mumbai. In 1947-48, he taught English literature and published literary articles. After dabbling in radical politics for a while, he sailed to England in November 1948. He studied philosophy at Birkbeck College, London. Philosophy plays an important role in his writings. He writes about an unreachable space of the unconscious and conscious which would be an interesting subject to arrive on. Like Nissim Ezekiel, many Indian poets showcase Indian philosophy in their works, intentionally or unintentionally. It could be because of the cultural influence which inadvertently impacts the ideas of the writer.

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 (1-5).

The above stanza has been taken from the poem 'Philosophy' in which we can examine the essence of True knowledge as dictated by Adi Shankaracharya. The poet in the above lines tries to put forward the importance of the absolute thing

which is Brahma. The situation of trance and fulfillment can be achieved by the ultimate truth or reality. In the above lines, the poet discusses the place which is metaphorically a sense of solace and contentment, which is away from all distractions and materialism. The poet admits that the world is merely an illusion (Maya). As Samkara says that the real and absolute would never change and be still forever, the same thing is portrayed by the poet, in the line, “whose will is uncontrolled”:

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” (16-10)

The other stanza from the poem is an example to prove the infiniteness of time like, Brahma. In a way, Brahma is never ending and ceaseless. Poet tries to compare time with Brahma. The lines are evocative and suggestive of the finiteness of human existence in the world, the only thing which has always been there and will always be there is Brahma (The Absolute). Ezekiel compares time with the existence of the world, he states that worldly existence is temporary and time (Brahma) is infinite and every stage of human history is nothing in its comparison, therefore the ultimate reality is absolute. It doesn't change even a bit. According to Samkara, “to know if something is absolute one should bring that into account to know its validity, which highlights the permanence of the absolute which is constantly present” (Adishankaracharya 55):

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 (1-5)

The above lines have been taken from the poem 'Enterprise', the poem is a philosophical journey that is open to multiple interpretations and unfolds the human search for the absolute. Human's journey towards true knowledge is portrayed in the poem. Pilgrimage is used as a symbol that is depicted as a path towards the absolute. Although it started to explore reality as Adi Shankaracharya says, the world is Mithya (beyond real or unreal) so it forms the illusory layering around the world which he calls Maya (Nescience) that is why there is a sense of incompleteness and dissatisfaction in the humans. The last line of the stanza predicts the desire for the ultimate truth.

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 goats.
Three cities where a sage had taught" (5-10)

The second stanza shows that the seeker tries to observe and analyze the essential facts of the world. The seeker is learning from the experiences. The poet points out in the last line that people are imparting fallacious knowledge about the world and human existence. According to Adi Shankaracharya, it can only be attained by true knowledge which is away from space, time, and casualties, which are empirical categories. True knowledge can be pursued from the ancient scriptures. The lines inculcate the sensibility of probing the various customs of the world which are made by humans. Brahma or the absolute does not differentiate. For the absolute, everything is the same and permanent, therefore a seeker must understand the world as a whole, away from all differences.

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 ben
When, we finally, reached the place,
We hardly know 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. (21-30)

The following lines of the poem suggest that the seekers could not reach any conclusion. The answers they were searching for don't exist in the unreal world which reflects as an illusion. From this point, the question arises, "Are even questions valid?" In the poem the pilgrims reach nowhere after an extensive journey, all they know is that they are just a straggling crowd with little hope. Maybe that's what this world is all about and we are just travellers, but there's no exact destination. The findings show that Indian poetry has an element of Indian philosophy and it tries to probe the questions on existentialism and supports the Advaitic features. The poem represents the qualities and traits of the ultimate truth (Brahma) which is incomprehensible. It showcases the common trends put forward in Advait Vedant, as dictated by Adi Shankaracharya.

Works Cited and consulted

- Ezekiel, Nissim. *Collected Poems*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Ezekiel, Nissim, and Frank Birbalsingh. "Frank Birbalsingh Interviews Nissim Ezekiel." *Journal of South Asian Literature*, vol. 22, no. 2, 1987, pp 130-8.
- Pande, G.C. *Life and Thought of Śaṅkarācārya*. Motilal Banarsidass, (2011).
- Shah-Kazemi, Reza (2006). *Paths to Transcendence: According to Shankara*, Ibn Arabi & Meister Eckhart. World Wisdom. (2006).
- Sinha, Jadunath. "*The History of Indian Philosophy*" Vol 1, Sinha Publishing House, 1956.
- Sinha, Jadunath. "*Outline of Indian Philosophy*." New Central Book Agency, 1998

Sayed Raj Askari

Sayed Raj Askari is Assistant Professor of English at Integral University, Lucknow. He qualified UGC NET in English in 2020.