



National Journal of Hindi & Sanskrit Research

ISSN: 2454-9177

NJHSR 2025; 1(61): 267-270

© 2025 NJHSR

www.sanskritarticle.com

Jayantakumar Panda

Student, Acharya Second Year,
Navya Nyaya, Dept. of Darshan,
Shri Lal Bahadur Shastri National-
Sanskrit University, New Delhi

“The Professor” by Nissim Ezekiel: A Study in Irony, Identity, and Indian Modernity

Jayantakumar Panda

Abstract:

Nissim Ezekiel's *"The Professor"* is a brilliant dramatic monologue that captures the voice of a retired Indian academic reflecting on his life with awkward pride, comic formality, and understated melancholy. Beneath its surface humor lies a profound exploration of aging, identity, material attachment, and cultural change in post-independence India. This paper investigates the poem's literary elements, satirical tone, structural technique, and philosophical resonance with the spiritual teachings of the Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, Vachanamrut, and Bhagavata Purana. The poem's seemingly mundane observations unfold into a subtle critique of ego, illusion (māyā), and misplaced notions of progress. It invites the reader to reflect on what it means to live meaningfully in a world that equates success with status and numbers. Through irony, realism, and philosophical depth, Ezekiel elevates the professor's voice into a universal meditation on human frailty and the yearning for relevance.

Preface

This research paper is an interpretive and philosophical analysis of *"The Professor"* by Nissim Ezekiel, a foundational voice in modern Indian English poetry. Written in a uniquely Indian idiom, the poem offers a slice of everyday life from the perspective of a retired geography professor whose speech is filled with comic awkwardness, outdated social pride, and subtle despair. While the poem stands as a literary gem for its satire and structure, it also resonates with deeper spiritual insights drawn from Indian scriptures.

• In exploring this poem, we journey beyond surface-level humor to uncover Vedantic questions about identity, the transience of life, detachment from material pride, and the soul's longing for liberation. Scriptural texts like the *Upanishads*, *Bhagavad Gita*, *Vachanamrut*, and the *Bhagavata Purana* are drawn upon to deepen our understanding of the poem's ethical and philosophical tensions. By bridging modern literature with classical Indian wisdom, this work hopes to offer a rich, multidimensional reading of Ezekiel's deceptively simple poem.

1. Literary Devices and Figures of Speech

Ezekiel uses several literary devices to create both humor and irony:

- **Irony:** The core device of the poem. For example, the professor boasts about his children's status, saying "Both have cars," revealing materialism and misplaced pride.
- **Metaphor:** "You were so thin, like stick, / Now you are man of weight and consequence." The line plays on both literal and metaphorical meanings of "weight."
- **Simile:** "You were so thin, like stick," adds comic vividness to the professor's observation.
- **Personification:** "Our progress is progressing" anthropomorphizes "progress," mocking bureaucratic and hollow expressions.

Correspondence:

Jayantakumar Panda

Student, Acharya Second Year,
Navya Nyaya, Dept. of Darshan,
Shri Lal Bahadur Shastri National-
Sanskrit University, New Delhi

- **Imagery:** Phrases like “My wife died some years back,” and “eleven grandchildren” evoke vivid snapshots of the professor’s life.
- **Alliteration:** Subtle, as in “black sheep,” reinforcing rhythm and sound.
- **Assonance:** Occasional internal vowel repetition helps preserve the conversational tone.
- **Symbolism:** The professor becomes a symbol of India’s middle class—rooted in colonial education, proud of westernized progress, yet linguistically insecure.
- **Oxymoron:** Phrases like “progress is progressing” reveal hollow modernity.
- **Parody:** The entire poem mimics a formal Indian-English idiom, enhancing realism while mocking it.

2. Structure and Form

- **Rhyme Scheme:** The poem is written in **free verse**, reflecting natural speech.
- **Meter and Rhythm:** Conversational rhythm replaces formal meter. The irregular beat mimics spoken language.
- **Stanza and Line Breaks:** The single stanza, without punctuation, replicates an uninterrupted speech—emphasizing the professor’s monologue style.
- **Enjambment:** Used throughout, enhancing flow and continuity. E.g., “Every family must have black sheep. / Sarala and Tarala are married...”

3. Theme and Subject Matter

- **Subject:** The professor recounts his post-retirement life, family updates, health, and offers reflections on change in India.
- **Themes:**
 - **Aging and Mortality:** “This is price of old age.”
 - **Cultural Change:** “Old values are going, new values are coming.”
 - **Pride and Identity:** Pride in material accomplishments and traditional status.
 - **Language and Colonial Legacy:** The peculiar English reflects colonial hangover and linguistic hybridity.
 - **Societal Expectations:** Emphasis on family planning, “black sheep,” success measured by jobs and cars.

4. Tone and Mood

- **Tone:** Ironic, nostalgic, boastful, humorous, and subtly melancholic.
- **Mood:** Evokes amusement, sympathy, and reflection in the reader. The simplicity is touching, yet the undertones critique materialism and superficial progress.

5. Philosophical and Spiritual Interpretation

Though secular on the surface, the poem reflects **Vedantic detachment** from ego and material attachments:

- The professor’s identification with worldly roles and accomplishments contrasts with **Bhagavad Gita’s** emphasis on detachment from the fruits of action (Gita 2.47).

- His contentment (“By God’s grace...”) echoes **Indian philosophical gratitude** and karma theory.
- The reference to mortality—“this is price of old age”—resonates with **Upanishadic reflection** on impermanence (e.g., *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 2.4.12: “All this is perishable”).
- Yet, the poem subtly critiques **Maya** (illusion) through misplaced pride, exposing the illusion of social prestige and worldly success.

Nissim Ezekiel’s “*The Professor*” is a poem rooted in irony and realism, yet when examined through the lens of **Upanishadic and Vedantic wisdom**, along with **scriptural teachings** such as the *Bhagavad Gita*, *Vachanamrut*, and *Bhagavata Purana*, it reveals deeper insights into the human condition, especially regarding **ego, aging, detachment, illusion, and the pursuit of mokṣa (liberation)**.

Alignment with Upanishadic and Vedantic Wisdom

1. The Illusion of Ego and Self-Importance (Ahaṅkāra and Māyā)

The professor speaks with subtle pride:

“One is Sales Manager, / One is Bank Manager, / Both have cars.”

These lines reflect **attachment to ego, family success, and material identity**, which is contrary to the Upanishadic path of self-realization.

•Chāndogya Upaniṣad 8.7.1:¹

“*ātma vā are draṣṭavyaḥ śrotavyo mantavyo nididhyāsitavyaḥ*”

(*The Self alone is to be seen, heard, reflected upon, and meditated upon.*)

The professor’s attention is directed outward—towards social validation—rather than inward, toward self-knowledge.

•Bhagavad Gītā 3.27:²

“*prakṛteḥ kriyamāṇāni guṇaiḥ karmāṇi sarvaśaḥ, ahaṅkāra-vimūḍhātmā kartāham iti manyate*”

(*All actions are performed by the modes of nature, but one deluded by ego thinks, “I am the doer.”*)

The professor believes he has shaped his children’s success, showcasing the ignorance born of ego (ahaṅkāra).

2. Attachment to Saṁsāra (Worldly Life)

The professor finds value in offspring, marriage, cars, and respectability. However, Vedānta teaches that **true happiness is not in external accomplishments** but in renunciation and the realization of the eternal Self.

•Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 2.4.5:³

“*na vā are putrasya kāmāya putraḥ priyaḥ bhavati, ātmanastu kāmāya putraḥ priyaḥ bhavati*”

(*It is not for the sake of the son that the son is dear, but for the sake of the Self.*)

This passage reminds us that all worldly love and pride ultimately revolve around the Self (Ātman), not the external other.

• **Vachanamrut Gadhada I-11:**

"The root cause of bondage is attachment to the body and worldly relationships..."

The professor's pride in children, grandchildren, and social status reflects this attachment, a core obstacle on the spiritual path.

3. Impermanence and Old Age (Jara and Nitya-Anitya Viveka)

The professor says:

"Only, this is price of old age / But my health is O.K."

While he accepts the aging process, he tries to retain control through optimism. Vedānta urges us to reflect deeply on the **transitory nature of life**.

• **Bhagavad Gītā 2.13:**⁴

"dehino'smin yathā dehe kaumāram yauvanam jarā, tathā dehāntara-prāptir dhīras tatra na muhyati"

(Just as the boyhood, youth, and old age come to the embodied soul in this body, so also is the transition to another body; the wise are not deluded by this.)

The professor sees aging as inconvenient rather than an invitation to transcendence. The wise, however, perceive it as a phase in the soul's journey.

• **Mundaka Upaniṣad 1.2.12:**⁵

"parīkṣya lokān karmacitān brāhmaṇo nirveda-māyān nāsty akṛtaḥ kṛtena"

(Having examined worldly life, the wise person becomes dispassionate, realizing that the uncreated (immortal) cannot be attained through action.)

4. Irony of "Progress" and Vedantic Satya (Truth vs Illusion)

The professor proudly declares:

"Our progress is progressing. / Old values are going, new values are coming."

This shallow metric of "progress" is ironically presented. According to Vedānta, **true progress lies in turning inward** and transcending illusion (māyā).

• **Bhagavad Gītā 5.29:**⁶

"bhoktāram yajñā-tapasām sarva-loka-maheśvaram, suhṛdam sarva-bhūtānām jñātvā mān śāntim rcchati"

(Peace comes to one who knows Me as the enjoyer of all sacrifices, the Lord of all worlds, and the friend of all beings.)

Outer progress without inner peace is futile.

• **Vachanamrut Gadhada I-10:**

"The Jiva who perceives worldly progress as progress is ignorant. True progress lies in attaining the company of the Satpuruṣ and developing detachment from Maya."

5. Humor and the Masking of Existential Suffering

The professor jokes:

"Now you are man of weight and consequence. / That is good joke."

Behind humor lies a sense of loss, longing, and relevance-seeking. This aligns with **Bhagavata Purana's** notion that those immersed in worldly talk avoid the deeper pain of existential ignorance.

• **Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa 11.23.42:**⁷

"na hy ekāntena nandanti na dvandvaiḥ parimucyate"

(No one is truly joyful in this world, nor is anyone free from dualities unless one seeks shelter in the Lord.)

The professor's cheerfulness masks the inner void created by the absence of deeper, spiritual anchoring.

6. Clinging to Family and False Security

"You won't believe but I have eleven grandchildren."

Such boasts reflect misplaced fulfillment. The scriptures view **clinging to family life as bondage unless it is spiritualized**.

• **Vachanamrut Gadhada II-11:**

"So long as one believes one's relatives, wealth, body, and all else to be one's own, one continues to suffer pain and pleasure."

• **Bhagavad Gītā 2.71:**⁸

"vihāya kāmān yaḥ sarvān pumānś carati niḥspṛhaḥ, nirmamo nirahaṅkāraḥ sa śāntim adhigacchati"

(He who abandons all desires, moves without longing, without ego and possessiveness—he attains peace.)

Conclusion: Vedantic Message Hidden in a Comic Monologue

Though *The Professor* appears humorous and mundane, it echoes profound Vedantic and Upanishadic concerns:

- The illusory comfort of ego and material success (māyā)
- The transitory nature of life (anityatā)
- The deep yearning for relevance and immortality (pūrṇatva)
- The ultimate futility of pride in worldly roles (sāmsārik bandhan)

Through the professor's voice, Ezekiel ironically critiques the **false notions of identity and progress**, inviting the spiritually inclined reader to reflect on **true Self-realization**, as described in the *Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gītā, Vachanamrut, and Bhagavata Purāṇa*.

6. Historical and Cultural Context

• **Era:** Written in post-independence India (likely late 20th century), a time of rapid urbanization and socio-economic shifts.

• **Cultural Influence:** Reflects Indian middle-class anxieties in adapting to western modernity while clinging to traditional pride.

• **Colonial Legacy:** The professor's English reflects British colonial education. His awkward idiom ("progress is progressing") mirrors hybrid cultural identity.

• **Movement:** Part of **Indian modernist poetry in English**, Ezekiel pioneered writing that fused Indian subject matter with English diction.

7. Poet's Perspective and Emotional Mindset

• **Inspiration:** Likely drawn from Ezekiel's observations of real-life interactions with Indian middle-class intellectuals.

• **Emotion:** The poet mixes affectionate humor with subtle critique—suggesting empathy for the speaker while exposing his limitations.

• **Autobiographical Elements:** Ezekiel, a professor himself, critiques his own class gently. His Jewish-Indian identity gave him an outsider-insider gaze.

8. Target Audience and Purpose

• **Audience:** Educated Indian readers, post-colonial critics, and global readers interested in Indian English literature.

• **Purpose:**

○ **Satirical Critique** of Indian English and post-colonial aspirations.

○ **Cultural Documentation** of a generation shaped by colonial education and modern ambition.

○ **Reflection** on aging, change, and social status.

9. Personal Interpretation

The Professor is a masterful dramatic monologue that uses irony and humor to capture the complexities of post-independence Indian identity. It documents a generation that clings to fading cultural pride while embracing materialistic modernity. Beneath the surface comedy lies a subtle philosophical musing on mortality, ego, and progress. As a reader, one feels both amused and moved—laughing at the professor's odd expressions while sensing the universal human desire to be remembered, respected, and relevant.

Conclusion

Nissim Ezekiel's "*The Professor*" transcends its form as a comic monologue to become a meditation on the human condition in modern India. The professor, while speaking in a language marked by linguistic oddities and social formalities, reveals much more than a casual life update. His speech reflects the tensions between tradition and modernity, appearance and reality, spiritual emptiness and societal pride.

By examining the poem in the light of Vedantic and Upanishadic philosophy, it becomes clear that the professor's self-image—centered on family, health, and professional legacy—is a poignant illustration of māyā (illusion). The poem subtly critiques the reliance on transient accomplishments while hinting at the need for self-inquiry (ātma-vicāra) and detachment (vairāgya). His misplaced satisfaction mirrors the Bhagavad Gita's teachings on karma and the illusory nature of ego.

Thus, "*The Professor*" becomes a reflective mirror: while we may laugh at his odd turns of phrase, we are compelled to confront our own attachments and illusions. Ezekiel offers not just satire but a quiet spiritual provocation, encouraging us—like the great Indian scriptures—to look inward for meaning beyond social definitions of success.

References (APA Style)

Ezekiel, N. (1965). *The Exact Name: Poems*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Bhagavad Gita. (Trans. Swami Sivananda). (1996). Divine Life Society.

Radhakrishnan, S. (1953). *The Principal Upanishads*. London: George Allen & Unwin.

King, B. (1987). *Modern Indian Poetry in English*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Lal, P. (Ed.). (1971). *Modern Indian Poetry in English: An Anthology & a Credo*. Calcutta: Writers Workshop.

References

¹ य आत्मापहतपाप्मा विजरो विमृत्युर्विशोको विजिघत्सोऽपिपासः सत्यकामः सत्य-संकल्पः सोऽन्वेष्टव्यः स विजिज्ञासितव्यः स सर्वांश्च लोकानानोति सर्वांश्च कामान्यस्तमात्मानमनुविद्य विजानातीति ह प्रजापतिरुवाच ॥ ८.७.१ ॥

² प्रकृतेः क्रियमाणानि गुणैः कर्माणि सर्वशः ।

अहङ्कारविमूढात्मा कर्ताहमिति मन्यते ॥ २७ ॥

³ स होवाचः न वा अरे पत्युः कामाय पतिः प्रियो भवति, आत्मनस्तु कामाय पतिः प्रियो भवति । न वा अरे जायायै कामाय जाया प्रिया भवति, आत्मनस्तु कामाय जाया प्रिया भवति । न वा अरे पूत्राणां कामाय पुत्राः प्रिया भवन्ति आत्मनस्तु कामाय पुत्राः प्रिया भवन्ति । न वा अरे वित्तस्य कामाय वित्तं प्रियं भवति, आत्मनस्तु कामाय वित्तं प्रियं भवति । न वा अरे ब्रह्मणः कामाय ब्रह्म प्रियं भवति, आत्मनस्तु कामाय ब्रह्म प्रियं भवति । न वा अरे क्षत्रस्य कामाय क्षत्रं प्रियं भवति, आत्मनस्तु कामाय क्षत्रं प्रियं भवति । न वा अरे लोकानां कामाय लोकाः प्रिया भवन्ति, आत्मनस्तु कामाय लोकाः प्रिया भवन्ति । न वा अरे देवानां कामाय देवाः प्रिया भवन्ति, आत्मनस्तु कामाय देवाः प्रिया भवन्ति । न वा अरे भूतानां कामाय भूतानि प्रियाणि भवन्ति आत्मनस्तु कामाय भूतानि प्रियाणि भवन्ति । न वा अरे सर्वस्य कामाय सर्वं प्रियं भवति, आत्मनस्तु कामाय सर्वं प्रियं भवति । आत्मा वा अरे द्रष्टव्यः श्रोतव्यो मन्तव्यो निदिध्यासितव्यो मैत्रेयि, आत्मनो वा अरे दर्शनेन श्रवणेन मत्या विज्ञानेनेदं सर्वं विदितम् ॥ ५ ॥

⁴ देहिनोऽस्मिन्यथा देहे कौमारं यौवनं जरा ।

तथा देहान्तरप्राप्तिर्धीरस्तत्र न मुह्यति ॥ १३ ॥

⁵ परीक्ष्य लोकान्कर्मचितान्ब्राह्मणो निर्वेदमायान्नास्त्यकृतः कृतेन ।

तद्विज्ञानार्थं स गुरुमेवाभिगच्छेत्समित्पाणिः श्रोत्रियं ब्रह्मनिष्ठम् ॥ १२ ॥

⁶ भोक्तारं यज्ञतपसां सर्वलोकमहेश्वरम् ।

सुहृदं सर्वभूतानां ज्ञात्वा मां शान्तिमृच्छति ॥ २९ ॥

⁷ द्विज उवाच

नायं जनो मे सुखदुःखहेतु

र्न देवतात्मा ग्रहकर्मकालाः ।

मनः परं कारणमामनन्ति

संसारचक्रं परिवर्तयेद् यत् ॥ ४२ ॥

⁸ विहाय कामान्यः सर्वान्पुमांश्चरति निःस्पृहः ।

निर्ममो निरहङ्कारः स शान्तिमधिगच्छति ॥ 71 ॥