



ORDINARINESS IN THE WRITINGS OF NISSIM EZEKIEL

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ABSTRACT

This research paper is an attempt to find ordinariness in the select poems of Nissim Ezekiel. Nissim Ezekiel is a distinguished poet in the history of Indian English literature. He has so far published six collections of poems in addition to several poems published in several journals and anthologies etc. His is a land mark in Indian English poetry, for he was able to pen approximating to the demands of the modern world. The poem "The Paradise Flycatcher" discloses the bird watcher zafar futehally and the juxtaposition of dream and reality raises the prosaic and the ordinary to the level of poetry. The poems "The Visitor", "The Virginal" and "A Women Observed" reveal the exposition of the human situation in poetical terms. The "Night of the Scorpion", "In the Queue", "Gallantry", "Case Study", "The Country Cottage", "Philosophy", "Night of the Scorpion", "In India", "The Patriot", "The Professor", "Poem of Separation" reveal the aspect of ordinariness.

INTRODUCTION

The fifth volume "The Exact Man" composed in 1965 comprises twenty poems and its title is extracted from Juan Ramon Jimenez's poetic lines mentioned below.

*Intelligence gives me
The exact name of things*

In this volume which has some fine poems the poet divulges unsurpassable ability of making poetry out of the ordinary and the common place. Containing some beautiful poems, the said

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volume disclosed the poet's unsurpassable ability of making poetry out of the ordinary and the common place. The authentic voice which he has attained offers a new power to his poetry. The poem "The Paradise Flycatcher" discloses the bird watcher zafar futehally and the juxtaposition of dream and reality raises the prosaic and the ordinary to the level of poetry. The poems "The Visitor", "The Virginal" and "A Women Observed" reveal the exposition of the human situation in poetical terms.

The poet has the rare gift of idealizing and universalizing the common place by the restrained and skillful treatment. Regarding "The Virginal", it points our psychological insight and suggests how a virgin adjusts to some unending loneliness in her life. One of the finest poems is "Night of the Scorpion" in which the poet shows a rare human interest in addition to blind belief in religion and supernatural element, suffering, etc. At the end, he says:

*Thank God the scorpion picked on me
And spared my children*

Ezekiel seems to regard ordinariness worthy of celebration when he directs his sense against it. And he seems to believe, as W.H. Auden did, that the subject matter of this sense springs from the experiences of the poet as an ordinary human being. Ordinariness is a mode of survival, an antidote to sentimentality, and a buffer against misfortunes and failures in life, while ensuring a sense of humor that is also a sense of values.

Ezekiel poetizes ordinary situations, ordinary human relationships, ordinary men and women, and ordinary creatures. He has composed his very best poetry out of the ordinariness of human life. He also exhibits his inborn love for Indian landscapes, Indian flora and fauna. In the poem "The Country Cottage" for him (Ezekiel) Lizard was patient, active, firm in determination and strong in will power and teaches the lesson of patience and it does its work of eating the cockroaches with tireless energy and patience, and silently goes away when the work is done:

*When we awoke the next
morning we found as we
expected that the job
was done, clean and complete,
and the Stout Lizard gone.*

"Night of the Scorpion", published in "The Exact Name" in 1965 is one of the finest poems of Ezekiel. It has been highly admired as a flawless piece of poetic composition. In it Ezekiel offers to the narrative a dramatic intensity, a beauty of imagery and a musical subtlety and

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richness such as Indian poetry in English has rarely known in its recent history. This poem reveals that Ezekiel is one of the typical Indian poets whose interest in the Indian Soil and in ordinary human events of day - to - day Indian life is superb. The mother occupies a prominent place in Indian home. All most all the people love and respect her. So, all members of the family and neighbors are very anxious to bring her a quick relief.

*"The peasants came like swarms of flies and
buzzed the name of God a hundred times
to paralyze the Evil one"*

Therefore, Karnani's view of the poet "takes pure delight in the joys of the body" as shown in this poem appears curious. "Gallantry" is yet another poem of this kind in this volume. These two poems— "In the Queue" and "Gallantry"— using ordinary situations, are far from satisfactory as poetry because they lack urgency of feeling which, only pressure of experience can generate.

"Case Study" is the penultimate poem in 'The Unfinished Man' is remarkable for self-scrutinizing psychology and polished expression. The poem takes the form of a brief dialogue between, as Karnani, following David Me Cutch ion puts it a "depersonalized third person"— the "he" of the poem —and the "projected self" of the poet— the 'I' of the last stanza. This device enables the poet to keep himself, at arm's length from his self and scrutinize it sympathetically. The "he" of the poem is in many ways an ordinary and average person in his desires, ambitions and aspirations, hopes, expectations, and disappointments.

In the poem "The Exact Name", Ezekiel, the poet speaker, seeks to make poetry out of the ordinary and common place more consistently than before. His endeavor is to capture in poetic terms what he calls 'the ordinariness of events' which, paradoxically, is nonetheless quintessence. He therefore, as the poet speaker, tends to move more towards the sensuous, concrete and particular, and away from the abstract [which, of course wisely, is not altogether rejected].

This trend is indicated by the first poem of "Philosophy", in 'The Exact Name' in which Ezekiel rejects the kind of cold reasoning and intellectual analysis which he believes destroys the reality of experience. The poems in the volume reveal legibly his increasing human concern, commitment to life in a particular place, and his capacity to transmute ordinary occurrences into poetic perception. He wants to find his identity here and now rather than try to see beyond the present or indulge in the extraordinary. He seems to have told his biographer Raj Rao: "We all tend to forget the common places of life in the pursuit of

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sublimities. In reality the commonplaces are sublime." Appropriately "Philosophy" concludes with the following lines:

*The mundane language of the senses sings
Its own interpretation. Common things
Become, by virtue of their commonness,
An argument against the nakedness
That dies of cold to find the truth it brings.*

The very next and beautiful poem in the said volume is "Night of the Scorpion", which superbly demonstrates, the poet's emphasis on the ordinary. It is not solely Ezekiel's best known and most celebrated poem. "In India" which emulates this poem, presents a series of four sketches, satirical in spirit, focusing on ordinary events in today's India - Together they present a cross-section of the city of Bombay, with which the poet identifies himself. Though polluted the cosmopolitan city of Bombay, for him, represents a miniature India. But he has no illusions about the metropolitan Bombay city. Each of the four sketches presents a separate facet of life.

The scenes presented in "In India" are neither extraordinary nor out of the way. In the volume titled "The Exact Name" Ezekiel's focus is more consistently than before on the commonplace and ordinary, and the ordinariness of events which nonetheless carry a significance. The poem entitled "The Visitor" based on a popular folk belief about the cawing of a crow, describes in a humorous vein a very ordinary event to illustrate the ordinariness of most events in our everyday life of expectation and disappointment. As a carefully designed poem, it moves steadily towards the wry comic reversal with which it ends in a philosophic way.

"The Visitor" presents a homelier instance of the ordinariness of events. It is supposed to be based on a belief that when the crow caws three times at the window, a visitor is sure to arrive. But nothing prevents an urban man to share this belief as it is commonly seen in India and elsewhere. The poet speaker of the poem mentally prepares himself to receive the visitor, first of all condescendingly and later expectantly. He waits all the day, with mounting expectations that the 'Visitor' might be "an angel in disguise" or some unforeseen "temptation" to test his resolve. The poet very skillfully builds up an atmosphere of anticipation of something extraordinary and surprise. But, when the visitor actually arrives, he is neither an angel nor a tempter, one who just wants to while away a little time and the conversation with him is as substantial as smoke. Rather belatedly, the poet speaker mentions what he should have known all along, that most events are ordinary.

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As for the poem "The Patriot" it is much more sharply and pointedly satirical than "The Professor". The protagonist's offence against English is far greater than his counterpart's, although his unexpressed but confident presumption is that he knows his English. The title of the poem, like that of "The Professor", is ironical. The aftermath of Indian independence, for which Gandhi's leadership was largely responsible, threw up a number of people professing patriotism as well as Gandhism, making a mockery of both. The protagonist of this poem is one such patriot. Like the professor, he too is very much of the ordinary patriot. Like the professor, he too is very much of the ordinary and average, complacent, self-satisfied, pretentious, who mistakes his rambling and superficial talk about the country and the world situation, from the security of his arm chair for genuine patriotism.

The aspect of deflation is also noticeable in the following lines of his another poem entitled

"Poem of Separation".
Any man may be a whirlwind,
any woman lightning,
But buses take us to our meeting,
trains to our destination.

The poet appears to regard ordinariness worthy of celebration. Further, he has preferred to confine himself to the average and ordinary and uncelebrated, who form the bulk of mankind, for his imagination contemplation, and to discover meaning and significance in the apparently ordinary and commonplace events.

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