

Exact Name - Nissim Ezekiel's Precise Image of Poetry for his Emotional Complex

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According to a widely disseminated version of the history of Indian verse in the second half of the 20th century, Nissim Ezekiel is at the centre of the group of poets who inaugurated the modernist revolution in Indian poetry in English. When Ezekiel returned from England in 1952, he brought with him a poetics that challenged the lyrical Romanticism of preceding generations of Indian poets; and along with like-minded contemporaries such as P.Lal, R.Parthasarathy and Keki, N.Daruwalla, he replaced a tendency towards mystical obscurantism, of which Sri Aurobindo is seen to have been particularly representative, with an insistence of precision of expression and a sceptical rationalism that advocated a break with the past. Ezekiel and his contemporaries committed themselves to injecting a new seriousness into the writing of Indian verse, following European modernist masters such as T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound in their dedication to finding objective correlatives for both subjective emotions and abstract ideas. As Sudesh Mishra points out, the very title of Ezekiel's first collection, "A Time to Change (1952) seemed to signal his resolve to make a clear break with the Romantic past" (1995: 14).

Ezekiel is one of the post-Independence India's finest poets, and much of the strength of his writing lies in its individuality. While his earliest verse bears the imprint of his European Modernist influences, the more mature Ezekiel is a poet whose verse defies easy categorization. His distinctive poetic practice draws on a range of traditions--Judaic and Hindu, ancient and modern, Western and Eastern – creating a highly personal. Indian landscape, albeit one that also has broader resonances as an embodiment of Post- Independence secularism.

The title of the volume *Exact Name* is appropriate for in this collection, the poet examines the nature and function of the poet, its defining the process, whereby images and symbols are used in poetry to give exact names to things and to human emotions. This he did by borrowing some lines from Juan Ramon Jimenez, which he used as an epigraph to this volume:

Intelligence, give me
The exact name of things!
Let my world be
The thing itself,

Newly created by my soul.

It is only in poetry where we attend to the sensory character of words that they become images too. To be a poet is to look at things with fresh wonder and to gain 'the right mastery of natural things'. Ezekiel had already said:

To see things as they are is a habit,
 An acquisition in the blood'
 That will not let the eye grow cold. (1959: 14)

In this collection, there is a fine image which suggests the fresh arrival of inspiration:

From the long dark tunnel
 Of that afternoon, crouching, humped,
 Waiting for the Promised land,
 I peeped out like a startled animal
 And saw a friend flapping his angelic wings.
 I welcomed him. (Two Images)

He treats poetry as 'inspired mathematics' trying to find the precise image for his emotional complex. Thus in *The Exact Name*, poetry is praised for its great gift of the process of naming things and the way it provides symbolic equivalents for our emotional thoughts.

In this collection, Ezekiel tried to extend the scope and subject matter of his poetry. He sought poetry in the ordinary and the common place. In the process, he showed a lot of human interest that his poetry always had. He has sought poetry in 'the ordinariness of most events' like Wordsworth and also like him gets tedious and trivial, "every thing looks tedious when you do not see it from the point of view of the author".

It is from this point of view that one can justify 'A Warning' (for Linda Hess) in this collection. This poem is based on another poem by Linda Hess, entitled 'Bombay Waterfront', which appeared in *Poetry India*. The lines which inspired Ezekiel's poems are as follows:

As I sit here, my back against the traffic
 any man passing by could push me off very simply,

Just a touch and I'd tumble
 To the boulders and the stars (1966: 42).

Thus, Linda Hess, sitting precariously on the 'Bombay water front', looking at the sea, gets 'a warning' from Ezekiel that she should be careful about her life since nothing is certain about the world:

The boulders will be hard
 and the water cold, the stars
 distant, and no doctrine proved. (Warning)
 Better hold to the sea wall –
 I don't want to hear you scream (Warning)

Such a poem shows as much interest in the person who inspired it as in the poetry itself. Like wise the poet is surprised to find that a pregnant woman feels uncomfortable when she looks at a nude in the art gallery. This invites a forthright comment from the poet that nudity was necessary for her pregnancy, and she has no business to disown the source of her conception:

The life
 in the woman's belly
 swelling her erotic lines
 depresses me, the seed
 and source denied by this
 expression on her face (A Woman Observed)

Characteristically, Ezekiel finds that life is superior to art. Hence, in that woman observed in the art gallery, he finds "all that sensual / movement bursting through the dress". In such cases, Ezekiel tries to elevate the common place to the poetic and succeeds substantially.

There are certain poems in this collection which look like an exercise in natural history. Thus the poem on 'Paradise Fly Catcher' tries to poetise the entire description of the bird, bodily lifted from an essay on ornithology. What raises it to the level of poetry is the juxtaposition of dreams and reality at various levels.

White streamers moving briskly on the green
 Casuarina, rouse the sleepy watcher
 From a dream of rarest birds
 To this reality. A grating sound

Is all the language of the bird,
Spelling death to flies and moths
Who go this way to Paradise.
Its mask of black, with tints of green,
Exactly as described in books on Indian birds,
Is legend come alive to the dreamer
Whose eyes are fixed on it in glad surprise. (Paradise Fly Catcher)

Commenting on the above poem, Michael Garman rightly suggests the source of its poetics: "The easy correlation of the dream, the dead Fly Catcher in the mind of the sleepy, awakened watcher, and the live one (itself a 'legend' before his eyes) represents a possibly profitable interplay of dream and reality that was unthinkable in the earlier, rather literal-minded, but scrupulously honest pilgrim (1969: 120).

'The Visitor' shows Ezekiel's fine gift as a verbal portraitist. The poem juxtaposes superstition with reason. The superstition on which the poem is based is a popular one in India -- a cawing crow indicates the arrival of a visitor. The crow caws, the poet narrator waits expectantly and to give both the crow and the narrator their due, a visitor does arrive after all; we expect so much but what turn out is the most causal and the ordinary. What a difference between the expectation and the actuality. To that extent, the superstition is not debunked. Where reality confronts, superstition heads on and causes the narrator to reaffirm his faith in 'the ordinariness of most events' when the visitor in question turns out to be a man he expected a woman; needless to say, a young woman further more, his hands were empty, his need only to kill a little time:

His hands were empty, his need:
Only to kill a little time.
Between his good intentions
And my sympathy the cigarette smoke
Was more substantial than our talk

I see how wrong I was
Not to foresee precisely this:
Outside the miracles of mind,
The figure in the carpet blazing,
Ebb flow of sex and the seasons,

The ordinariness of most events. (The Visitor)

We expect so much but what turns out is the most casual and the ordinary. This is how the temptation and the promise ruin us.

'Night of the Scorpion' is a brilliant poem of human interest. The poem has, as its setting a contemporary Indian tender family situation. The theme of the poets' mother, stung by a scorpion is given multiple treatment, bringing in its sweep the world of magic and superstition, science and rationality, and maternal affection.

To begin with, evil is represented by "flash of diabolic tail in the dark room". Then the world of ritualistic incantation, performed by the holy man to tame the poison and the role of peasant community who buzz the name of God to paralyze the evil effect of the scorpion's sting is brilliantly evoked in the following lines.

May he sit still, they said.
May the sins of your previous birth
be burned away tonight, they said.
May the sum of evil
balanced in this unreal world
against the sum of good
become diminished by your pain
May the poison purify your flesh
of desire, and your spirit of ambition,
they said, and they sat around
on the floor with my mother in the centre,
the peace of understanding on each face. (1996: 61)

This is contrasted with the world of science, as represented by his sceptic, rationalistic father, who, in contradistinction to the holy man, tries "powder, mixture, herb and hybrid," thus drawing attention to the two different philosophies in India, the religious superstition of the peasants and scientific rationalism exposed to western education. The end of the poem reflects the sensibility of an Indian mother who makes light of her own suffering and thanks God that the scorpion spared her children and picked on her.

The entire poem is built on irony, which reaches its climax in the last lines:

My mother only said
 Thank god the scorpion picked on me
 And spared my children. (Night of the Scorpion)

Ezekiel reserved certain tough poems for the early part of his book. One such poem was 'Philosophy' with which the collection started. 'Philosophy' brings out the love of metaphysics. 'Philosophy' was Ezekiel's early companion. He has already written that in London, "philosophy, poverty and poetry, three companions shared my basement room." (12). But here, his love of metaphysics and logic is stated explicitly:

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. (Philosophy)

He loves the 'cold lucidity' of logic while the last line refers to the philosopher's ability to multiply any number of ideas from a few basic ones. The same idea was expressed by William Empson in his 'Dissatisfaction with Metaphysics'

Adam and Eve breed still their dotted line,
 repeated incest, a plain series
 their trick is all philosopher's disease. (1956: 9)

'Philosophy' tries to contra-distinguish the world of pure reasoning with that of poetry. The poet does believe in science and ruthless logic but there are world greater than this 'cold lucidity' where 'residues of meaning still remain.' This is the world of poetry which alone gives the apocalyptic vision. Hence the 'clarity of sight' given by philosophy and science is not enough. It is not a substitute for the world of myth represented by poetry, which also has the gift of multivalence. Here, "we receive but what we give'. Not every thing can be explained; certain things are known only by the final formula of light." Hence in the fourth stanza, 'Philosophy' tries to explore the music of senses:

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. (Philosophy)

Ezekiel finally rejects the world of abstraction. Instead he prefers the warmth of human relationship and the social smile. The study of these common things is preferred to the study of cold abstraction. This Augustan trait—"The proper study of mankind is man"- appears in the work of Ezekiel again and again. Hence, logic and metaphysics provide the poet with an occasional source of escape.

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