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A CRITICAL INSIGHT INTO NISSIM EZEKIEL'S "CASE STUDY" AND "POET, LOVER, BIRDWATCHER"

Dr. Satrughna Singh

Associate Professor, Department of English

Raiganj University

Raiganj, Uttar Dinajpur, West Bengal

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Abstract

Nissim Ezekiel, a prominent Indian poet, crafted verses that reflect the complexities of modern life, blending traditional Indian themes with contemporary global sensibilities. His poetry often explores the struggles of identity, cultural conflicts, and the challenges of urbanization. Ezekiel's works, such as "The Night of the Scorpion" and "Enterprise," employ vivid imagery and a conversational style to convey the human experience. Through wit and irony, he critiques societal norms and values, offering insights into the multifaceted nature of existence. Ezekiel's poetry is celebrated for its linguistic precision, nuanced observations, and a unique fusion of Indian and Western literary influences, contributing significantly to post-colonial Indian literature. Ezekiel was one of the most famous and significant poets writing in the post-Independence India. He shows enough maturity and skill to be counted among the greats in world poetry. However, he has also been attacked of showing a decline in his later poetry. An Indian reader of his poetry is both proud of him as well as painfully disappointed to see him wasting his poetic propheticism, which could have made him a world (famous) poet. It seems imperative, therefore, to see why we do not see him among the great poets of the world that wrote in English. Here I analyze two of his often-anthologized poems, which together might be called his most significant statements on creativity: "Case Study" (CP 124-5) and "Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher" (CP 135).1

Keywords

"Case Study", "Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher", Nissim Ezekiel, Indian English Poetry,
Indian Writing in English.

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"Case Study" is about an 'ephebe,' an aspiring creative artist, who has had to face failure so far. He cannot recognize the cause of his failure, obviously because he is not yet among the Masters who "never failed . . . / To know when they had sinned against the light." To overcome the desiccation of creativity, it is necessary for him to learn to know from the great creative artists of the past his sins against the 'light.' The failure is imputed to the problems in the ephebe's personal life; hence the causes: he had been educated in "common school and rotten college," had indulged into "a foolish love affair" and "Messed around . . . with useless knowledge." His married life has become nightmarish. He has a wife, two children, and servants; however, extremity or eccentricity of his behaviour with them created problems. The children were either loved too much by him or treated with austere discipline; the wife and servants had a similar experience. This "drove them to the wall," though it was not quite what he desired. The result was that he felt "damned in that domestic game." Equally frustrated was he at work; he took up various jobs only to abandon each. The reasons were neither clear nor quite "approved / By those who knew" him; some accused him of shopping for unrealizable "dreams and projects."

However, the personal problems are by no means a thorough measure of the ephebe's whole character; there is more to it than imagined by those who felt that he "shopped / Around for dreams and projects later dropped." It seems that everyone who came in contact with him, except the poem's speaker, failed to understand him. Perhaps, understanding him required someone special; this is what makes him a 'case' to be studied, and the speaker is given that task. Being an expert in such cases, the speaker not only identifies the ephebe's problems but also recognizes his potential and gives an invaluable advice. Though the reader can make out the speaker's subjective involvement in the 'case,' he can also see that the study is presented with as much clinical detachment as possible, without verbal excesses and superfluous details. In fact, the whole poem reads like a report at the end of which the reader is presented with what appears like a recommendation.

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The title clarifies the speaker's position as one who has studied or worked with the 'case.'

The very first line manifests his attitude toward the 'case:' he does not say 'Whatever he had done was wrong' but "not quite right." The choice of the word 'right' and later the confessional remarks that "He had the patient will," that what people said about the 'case' "was quite untrue," are indicative not only of the speaker's sympathetic attitude but also of his faith in the ephebe's potential. To crown it all, as it were, he also declares that the ephebe "never moved / Unless he found something that he might have loved." Despite the involvement, the speaker has some quite practical suggestions, indicative of his knowledge of the ephebe's weaknesses:

Can [the Masters'] example purify his sight?
Ought he to practice Yoga, study Greek,
Or bluff his way throughout with brazen cheek?

Owing to the speaker's positive attitude, the last of these suggestions is out of question; in fact, he feels that the ephebe must learn -- to use Stevens' expression -- "by sight and insight" (473) how to know his sins against creativity, like the old Masters. Practicing Yoga and studying Greek are no less important; apart from representing the East and West, they are constituents of the Longinian formula for sublimity: Yoga represents the inner, even inherent, strength or skills, and Greek is symbolic of the knowledge acquired from without. But even the Longinian formula of the innate and acquired skills is not sufficient; the speaker has something more to say.

The final stanza presents the speaker's last words of advice. What is remarkable about his speech here is that it raises the speaker's position from a mere expert to almost a sage or soothsayer like Tiresias, in whom the ephebe is supposed to meet his epipsyche, whereupon his Coleridgean dejection would be laid to rest:

He came to me and this is what I said:
"The pattern will remain, unless you break
It with a sudden jerk; but use your head.
Not all returned as heroes who had fled
In wanting both to have and eat the cake.
Not all who fail are counted with the fake."

The language of this message imitates the hermetic and baroque style of a soothsayer, hence the ambiguity. It says that the "pattern" of the quotidian life will not change unless it is broken with "a sudden jerk;" nevertheless, it also advises the ephebe to use the head or to be careful about the breaking. This is because breaking the pattern and taking 'the road not taken' would make the return difficult, even impossible. Even if one returns, there is a great chance that one would be counted as failure since "to have and eat the cake" is close to impossible. At the same time, the speaker also says, "Not all who fail are counted with the fake." In this way, neither is the possibility of successful return fully rejected nor is the Icarusian failed return looked down upon. This ambiguity is what makes the poem greater than what it would be without it.

While the poem effectively brings out the anxiety ridden, frustrating period between the desire to attain to Mastery and its achievement, it also discloses some of the basic requirements for becoming a creative artist. Perhaps, the prerequisites demand too much from the ephebe, but what matters is the "patient will" and "flair" that come respectively from the growth of the inherent potential and the skills acquired from outside.

"Case Study" finds a sequel in Ezekiel's "Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher." The links that join the two poems are obvious: the ephebe of the former becomes what Donne would call a

'threepersoned' figure in the latter as Ezekiel does not distinguish among the poet, lover, and birdwatcher. The "patient will" of the former succeeds to "patient love" in the latter. Both the ephebe and the three-headed protagonist would not 'move' unless they find something they might love. However, there are some differences, too. The most vital difference is that the ephebe has yet to overcome his problems and make a mark as an artist, whereas the protagonist in the sequel seems to have an adequate artistic aptitude. Another difference is that the ephebe has a concrete existence in the poem, while the protagonist of the latter poem does not have a concrete identity, which flits randomly and unexpectedly from poet to lover to birdwatcher. It is only the poet who has a direct mention in line 9 of the sequel and an indirect in lines 3 and 19; this might be taken to be Ezekiel's prejudiced concern in favour of the poetic vocation -- rather 'avocation,' to use Robert Frost's word. This could also be said to link the two poems: the ephebe could be viewed as a poetic aspirant per se.

"Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher" is remarkable for its blending of the objects of meditation (or desire) of the three personages figuring in the title. In this blending, the personages become indistinguishable. The poem also emphasizes 'patience' in order for the object's coming into the glade of experience and thought; this makes artistic creation an avocation, a love, since vocation demands "To force the pace and never to be still." However, writes Ezekiel,

To watch the rarer birds, you have to go
Along deserted lanes and where the rivers flow
In silence near the source, or by a shore
Remote and thorny like the heart's dark floor.

'The rivers flowing in silence near the source' where the 'rarer words' may come on their own would remind of Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey;" however, the passage seems to have greater affinity with Coleridge's description, in "Kubla Khan," of the surroundings of the "pleasure-dome,"

Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea
.....
But oh! That deep romantic chasm which slanted
Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover
A savage place! as holy and enchanted
.....
And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,
.....
A mighty fountain momentarily was forced.

Both the excerpts refer to a river, which ends up into a sea. Imagine the 'river' to be the flow of consciousness and the 'sea' to be either the unconscious or the Not-Me, outside world (for both are referred to as the 'Other' by Jacques Lacan and are paralleled by Ezekiel's "source, or by a shore"), and the imagery takes to an altogether different level. The Indian poet's "rarer birds" may be watched in Coleridge's "deep romantic chasm," the field of the Freudian 'imago' (or the 'Imaginary' of Lacan) that links the conscious and unconscious domains. Both poets seek inspiration for high poetry from these places; that is, from the obscure recesses of self or mind ("Consciously, I ask my sub-conscious / To supply me with a poem," writes the Indian poet in his poem "Sub-conscious" [CP 271]) where, Ezekiel says in "Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher,"

... the women slowly turn around,
Not only flesh and bone but myths of light
With darkness at the core, and sense is found
By poets lost in crooked, restless flight,
The deaf can hear, the blind recover sight.

Here, "myths of light," apart from representing the obscure origins of creativity, also seems to be a secret allusion to the Creation Myth in the *Bible*; it is engaging for these reasons: the biblical myth begins with "God said, 'Let there be light;' and there was light." This is mysterious, even mystical, to date since it still confounds our imagination as to how the originator of the myth could conceive the idea of light, much like the astounding conception of the idea of God. More than artistry, it is such great ideas that make any poetry great. The great ideas have always been incomprehensible to the fullest; hence have "darkness at the core." Nevertheless, gifted creatures like poets find sense in them. Here, Ezekiel certainly deserves appreciation, for he knows that high poetry comprises of great ideas; besides, when one considers that it is a Jew writer alluding to a Christian myth and its greatness, one sees Ezekiel having overcome the barrier of religion and believing in the secularity of art; it is a personal greatness that even Shakespeare fails to show owing to his anti-Semitic attitude.

The construction in lines 3 and 4 in the above passage gives rise to ambiguity; the lines can be read in at least two ways:

- i) sense is found by poets [who] are lost . . .
- ii) sense is found by poets [as] lost . . .

Thus, the finding or founding of sense may be equaled with its loss since it is poets' privilege to see the normal in the abnormal or the abnormal in the normal. This ability is precisely what makes their poetry remedial, so that "The deaf can hear, the blind recover sight." A poet like Wallace Stevens would be very proud of Ezekiel here, for these are precisely his thoughts. Both Ezekiel and Stevens strike an affinity of thought on 'poetry as cure' (see section II of Stevens's "The Rock") although Stevens needed it for his own cure. Many of Stevens' critics feel that he suffered from "a crisis not only of art but of self;" the Indian poet's "Case Study" could be viewed as a verbal analogue for the 'crisis of art' resolving which the protagonist in the poem might overcome the crisis of identity as an artist. If "Case Study" is autobiographical as Karnani believes (Karnani 64-65), Ezekiel had come very close to effecting his own cure since he had the desire to transform his art into a panacea as the following lines from his "At 62" would testify:

I want my hands
to learn how to heal
myself and others,
before I hear
my last song.
(CP 274)

However, we do not see the Masters' example having purified the ephebe's sight in "Case Study"; similarly, the complex figure of the protagonist in "Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher" seems to be someone with insight that remains unutilized. Both poems, though, increase the reader's hope of at least finding one poem in Ezekiel where the ailing ephebe would come of age and be a poetic hero.

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Note

1. References to Ezekiel's poems are from his *Collected Poems*, abbreviated parenthetically in the text as *CP*.

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1. Coleridge, Samuel T. "Kubla Khan." *The Winged Word*. Ed. David Green. Madras:Macmillan, 1974. 90-91.
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