

“Time Stretched Thin” : A Study of Everyday Temporalities, Boredom and Banality in Nissim Ezekiel’s Verse

ANJAN DAS

Abstract. This research navigates the interplay of time, boredom, and banality within the poetic realm of Nissim Ezekiel. Prominent poet of the post-independence era, Ezekiel (1924–2004), tackles a variety of subjects, including the depiction of the daily lives of Indians. He travels the world, discovers his worries about the fleeting aspects of existence, and then progressively enters the mysterious world of philosophy and spirituality. Titled “Time Stretched Thin,” this study embarks on an exploration of the temporal dimensions inherent in the mundane as expressed through the verses of Ezekiel. His poetic world is permeated with an assortment of images, both urban and rural. The poet paints portraits of people from various social classes who together comprise a sizable portion of daily India. The poet often hailed as a trailblazer in Indian English literature, provides a lens through which the everyday is scrutinised, revealing layers of existential depth. This study which is based on the critique of everyday lives by theorists like Henri Lefebvre, Guy Debord, György Lukács, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and others, analyses and investigates select poems of Ezekiel to offer a fresh perspective on the topic, determine how the poet interprets ‘Everyday’ and how the everyday life of Indians, particularly that of city dwellers, is expressed.

Keywords : Everyday; boredom; daily life; existential concerns

One of India’s most celebrated poets and acclaimed as the progenitor of contemporary Indian English poetry, Nissim Ezekiel catalysed the growth and success of subsequent poets. Bruce King opines, “Whereas previously Indian English verse was a hobby, something done in spare moments, Ezekiel made it central to his life. Others wrote poems, he wrote poetry” (King 91). Among other Indian English poets, he shows himself as an astute observer of daily life. His poetry, with its understated depths, offers windows into the temporal realm of the ordinary, a place where time, monotony, and quaintness are all interwoven. In select poems like “The Railway Clerk” “Island”, “In India” and “Portrait” respectively he portrays the everyday life of an individual who works in an office, the daily life of

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people in a city, the daily lives of people of an entire country and their ultimate retrospection and realisation about life, daily reality and existence. In *Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus writes, “The everyday man lives with aims, a concern for the future or for justification (with regard to whom or what is not the question). He weighs his chances, he counts on “someday,” his retirement or the labor of his sons. He still thinks that something in his life can be directed”(Camus, 38). Most of Ezekiel’s urban poems are like that with characters that barely live their everyday lives but rather survive in life with hope and sometimes despair. Mohammad Shafiqul Islam aptly notes :

Ezekiel in his long poetic journey never backs down from his main objectives: he has always given emphasis to everyday affairs of human beings, social injustice, discrimination, and the domination of the landowning class. The poet writes about the plight of the common people of his country showing his empathy to them. He becomes concerned with the sufferings of the marginalized people who cannot speak of the intolerable levels of hardship with which they lead their everyday lives. (Islam, 104)

Discussion and Analysis

“Man must be everyday, or he will not be at all”(Lefebvre, 167).

Bruce King writes, “A breakthrough to poetry about everyday Indian life written in a more colloquial seeming voice occurred in the volumes published by Ramanujan, Ezekiel, Gieve Patel, and Kamal Das in the mid 1960s” (King, 113). Ezekiel with his contemporaries draws the picturesque everyday of Indian lives. According to Norman Ross Edington, “All of Ezekiel’s poetic work is concerned with the dichotomy of human processes: Word and Silence; Love and Sex; Urban and Rural; and most especially, Life and Death” (Edington, 139). His poem “The Railway Clerk” from the collection *Hymns in Darkness* (1976), also revolves around a dichotomy of mundane and extraordinary in the daily routine of a clerk. In the poem, everyday life and the monotony of the clerk’s existence are vividly portrayed, painting a picture of routine and tedium.

Speaker's work as a railway clerk becomes a symbol of routine, with the constant denial of leave applications and the absence of overtime pay. He is falsely blamed for mistakes he has not made. He lacks appreciation and motivation.

I am never neglecting my
responsibility,
I am discharging it properly,
I am doing my duty,
but who is appreciating?
Nobody, I am telling you.
(Ezekiel, 14-18)

Phrases such as "Money, money, where to get money?" (Ezekiel, 9) emphasize the constant financial strain and the perpetual worry about meeting basic needs in daily life. The portrayal of the small desk and the malfunctioning fan contributes to the sense of discomfort and confinement in his workspace. His daily life is filled with work pressure- "Every day there is so much work and I don't get overtime"(6-7). Ezekiel's synecdochical portrayal of the clerk's daily business becomes a motif for all the middle-aged low-wage office workers' daily lives in India. The speaker's yearning for a simpler life as a bird speaks to the desire for escape from the monotony and responsibilities that define his existence. Guy Debord in his book *Society of the Spectacle* writes, "Individuals who passively accept their subjection to an alien everyday reality are thus driven toward a madness that reacts to this fate by resorting to illusory magical techniques" (Debord, 118). The occasional reprieve in the form of watching a film once a week works as a magical technique of balance restoration within his daily mundane life. These brief escapes serve as a contrast to the prosaic aspects of everyday life, providing a temporary respite from the boredom that pervades the speaker's existence. In the end, he asserts that even the nation's problems do not affect him much because he is submerged in his personal problems and family issues since he is the only support his family has :

We are discussing country's problems.
Some are thinking of foreign
but due to circumstances, I cannot
think.
My wife's mother is confined to bed
and I am only support. (Ezekiel, 31-35)

The poem "Island", from *Hymns in Darkness* (1976), captures the routine and monotony inherent in the daily life on the Island, The City of Mumbai. Mumbai changes, transitioning from natural beauty to urban decay, mirroring the temporal progression. The reference to "bright and tempting breezes" (Ezekiel, 11) separating the past from the future suggests moments of clarity and change. However, the return to stillness in the air, coupled with the speaker sleeping in the fragrance of ignorance, implies a cyclical nature of temporal experiences. Henri Lefebvre writes, "We perceive everyday life only in its familiar, trivial, inauthentic guises" (Lefebvre, 172). Ezekiel draws this familiarity and depiction of raw everyday in his poems. The everyday life of Bombay becomes "unsuitable for song as well as sense" (Ezekiel, 1). The speaker's cry for help and the acknowledgement of keeping one's own counsel convey a sense of personal struggle and, at times, boredom. His inability to leave the island suggests an entrapment and perhaps a monotonous existence. According to Kumar and Chauhan, "In "Island" although Ezekiel touches on a sinister side, hither to unexplored, Bombay to him is home, but it is also a place which hampers his creative longing, as it is a place not suitable for sensitivity or creativity, it is vulgar and the commercialism and lack of ethics, is deeply disturbing, and disappointing" (Kumar and Chauhan, 54). The mention of slums and skyscrapers reflects the banality of urban development, portraying the trivial aspects of progress. The speaker's commitment to "minding the ways of the island / as a good native should" (Ezekiel, 23-24) suggests a duty to navigate the routine aspects of life. Rinkoo Wadhera rightfully contends :

Like Eliot and Auden, Ezekiel deals with the life in a city. Like them, Ezekiel too highlights the rootless-ness of urban life and the psychological stresses and challenges inflicted by modern urban living. However, Ezekiel's approach to the city is different from these poets. He is more exclusively concerned with the Indian milieu. His ambivalent relationship with the city with mixed reactions of allure and repugnance generate tautness in his writing.

(Wadhera, 446)

While referring to Kafka's *The Castle*, Camus writes, "the details of everyday life stand out, and yet in that strange novel in which nothing concludes and everything begins over again, it is the essential adventure of a soul in quest of its grace that is represented." This also becomes the ideal of the lives of the Islanders as Ezekiel writes :

Even now a host of miracles
hurries me to daily business,
minding the ways of the island
as a good native should,
taking calm and clamour in my stride.
(Ezekiel, 21-25)

The juxtaposition of "miracles" and "daily business" highlights the contrast between the extraordinary and the ordinary, emphasizing the speaker's struggle to find meaning and significance amidst the city. The word "business" also suggests a pragmatic and practical aspect to the speaker's engagement with the world, underscoring the nature of their daily endeavours but then again, he talks about "calmness" and "clamour" in the end.

K.R Srinivasa Iyengar writes, "There is a tautness and austerity in Ezekiel's best verse, although the thorn of irony pricks now and then, the total effect is cathartic"(Iyengar, 660). We find this kind of catharsis in his criticism of Indians in the poem "In India" from the collection *The Exact Name* (1965). The poem is broken up into four sections. Every section presents some startling facts about the everyday Indian environment. The opening stanza encapsulates the temporalities of everyday life, presenting a vivid tableau of individuals grappling with adversity. The poet paints a poignant picture with the lines :

Here among the beggars,
Hawkers, pavement sleepers,
Hutment dwellers, slums,
Dead souls of men and gods,
Burnt-out mothers, frightened
Virgins, wasted child
And tortured animal,
All in noisy silence. (Ezekiel, 2-9)

encapsulating the relentless struggles and routine challenges that define the quotidian existence. Boredom surfaces subtly in the narrative, particularly in the depiction of a year-end celebration. Despite initial success, an undercurrent of discontent emerges as someone remarks, “We can’t enjoy it, somehow, don’t you think?” (44-45) This sentiment implies a monotony or dissatisfaction, highlighting the pervasive nature of ennui within the context of everyday life in India. According to Shafiqul Islam, “He writes about different kinds of people including upper class and lower class, boss or typist, drunkard or dancer. He presents them with their both normal and weird everyday life. ‘In India’ is a poem in which the poet presents poverty, filth, wretchedness, heat and ugliness and other discomforts that the Indians encounter in the city” (Islam, 46). The poem encapsulates everyday life both as a lived reality and as a broader conceptual framework with the exploration of cultural clashes and societal expectations. He also explores the life of an educated and aristocratic woman in the lines :

The long evenings
In the large apartment
With cold beer and Western music,
Lucid talk of art and literature,
And of all ‘the changes India needs
(Ezekiel, 53-57)

The yearning for change indirectly is a desire for transformation within the larger societal framework. This contextualizes the daily struggles within a broader narrative of societal aspirations and the quest for a better life. Dr. S Chelliah highlights that, “In the poem, ‘In India’, he brings out the unique relationship between literature and environment. He makes no secret of the fact that he has to put up with poverty, squalor and other dehumanizing discomforts of urban life” (Chelliah, 248).

Ezekiel wrote two poems entitled “Portrait”. One is from the collection *Sixty Poems* (1953) and another is from the collection *Poems* (January 1954 to December 1958). In the second poem, Ezekiel explores the themes of everyday boredom offering a nuanced portrayal of a life caught in the mundane. The opening line “No longer young but foolish still” (Ezekiel, 1) sets the tone for a scrutiny of the passage of time. The regular actions, depicted through waking up and hearing “words unspoken,” suggest the ordinary passing of days. The protagonist’s daily planning with “shallow breath” and walking the “hard, accustomed way”

bespeaks the routine and sometimes burdensome nature of his life. The hope to find a time for self-change through play may indicate a desire to break free from the tedium of everyday life. Despite his daily plans, he is suffering and has no proper identity :

Beneath his daily strategy,
Reflected in his suffering face,
I see his dim identity,
A small, deserted, holy place (13-16).

Ezekiel's Philosophical Exploration of the 'Everyday'

In our lives, the word 'everyday' refers to the regular, unremarkable events and activities that comprise our days. It includes all daily activities such as getting up, going to work or school, eating, doing errands, and interacting with people. The commonplace, however familiar, holds great significance and meaning as it moulds our personas. In his poetry, Nissim Ezekiel paints a picture of Indians living their daily lives, where his characters' 'everyday' or 'daily' becomes an ontological 'everyday', raising concerns about reality and the essence of being. Heidegger, examines the idea of "being-in-the-world," proposing that the things we do on a daily basis disclose more fundamental truths about who we are and how we relate to the world. Ezekiel looks at the instruments, customs, and frameworks that influence our daily lives in an effort to reveal the building blocks of human existence and consciousness. In reality, the Railway Clerk is "Dwelling" (Heidegger's concept of being "at home" in the world, even with its anxieties) in his inner and outer world. Ezekiel sheds light on another government clerk, a typist, in his poem "Occasion". Describing the daily life of the typist he writes :

"He works all day in a bank,
then comes to me
for another hundred rupees or so a
month.
Three children, a mother to support,
invalid wife, how do these people live?"
(7-11)

Not only "The Railway Clerk" or "Occasion", the poem "Portrait" also talks about the identity crisis and sadness of an old person. In these poems, existentially, the 'everyday' can be seen as the arena where we confront the fundamental questions of existence. Existentialist

philosophers like Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre contend that we wrestle with questions of meaning, authenticity, and freedom in our day-to-day interactions and routines. Everyday decisions we make, no matter how insignificant they may seem at the time, are a reflection of who we are as people and our quest for meaning in an often ludicrous or routine world where “existence precedes essence” (Sartre, 6). Following this existential thread, in his another of his poems “Nothingness” Ezekiel writes :

And am I right in turning to
The logic of absurdity,
Nothingness, mortality,
Returning home to roost at last?
After all, it does not matter (15-19)

The speakers seem to be lost in the thread of existence and question the notion of value in trivial activities like his return to the house. He wonders if accepting absurdity and mortality is the right course of action, and this uncertainty is reflected in his rhetorical questions. He eventually realises that the answer doesn't really matter. The details of the decisions and beliefs lose significance in the face of the ultimate void, “Instead of fantasizing about life and bringing high-voltage dream effects into poetry, Ezekiel describes actualities with which human beings are closely associated in their everyday life”(Islam, 102).

In Ezekiel's poetic world the “daily life, like language, contains manifest forms and deep structures that are implicit in its operations, yet concealed in and through them”(Lefebvre, 743). In the poems “Island”, and “In India”, we observe a phenomenological ‘everyday’, which is viewed as the realm of immediate experience, where routine activities and objects reveal themselves through our senses, through the experience of different people of different religion and through the experience of a keen observer of the city of Mumbai. From “Hawkers, pavement sleepers, / Hutment dwellers, slums”, (Ezekiel, 3-4) to Anglo-Indian boys, Roman Catholic gentlemen, wives of India, and aristocratic Indian women, the poem “In India” captures the everyday experience of everyone. Phenomenologist Thinkers like Maurice Merleau-Ponty emphasize the embodied nature of our engagement with the everyday world, highlighting how our lived experiences shape our understanding of reality. At the end of the poem “Island”, the speaker ultimately lives the life of the native people of the city and finds joy in that. In these select poems, Ezekiel's

protagonists are all struck with the everyday which limits their achievement of the beyond. As György Lukács writes, “So long as we are stuck in the everyday life we are no more than idle caricatures of God: we repeat, in a badly fragmented fashion, the magnificent fragmentary Work of His universal creation”(Lukacs, 235).

Conclusion

Having been raised in the heavily westernised urban suburbs of Bombay, Ezekiel has a thorough understanding of both the positive and negative elements of living in a metropolis. As a result, he is able to capture even the most subtle nuances of city life in his poetry. He depicts the everyday existence of Indians, whether they are a clerk, a professor, a lover, or a religious figure. The concept of every day in Ezekiel’s poems becomes an idea, which can deliver discussion about life in a regular way. There is an unfamiliar union within the personal lives and experience of his characters though their social life may differ. As the word ‘daily’ or ‘everyday’ is associated with just survival, Ezekiel draws a different kind of pictorial representation of the ‘daily’ as he grapples with much diversity and theme. With simple and organised words he delivers insights into the circadian. ‘Daily’ becomes a philosophical ‘daily’ with ontological, existential and phenomenological undertones. The everyday discourse has not changed much from what Ezekiel portrayed in the 1960s. India still has all the facets and heterogeneity in its existence both as part and as a whole or nation. Ezekiel peels the layers of India and reaches to the core where his characters discover themselves, which may not have an immediate solution but the reader sympathises with the self-discovery of the characters. Space-time unites in his verses not depicting the day within the span of twenty-four hours but rather to a continuity of flat time where every day is the portrayal of the entire lives of his protagonists.

Anjan Das

M.A (English)

Biswa Bangla Biswabidyalay, Shiwpur, West Bengal

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