Chapter-I

THE CONCEPT OF THE SELF

Nissim Ezekiel’s concept of the self presupposes two basic assumptions. One is that the essence of the self is human and the other is that existence undermines this essential nature of the self. The first premise posits that the relation between the self and human nature/condition is already given, inseparable and inherent. The relation seems to be so obvious that it dissolves into a self-evident truth; it becomes difficult to refer to the self without implying its humanity. The human subject designates a pre-social, universal hypothesis, which is outside the particularities of time and space. As the human is deemed to be a truth self-evident and axiomatic, it apparently needs no definition, no predication to understand it. It can be treated as one of the “worn-out metaphors which have become powerless to affect the senses”\(^1\) and has therefore deadened into truth.

In ‘The Double Horror’, the “I” of the poem is being “continually/Reduced to something less than human.”\(^2\) The human is invariably left undefined and its relation with the self is simply taken for granted, although it is being temporarily destabilized by the state of
existence in the urban world. The human remains the point of reference. Any disruption between the self and the human is interpreted as a corruption, a reduction to “something less than human.” A moving away from the human is a moving away from nature, from truth itself and leads to the misfortune of losing one’s nature, the horror of unbecoming or becoming what one is not. Corruption, degeneration and dehumanization, which characterize the condition of modern existence in many of Ezekiel’s poems, after all, presuppose a human standard behind the self.

The human designates an essential principle, a hierarchy of values and chemistry of wants and dispositions, which is encoded in the very nature of man. There is a necessary balance, which presides at the heart of human nature. In ‘A Poem of Dedication’, he says:

I want a human balance humanly
Acquired, fruitful in the common hour.

It is this balance, which is being unsettled by the conditions and circumstances of existence. The human principle implies an eternal, which the temporal disturbs, a universal, which the particular disadvantages of culture and custom repress. The restoration of this principle in the process of existence is one of the main ideals of Ezekiel’s poems. It is the ultimate residue, the inalienable quota that remains with man, after his loyalties,
affiliations with and obligations toward religion, politics, culture, economics have been divided and used up; it is internal as the others are external. In Ezekiel’s environment, this human essence provides the self with an identity, which is outside the reductive dialectics of caste, class, race and religion. It is the ultimate platform from which the self can refer back to itself and find its identity and a quasi-spiritual autonomy. Perhaps, it compensates the racial, religious and familial deficiencies that Ezekiel as a Jew in India had to continually encounter. It provides a secure position to the minority whose social and religious identity condemns him to an insecure living space.

Evidently, the human designates a balance which can be acquired without extra effort and extraneous mediation and significantly the word “common” appears to introduce a sense of the natural, the normal, the simply given. Arguably, a human balance is essential to the “I” and hence its acquisition does not demand “the matador’s dexterity”\(^3\), “the yogi’s concentration”\(^4\), or “the tyrant’s endless power”\(^5\). Again in ‘Night of the Scorpion’, the final sentence uttered by the mother: “Thank God the scorpion picked on me and spared my children”\(^6\), sets to naught the superstitious frenzy of the crowd as well as the learned skepticism of the father. Her words are from the core of her heart; it is a reaction, which is
beyond the influence of religion and education, it is encoded in the very nature of her species and is, therefore, universal, original and only human. Contrary to this, the gestures of the lovers in ‘An Affair’ are controlled by the dynamics of the screen:

> And then she said: I love you, just like this
> As I had seen the yellow blondes declare
> Upon the screen, and even stroked my hair.
> But hates me now because I did not kiss.  

The golden mean can be read as a metaphor of human condition. It signifies a state of order, a balance which is perhaps the essential, original relation between “the élan of desire/and the rational faculties”, and Ezekiel probably sees it as an innate and inevitable condition of the self. The human condition also describes a state of being which is abstracted from the waste of doubts and questions. Its structure is like poetry. In ‘Something to Pursue’, he says:

> ... There shall be no more questions,
> No more expenditure of doubt
> But only a limpid style of life
> Whose texture is poetry.  

Common things/nature/sense are being repeatedly equated with the human condition/nature. Apparently, these words signify a sense of
satisfaction, harmony with the natural order of being and silently mock the anxiety, effort and stress implicit in the claims of science and philosophy.

In ‘Philosophy’, he says:

... Common things
Become, by virtue of their commonness,
An argument against the nakedness
That dies of cold to find the truth it brings.

This theme of commonness is emphasized again in ‘Transmutation’; here he suggests an immersion into social life without prejudice:

Do not, in your vanity, the tenuous thread
Of difference flaunt, but be
Asserted in the common dance. Participate
Entirely, make an end of separation.

This process of assimilation requires a deduction of individuality. The “common dance” implies a universal, “a wider meaning”, which erases difference. Here the paradox of the human combines into itself the properties of the individual as well as the common social man. Probably, this brings to light one of the inherent paradoxes of Ezekiel’s poetry. In his search for an identity and wholeness of being he cannot find a way between the extremes of loneliness and social life. Both these positions are ultimately irreconcilable – the uncertainty within frightens him as his social commitments compel him “to open his eyes outwards” only “to see
heartlessness, brutality.” Obviously, Ezekiel’s individual is not a heroic figure, he has his limitations and failings and his idea of the human recognizes the human in all its limitations and flaws. In ‘On Meeting a Pedant’, he says:

Give me touch of men and give me smell of
Fornication, pregnancy and spices.

His idea of the human is a recognition of a universal quality, a common nature which rejects exceptions and is, therefore, more visible in the crowd than in the solitude of an individual. It consists rather in the shedding of differences than in the assertion of difference. It is in other words “a fetishing of ‘Average Man’” rather than the unique, heroic individual. The quest for a human ideal is not a voyage into infinite possibilities but the discovery of a given nature and category roots that had been lost. It entails a journey into the centre of the self, a search for a given code and not a transport into unknown possibilities; it is only a return to the essential, the house, the womb. It can be equated with his endearment of his native environment:

I have made my commitments now.
This is one: to stay where I am.
As others chose to give themselves
In some remote and backward place.
My backward place is where I am.
(Concluded Poems 1952-1988, p. 178)
The notion that humanness is so natural, so obvious, so common that it is available to/in every individual, every culture, every age, is one of the central assumptions of essentialist humanism. This notion is of recent origin and not so universal as is supposed to be. Most of the expectations and assumptions that usually gather about man and its antecedents are not as it were encoded in nature (or any other absolute nature itself being an ideological fabrication) or somehow simply given but the results of certain eighteenth and nineteenth century conventions. So successfully had these theories managed to advertise and sell their views that they continue to influence the intellectual habits and critical gestures of readers and writers to our own day.

The roots of such a worldview or 'weltanschauung' can be traced back to the Enlightenment when a universal capacity, to abstract the “I” from all extraneous conditions and to see it “as it really was”, had seized mankind. Such a view became possible at this time because of the shift of concern “from the metaphorically derivative soul ... to ‘individual centres of consciousness’ ... which are said to be self-determining, free and rational by nature.” The self-determining centre of consciousness is the man of Rousseau, born (not created), positioned not by religion but against it, no longer within society but apart from it, not a part of nature but
outside it. In this discourse the human represented "the unique starting point and end to which everything must finally be related," the absolute centre "which is itself beyond the reach of freeplay."  

Although Ezekiel's gestures and assumptions carry authentic humanist implications, it must be said that his assertions lack the imperiousness of conventional humanism. The human aspect still represents a condition outside the control of social and religious factors, but it is not the central, constant determinant of the "I"'s position, function and value. The "I" does not enjoy a central, autonomous and absolute subject position. His emphasis is not so much on an individuated capitalist/humanist essence as on a universally available human nature/condition. The human is not necessary (in his concept) as an infinite power or potential on which an individual can build his uniqueness, his difference. Its meaning is not so much determined by its measure or manifestation in an individual as by the commonness and average that underlies and transcends individual difference, while, of course, retaining human nature/condition in its universal and eternal capacity.  

Ezekiel's second assumption also redefines his humanist position. This is perhaps because of an informed awareness about the contemporary disillusionment in an anthropocentric order. The awakening of the
consciousness to the harsher rhythms of contemporary existence was one of the agenda short-listed by Daruwalla for Modern Indian Poetry in English.

Contemporary (conditions of) existence represents a challenge to human nature, the essential constitution of the self. It can be said here that his second premise does not address an inherent area of the self, it rather emphasizes the exteriorization of what Ezekiel conceives to be the essential self. Transaction with the modern conditions of existence is a predicament for the self, since the essence of the self, human nature, is continuously repressed, denied and undermined. The self is present in this context only as a tenuous, disintegrated entity, endlessly reshaped, realigned and determined from outside. In 'The Double Horror', the essential code of the self, its human condition is being continually postponed, undermined, displaced and overlooked by "the crowd/Newspapers, cinema, radio features, speeches."\(^{15}\) The meaning of life consists in the essential relation between the self and humanness and as this relation is suppressed, undermined by modern existential arrangements, there is non-meaning, a void. In poems, such as 'Emptiness', 'Robert', 'An Affair', 'Urban', 'A Morning Walk', 'Event', 'Case Study' and 'The Double Horror', the self experiences a process of
unbecoming, an endless displacement from and deference of being because the self is denied its nature, its humanity, and is instead exposed to conditions contrary and detrimental to its essence. Experience seems to reject the subjectivity of the essential self. Existence proceeds without it, outside it and probably overlooks it. It is not the determining source but a recipient of sensation, feelings and other activities and experiences. It is reduced to an obscure, dysfunctional dimension of existence “suffering above all things/Its own obscurity”\(^1\). In ‘What Frightens Me’, the image of the self disintegrates and the human constitutes only one layer of the self. Like a Modernist text it represents a fragmentary structure where “the self-protective self/And the self naked”\(^2\) “the mask/And the secret behind the mask”\(^3\), coexist perhaps in anarchy. Similarly, in ‘For Her’, the layers of the disintegrated self resists wholeness:

> How much of me you leave untouched
> And yet you touch me well.


The entire self is more than its essence. Apparently, humaneness and humanity of the self constitutes only one segment of the self and is perhaps a constructed space, a reassurance for integrity, authority and autonomy in the midst of the existential chaos. Finally, it can be said that
Ezekiel’s concept of the self retains a belief in the essentiality of the human self which the existential process cannot altogether erase or expel.
NOTES


