



Ezekiel's play *The Sleepwalkers*: A sarcastic take on progressive India

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Abstract

Nissim Ezekiel's one-act play, *The Sleepwalkers*, serves as a poignant and farcical critique of the Indian urban elite's blind infatuation with American culture during the post-colonial era. This paper examines the play's thematic preoccupations with cultural hegemony, sycophancy, and the loss of authentic national identity. By analysing Ezekiel's use of absurdist theatrical devices, such as masks, choric chanting, and caricatured dialogue, the study highlights how the Indian intelligentsia is depicted as a collective of mindless imitators. Furthermore, the paper delves into the irony of intellectual commodification, where revered literary figures and regional pride are eagerly traded for foreign patronage. Ultimately, this analysis underscores Ezekiel's sharp satire on the hollowness of a supposedly progressive, sophisticated society that compromises its intellectual and cultural integrity in pursuit of superficial American validation.

Keywords: Post-colonialism, spatial dynamics, Indian English drama, cultural satire, hypocrisy.

Introduction

Nissim Ezekiel (1924- 2004) holds a significant place in Post-Colonial Indian English Literature. He is a Bene-Israelite settled in India and was educated in Mumbai and London. A winner of the Sahitya Academy Award, he is a major poet of Indian English Literature. In *A Time to Change* (1952), he has merged modern, critical and intellectual Literature. He has edited several journals, including *Quest* and *Imprint*. While Ezekiel is predominantly celebrated for his foundational role in modern Indian English poetry, his foray into theatre reveals an equally sharp, critical lens applied to the socio-cultural dynamics of an evolving, post-independent nation. Ezekiel began writing plays in the year 1968. Three of his plays, *Nalini*, *Marriage Poem* and *The Sleepwalkers*, adopted different themes. *Nalini* is a depiction of a woman who proves herself against all unusual situations in her life. *Marriage Poem* depicts the failure of a couple trying to survive a relationship. *The Sleepwalkers* is the portrayal of a sophisticated Indian society desperately imitating American culture legging behind their own. All these plays effectively expose the hollowness and hypocrisy of Indian society. Ezekiel shares the lifestyle of an educated Indian citizen under the influence of Americans.

The transition from verse to the stage allowed Ezekiel to visibly materialise the linguistic and behavioural absurdities of the Indian middle class. The 1960s in India were a period characterised by a complex relationship with the West. Having shed British colonial rule, the urban intelligentsia quickly found themselves ensnared in a neo-colonial web, substituting British imperial influence with American economic and cultural dominance. It is within this socio-political climate that Ezekiel's dramatic works find their footing, stripping away the pretences of the elite to reveal a deeply ingrained inferiority complex.

The Sleepwalker, an *Indo-American Farce* (1969), is a third play by Nissim Ezekiel. It is a one-act play which satirizes the type of Indian society. The genre of farce relies heavily on exaggerated, improbable situations and caricatured

figures to provoke laughter, yet beneath this comedic surface lies a scathing societal critique. By explicitly titling it an "Indo-American Farce," Ezekiel immediately sets the expectations of his audience: a collision of two worlds where mutual exploitation and superficiality reign supreme. The characters are classified as Indians and Americans as well. In American characters, there are Mr Edward and Mrs Olga Morris, an American magazine publisher, Mr West and Mrs West, an American official who must host the party for Mr. & Mrs Morris. Among Indians, there are Mr. & Mrs Raman, journalists, Prof. Shah and her wife, Editor Mr Kapoor and his wife, Mr Verma, writer Miss Ganguli.

Through this diverse ensemble, Ezekiel meticulously represents the various pillars of the so-called intellectual establishment: academia, journalism, and literature. However, rather than acting as the custodians of Indian thought and culture, these figures are rendered as grotesque sycophants. The play, *The Sleepwalkers*, is a blind imitation of American culture. The characters in the play expose the hollowness of the so-called elite class of today, who still look up to Americans visiting India. The play exhibits healthy social criticism with a sarcastic take on Progressive India.

The very opening of the play exhibits the same trend of imitation: "The cast stands in a semi-circle with their backs to the audience. Their marks cannot be seen in the darkness. Mr Raman: Give us this day our daily American. Rest of the cast: Give us this day our daily" (Ezekiel 83). This choric statement of the play is a sharp satire on Indian society. These lines are an imitation or parody of a Christian prayer titled "The Lord's Prayer: Our Father, who is in heaven...Give us this day our daily bread". By replacing "bread" (spiritual and physical sustenance) with "American," Ezekiel underscores the total displacement of domestic self-reliance. These lines also symbolise their God, who can only feed them and can give them a source of earning. The psychological dependency is absolute; the

visiting Americans are elevated to a divine status, granting grants, publications, and validation.

The spatial dynamics of the stage further amplify this critique. The setting of the play. He has used the stage as an airport area as well as the living area for the party. This dual-purpose setting represents the transient, unrooted nature of the Indian elite's cultural allegiance. The airport is a threshold, a place of arrival and departure, symbolising the influx of foreign ideologies that the domestic living space eagerly, almost desperately, accommodates. There are so many elements in the play which categorize it as a satirical play.

A central motif in the play is the concept of a publication devoid of substance, a direct jab at the superficiality of consumerist media. The magazine that Mr and Mrs Morris want to launch in India has been titled *Black*, which is again ironic, a magazine that lacks any kind of thought or fact. Only pictures will fulfil all the needs of a reader. This concept highlights a terrifying anti-intellectualism embraced by the very people who claim to be the intellectuals of the nation. The irony is palpable: an elite society is willing to embrace a publication utterly stripped of thought solely because it bears an American stamp of approval. The magazine becomes a metaphor for the intellectual void of the characters themselves, glossy on the outside, but profoundly empty on the inside.

There is an instance in the play where Miss Ganguly, who is an author, offers Mr Morris to exchange the renowned Indian author Rabindranath Tagore for the American author Hemingway: Mr Morris: (Joining in the fun) Fair exchange is no robbery. Miss Ganguli: You give us Hemingway. We give you Rabindranath Tagore. There is sarcasm in the dialogue, which shows a blind imitation of other cultures by demeaning Indian Literature. Rabindranath Tagore is the connoisseur of Indian English Literature. To treat a Nobel laureate and the philosophical cornerstone of modern Indian literature as a mere trading card exposes a deep-seated lack of cultural pride. It shows the futility of the urban middle class. Ezekiel satirises the cultural exchange between India and America. This transaction is not an exchange of ideas, but a desperate bartering of heritage for a fraction of Western modernity.

The play also exhibits a pinch of sarcasm in the behaviour of Indians and Americans. The way in which Indians behave in front of Americans shows their flattery to convince them for selfish gains. They seem to compromise even their self-respect. The emptiness and hypocrisy of Indians are shown through the characters of Mr Verma and Miss Ganguly. While they fight for validation from their foreign guests, they boast comically of their domestic achievements. Mr Verma tells Mr Morris, "That he has written four hundred and seventeen short stories in Hindi. Also, four hundred and seventeen poems" (Ibid 85). Miss Ganguly makes aware that Bengali has the most advanced literature in India. Both characters try to manipulate Mrs Morris through self-appraisal. Their regional chauvinism- Hindi versus Bengali- collapses instantly when faced with the overarching shadow of American hegemony. They are eager to discard their linguistic pride if it means securing a spot in an American-funded venture.

Masks and the Erasure of Identity

There are too many humorous situations in the play when Mr Morris tells about his magazine's idea, Mr Kapoor: A magazine without thoughts will be popular with Indian

women, Mr Morris, we *get along* peacefully without thoughts...Mr. Morris: We Americans find that too high for us; we prefer to be below thought, not above it. (Idid 90). It shows the foolishness and idiotic presence of mind of Indians. They his self/ himself make fun of their citizens. In their frantic attempt to agree with their American benefactors, the Indian characters actively participate in their own degradation, insulting their own populace just to maintain a veneer of cosmopolitan camaraderie.

To visually represent this loss of authentic self, Ezekiel employs a brilliant theatrical device. In the very opening of the play, the characters are shown in masks, which also have a symbolic significance. These masks are indeed symbolising the diminished existence of the Indian Elite class. The playwright wants to 'type' their individuality. The masks strip the characters of their unique human features, reducing them to interchangeable sycophants. They are totally negotiable in every situation. They are shown totally satisfied with their life and are looking similar in masks. By rendering them faceless, Ezekiel suggests that the post-colonial Indian intellectual has no original face left; it has been entirely obscured by a mask constructed from borrowed Western ideals. They are involved in their own shallow and pretentious knowledge.

Conclusion

To conclude, we can say that *The Sleepwalkers* is an emphatic satire on the so-called elite, sophisticated and liberal society. Ezekiel is noted for his irony and intellectualism. The play is full of amusing situations. The playwright has aptly targeted the characters to show the present scenario of society. By holding up a mirror to the intelligentsia, Ezekiel forces the audience to confront the uncomfortable reality of a nation that gained political independence only to willingly submit to a new form of cultural colonisation. The title of the play itself acts as a dire warning; a "sleepwalker" navigates the world without consciousness or deliberate agency. There is a sarcastic take on some professions like teaching, journalism, and writing a book or a poem. By exposing the ethical bankruptcy of professors, editors, and writers, Ezekiel dismantles the very institutions expected to guard the nation's intellectual soul. The characters' eager willingness to barter their cultural icons and abandon their linguistic roots for an empty American magazine highlights a tragic-comic desperation. Cultural and Economic exchanges are also shown as just a mere parody, which results in nothing ridicules the pseudo-civilised society in an appropriate manner. Ultimately, *The Sleepwalkers* stands as a timeless critique, proving that as long as a society prioritises imitation over innovation, and external validation over internal integrity, it will forever remain trapped in a comical, yet tragic, state of unconscious subservience.

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