# Chapter IV

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### *The Sleepwalkers: An Indo-American Farce*

*The Sleepwalkers: An Indo-American Farce* (1969) is a third play in the series of *Three Plays*, published by Writers Workshop, Calcutta (Kolkata). It is a one-act farce satirizing the kind of Indians and the Americans which visit India. The Play also explores the Indian's excessive fascination with American culture. The characters in the play are classified as Indians and Americans. Among the American characters, Mr. West is an American official with his wife Mrs. West and Mr. Edward Morris, an American magazine publisher with his wife Mrs. Olga Morris. The Indian Characters are Mr. and Mrs. Raman, Professor Shah, Mrs. Shah, Mr. and Mrs. Kapur, Mr. Varma, Miss Ganguly and a Bearer. They are guests at a reception given for Mr. and Mrs. Morris.

Ezekiel like a good dramatist gives detailed stage directions. The scene is airport back centre where Indian guests are waiting at the reception for an American visitor. At the start of the play, the airport area is lit up while the drawing room is in darkness. The Indian guests, except a Bearer wear masks. Bearer is attendant to provide food and drink. Before the curtain opens, the sound of airplanes is heard. The arrival and

departure announcements are made from time to time for the benefit of the audience. The noise of engines, the voices of crowds, the sound of horns, the shouting porters, the occasional barking of a dog; everything is portrayed minutely.

The play is characteristically 'ritualistic in tone' (Blackwell.1976.265). The play opens and ends on the same chant "Give us this day our daily American". (Ezekiel.1969.83) It is followed by apostrophes like 'Our American Town Planner', 'Our American Traffic Control Expert', Our American Educational Adviser', 'Our American Sunshine, 'Our American Air' etc. (Ibid.84). The farcical atmosphere is created with this kind of beginning.

The occasion of Mr. Edward Morris' visit is promoting an international magazine Blank, of which he is the editor. The Indian guests receiving them are Professor Shah, who is a teacher as well as writer; Mr. Raman is a journalist, Mr. Kapur an editor, Mr. Varma a Hindu Writer and Miss Ganguly a Bengali playwright. It is noteworthy that Professor Shah's wife keeps mum throughout the play. Except showing some body movements she has no role in the play. The Indian women characters are also typical:

Mrs. Raman : O no, our husbands drink whisky, we drink orange juice.

Mrs. Kapur : Our husbands eat meat. We eat vegetables. (Ibid.86)

The Indian women have given set roles. They are portrayed as mere spectators while the husbands have all the freedom.

The title of the play is very ironical. The Indian characters are really sleep-walkers. The relationship between the hosts and the guests is satirized by the playwright. The magazine 'Blank' suggests the stupid behaviour of the Indians who really stand as blanks without any thought. Everybody wants to include their writing in the magazine 'Blank':

Mr. Varma : My stories are perfectly suitable for your magazine, Mr. Morris. My critics say that they are totally without thought.

Miss Ganguly: This will be a very good thing for Bengal. People think too much there. That's why all the stone throwing and burning of buses. If we had less thinking, we could have stable government. (Ibid.90)

Ezekiel also satirizes the economic and cultural exchange between America and India. According to Professor Shah, Indian culture is rich but it has no economic support. Professor Shah suggests to Mr. Morris: "We give you spiritual aid, you give us financial aid." (Ibid.88) Ezekiel also satirizes the way Indians use English. For example, Mr. Varma says that, "Some I have translated in English, but I am not knowing English very nicely." (Ibid.86) It is a parody of Indian's English who use present continuous tense for simple present tense. Ezekiel in one of his poems

'Good-bye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.' also satirized the way Indians use tense in English.

The play shows the contrastive picture of Indian and American attitude. The farcical element in the play is the way Indian middle class people try to gain favour of wealthy Americans by using flattery. They are even ready to compromise with their self—respect. Ezekiel has created a comic picture out of these farcical elements. Ezekiel has also used the device of mask like Girish Karnad. The Indian characters wear masks which symbolizes that they are not authentic Indians.

The play also reveals American's fascination with Indian culture. Mrs. Morris is a very curious woman who wants to visit India. When she observes Mrs. Raman in the sari:

Mrs. Morris : (To Mrs. Raman) My dear, how do you wear that delightfu thing? Doesn't it ever fall off?

Mr. Raman : It falls off only when I want it to fall off. And it's quite easy to wear. I could teach you how to do it in five minutes. (Ibid.89)

Mrs. Morris learns the way in which a sari is worn but she wears it in such a way that it falls off on the stage and she has to run out.

The hollowness and boasting of Indian writers is shown through Mr. Varma and Miss Ganguly. Mr. Varma tells Mr. Morris that he has written "One hundred and eighty-seven short stories in Hindi. Also four

hundred and seventeen poems. In Hindi I am one of the well known writers." (Ibid.85) Ezekiel has shown the Indian fascination for foreign critics through Miss Ganguly; "Bengal has the most advanced literature in India, Mrs. Morris, according to foreign observers." (Ibid.86) Professor Shah says that he used to write poetry in Gujrati but now writes criticism. Mr. Raman proudly claims that he writes in English and studied journalism in New York.

Ezekiel has created highly amusing situations in the play. The main purpose of Mr. Morris' visit to India is to popularize his magazine 'Blank' in a way to enable people to get rid of thinking. All Indian characters who are in masks agree with Mr. Morris' idea, because this very thoughtlessness is similar to their temperament:

Mr. Kapur : A magazine without thought will be popular with Indian women, Mr. Morris. We get along peacefully without thought.

Prof. Shah : In this country, Mr. Morris, the ideal of many of us is to transcend thought, to reach a state of mind where thought is unnecessary. (Ibid.90)

It shows the stupid and meaningless behavior of the Indians.

Ezekiel speaks through his characters. He creates humour with satire. Professor Shah is an intellectual. He is a teacher but he has prepared his lectures twenty years ago. He uses those notes for teaching which he has prepared as a student. Another farcical situation in the play

is Miss Ganguly's plays. She writes on the themes of family planning. But when Mr. Morris curiously asks the effect of her writing on the villagers, the reply is very amusing:

> "Miss Ganguly : Mr. Morris, all your foundations know about it, and they all help, many of them help, but you see, we are five hundred million, and most of us are in the villages and there's no entertainment in the villages or anything like that. You know, the way you have night clubs and so on." (Ibid.94)

Ezekiel has shown in this satire, the depravity of the elite class in India. They are satisfied with their meaningless existence.

Ezekiel has made clever use of masks in this play. But he does not want to hide the characters. Moreover, his masks are more revealing than hiding. The reason behind the use of masks is made clear by the playwright when he gives clear instructions to the director: "He should seek to "type" them and avoid individuality."(Ibid.84) Ezekiel wants to portray the unthinking dependence of Indians on foreigners. The same thing can be observed in the first play *Nalini*; an American praises Nalini's paintings and she thinks of an exhibition. Ezekiel attacks the slavish mentality of the Indians.

The situation which Ezekiel has portrayed is not very new. The genius of the playwright lies here in which he creates something unconventional out of a convention. He satirizes the Indian's attitude and the foreigner's superstition. He shows the artificiality of the modern

society. The qualities of the foreigners are taken for granted. But the Indian characters lack the identity in the play. They are craving for the identity. They want publicity as it is very important in a commercial world.

Ezekiel portrays his characters devoid of thought. His characters live a surface life. Even Mr. Morris tells the Indian hosts that his magazine has no space for thought. According to Mr. Morris: "We are all human, even the communists. Yet we are all divided and unhappy. What is the chief cause of division and unhappiness? Thinking. If we discourage thought, we shall decrease unhappiness." (Ibid.89). Mr. Morris may be compared with Bharat in *Nalini.* There is a conflict between intellect and thoughtlessness. This is typical model of Ezekiel's plays. And this has not been expressed in Indo-English drama so prominently before Ezekiel.

***Song of Deprivation: A Comic Morality in One-Act***

Nissim Ezekiel's *Song of Deprivation* (1969) was published separately in Enact, Delhi. Ezekiel usually gives subtitles to his plays. Though he had written only a few plays, he tried his hand in comedy, tragic-comedy, farce etc. According to Ezekiel, *Song of Deprivation* is a comic morality, a one-act play. He has written it for the non-existent underground theatre in India. The play is very small. There are only two characters in the play that are not even named. They talk about the hypocrisy of the contemporary society.

In this play also, Ezekiel has given detailed stage directions. The action takes place in two small rooms. These two rooms actually capture one fourth area of the total stage. These two rooms are lit and the other area is kept in darkness. It is a story of two lovers who can't meet openly in real life. But they find the telephone as a substitute mediator and continue to make love through it.

He and She are the only characters in the play. The play opens with a conversation between He and She. It is very unusual that the characters are without proper names. Ezekiel has portrayed them only as negatives, without adding any colour. The question arises about the playwright's intention behind the namelessness of the characters. They are "Young lovers who can't meet and consummate their love." (Rodrigues.1986.122) Ezekiel criticizes the lovers who are interested in the only sexual side of love. In the play, they talk about the sexual freedom in the society.

Ezekiel has intentionally avoided giving names to the characters. He has also avoided presenting them with any caste and race, because he wanted to represent the unique features of the lovers. He also wishes to show that love can go beyond the limits of what is morally or legally acceptable. These characters can be found in any community: Hindu, Muslim, Christian etc. or in any religion. They may be anybody around us. It is also unusual that apart from He and She, no other character is introduced in the play. The playwrights' intention behind this is very clear. He wants to show that lovers do not need anybody. The lover and the beloved live in their own world. These characters have a universal appeal.

The play as well as the love making begins with the character; She. The playwright wants to suggest that women take more initiative in the act of love. This cynical view of the playwright about women may have some touch of shattered experiences in his own life. In the telephonic conversation with He, She recalls her dogs rubbing of genitals with one foot. This has some sexual connotations. The play ends with He's speech.

The path of lovers is never a smooth one. In this play also the lovers face some obstacles. But fortunately enough they pass out all the barriers. Ezekiel has just mentioned some other characters in the play but they never appear on the stage. She has a grandmother who is the main obstacle to the lovers. But the grandmother has gone out of the house and this opportunity gives ample freedom to the lovers to exploit the situation. The next obstacle in the lover's path is the servants in the house. But He prepares to bribe them by giving them leave. Another obstacle is the egg-man but they avoid him by not allowing him into the house.

For He, just a kiss and a hug is not enough, he wants to satisfy his erotic pleasure. He and She very cunningly avoid the obstacles in their way. They want to be isolated from the society. They want to play only the game of love. Their conversation is very sensual. He says, "I undress you." (Balachandran.1994.148). It becomes very erotic when He says, "I lick the perspiration off your body particularly the places where it is thickest." (Ibid). This conversation shows that the lovers are slaves to their senses and to the physical side of their love.

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There are many evidences in the play which show the lovers surrender to their senses. She recalls a journey in a train with He and She leaning on him. The question which Ezekiel raises and which also arises in the readers mind is "What is love?" as the lovers in the play talk more about sensuous love alone. He and She also dance to light music which shows they have similar interests and are only enjoying each other. They live a pretentious life. She becomes romantic when she wears a bikini but when she wears a sari, She is very 'Social'. She herself confesses that she has to pretend all the time.

She is disgusted with the conventional values of Hindu culture: "All that suppression and repression. Half a dozen voices saying No to me from the time I was a child. No sympathy in adolescence. No freedom as a college student... Not allowed to mix freely with boys." (Karnani.1974.125). This shows conflict between the life and the standards. The playwright mocks at these conflicting standards. Ezekiel shows how repression leads to compensatory 'love talk' on a telephone. She's lengthy speech at the end of the play shows criticism of modern life of the youths as well as the girls who are deprived of freedom. They don't have freedom to choose their own partner.

She says that she wants to live. It shows her craving for life of freedom. She questions him, "Without freedom, how can I live? Unless I live how can I find out what living is?" (Balachandran.1994.148). He's reply is very interesting, "you want freedom and that's what people are afraid of. One freedom leads to another and all leads up to sexual freedom." (Ibid). He also says that "She is ready to leave them alone but

they are not ready to leave her alone." (Ibid). This shows that one cannot escape from the clutches of the society. There is not much action in the play. The playwright speaks through the two characters. Ezekiel is "laughing at the characters and through them at the world around him." (Rodrigues.1986.130)

Ezekiel has used "freeze effect" for the audience at the end of the play. The lovers pretend that the audience has left; they do not bother about the audience. The curtain falls and the lovers go behind it and start making love. She is seen on his lap! Ezekiel tries to expose how the deprivation of human instincts results into neurotic effects on the minds of the youths. It is a very amusing comedy though the playwright wants to give a moral lesson through it. The time-span of the play is only fifteen minutes.

There are two more characters in the play that are 'abstract' but become concrete for the lovers. The telephone and the radio also can be treated as the characters. As they play important role in uniting the lovers. The presence of these machines also shows the mechanical modern life. It shows how life is obsessed by the machines. The lover's life seems incomplete without these machines. The conversation between He and She is mostly in the form of questions. It shows how the modern life is now interrogative. It also shows love as if in a questionable state.

The play shows what the lovers are deprived of by the society. The heroine gives a long speech on the do's and don'ts which she has to follow but as the play proceeds, the lovers are exposed as unbearably

disgusting. Hence, there should be some restrictions on the youth. Ezekiel presents only the unpleasant realities. Though Ezekiel calls it as a song, he is never poetic in singing this song. The construction of plot is nothing but one's waiting for the privacy, enjoyment in the life and its partial fulfillment.

The conversation between the lovers takes place through telephone. It is very critical and doubtful. Their statements create suspicion in the audience's mind. But Ezekiel gets served his purpose through the dialogue of She. Ezekiel comments on She's life, the socio-cultural threats on her and the suppression to follow the do's and don'ts. She is deprived of reading certain books, to see certain films, no freedom as a college student and the list never ends. Ezekiel also attacks the society, religion and the past generation which burdens the youths to follow their life style. Finally the suppression explodes into disastrous effects of which He and She become the ultimate victims.

The dialogue between He and She is very erotic. They consider sex not as a part of life but the ultimate life. Their talk suggests that they are not interested in the natural process of sex. They are just like animals and can fulfill their suppressed desires with a little privacy. It is not 'pure love' but a garb moral talk to hide their immorality. The characters in the play are only sexually oriented. They constantly tell the audience to leave as they want privacy.

*Song of Deprivation* also reveals the same theme of hollowness of life like the other *Three Plays.* But the dramatic rapidness is not as effective as the other plays. The dialogues are repetitive, dull and boring

and not structured. Perhaps it must be very difficult to write a play with phonic conversation. Ezekiel has carefully manipulated his characters as types. The playwright allows the situation to dominate over his characters, His characters expose the "anti-thought outlook" (Blackwell.1976.269) of contemporary society. This is the underlying theme of *Song of Deprivation*; the characters visualize life only as all enjoyment which is deprived by the society. They talk about their freedom but ignore their responsibilities. Ezekiel's point is that "sex never becomes a means of rebellion and freedom." (Dubey. Enact, Delhi. 1969)

*Song of Deprivation* was published separately in Enact periodical which winded up after some years. The play is not readily available in book form. So the discussion of the play is based on the secondary sources. The quotations are cited from the secondary sources. The unavailability of the play makes it difficult to study the development of the playwright. But whatever Ezekiel has dramatized is worth enough to give him a place in world of drama.

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