**An outstanding modern epic**

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There are amongst us some very distinguished writers, who do not like to formally expose themselves as writers, and are content to remain in the comfort of their privacies. One such name is Mr. Ejaz Rahim, who post-graduated in English literature from G.C. Lahore, with the reputation of an outstanding scholar of his subject. Soon he appeared in the CSS exam and topped the list of successful candidates. Later he served in important posts in the Federal Government and acquired a very good reputation of being an honest and able administrator, and retired from service more than a decade ago. During all those years writing remained his favourite hobby.

Ejaz Rahim is essentially a Pakistani poet in English language and has so far written more than 25 books in English poetry. His latest book is titled “Garden of Secrets Revisited: An Epic Poem on Divine-Human encounter” which is truly his magnum opus. In this monumental work, the poet surprises everybody with his encyclopedic knowledge of all religions, scientists and thinkers.

Epic is a difficult genre of poetry because of its great length narrating the deeds and adventures of heroic and legendary figures in the past history of a nation. We have great examples of epics of ancient poets like Homer and Virgil (‘The Iliad’ and ‘The Odyssey,’etc.) which lay bare the events of the Trojan Wars. Same is the design of Sanskrit epic ‘Mahabharata.’ As against those epics, Ejaz Rahim’s epic is completely modern without celebrating any hero. It represents a struggle to find a common ground between the secular and sacred in the world we inhabit. In his own words, “unlike wars, poetry does not care for victories or defeats. What truly matters is the ardour brought to that quest and steadfastness in seeking correspondence between the physical and spiritual.”

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His purpose was to address the youth of our nation to “plough through the vast fields of knowledge and experience before rushing to conclusions about life and universe.” In short this epic is “an essay into the relationship of God, Man and the Universe,” in the context of modern sciences, philosophy, poetry and metaphysics. Wherever there appears a conflict, the poet calls the Muses for help, and resolves the dilemma.

Now reverting to the text, the poet’s quest is to know the genesis and purpose of man’s existence, and “What’s a goal worth seeking/ And where’s the highway leading?” The Poet’s mind remains troubled why there are battles still raging between “Denial and affirmation,” and despite the coming of sages after sages, there is so much bloodshed and wrong-doings in the world. Why the Prophet’s efforts to “nurture and leaven, both imagination and reason,” their “Taps have run dry/ And we sit today empty-eyed/Upon a waterless earth/ Under a rainless sky.” And with the arrival of science and technology, the new age has done nothing except “Leaving a double void in its wake/ Divine dis-enfranchisement/ And human beings divested/ Of spiritual content.” No instrument of science has in concrete terms un-veiled the Creator of this universe, and the inherent restlessness and confusion of man persists as before. This in crux is the question which needs an answer not only from the prophets, but from the scientists, biologists, astronomers, anthropologists, and the protagonists of all big and small branches of sciences. The Poet in his sheer desperation invokes the Prophet of Allah, as to “What is the honest truth?/ Have humans forsaken God/ Or has He forgotten us?”

To resolve this dilemma, the Poet turns to the Muses to help him in unraveling this mystery. Then the poet “spells out his litany of anguished thoughts to them,” which fills the major part of the book. During his quest to find the right answers, the entire bulk of philosophy of various times and ages, the laws of motion and Quantum Physics, the science of elementary particles are analyzed and discussed. From the labyrinth of the knowledge of these branches, one Muse proclaims that “God’s greatest gift is the all embracing/ Canopy of Love provided to Humankind/ Like a tower out-topping/ Knowledge, wealth and power.”

Discussion of various concepts of the particle-physics and the latest discoveries in various branches of science, the poet spell-binds the reader with his vast knowledge and acute insight into the latest advances in science, which one cannot expect a poet to be familiar of. to show how an equilibrium is made in this cosmos, and all elements are subject to obey the orders of the Creator, and how a little deviation from the principles of nature can bring to naught the entire universal order. the “Grand uncertainties of scientific knowledge” keeps the scientists to sit on their tenterhooks, and their inability to know the ultimate truth of this cosmos keeps them ever on their toes. The scientists show their utter humility to know “How the universe originate” and where it would finally end.

Then there is a long discussion of the habitat on this earth and their evolution. This includes Homo Habilis, Homo Erectus and Homo Sapiens. With the startling knowledge of a scientist and an insightful historian, the poet analyses human structure and its functionality to conclude that human brain is a paragon of harmony in the universe. He shows by examples from biological sciences how the changes in human mind can be brought about, to show how “Science revels in Reason/ As an end in itself/ But Reason commits the treason/ Of falling in love/ And flying with passion.” In tracing human history, the poet observes that Neanderthal lived for two hundred thousand years , before the Homo sapiens took over forty thousand years ago. It was his Caveman stage.

Now the poet shows the nature of man in various civilizations and dynasties, the traces of most of which are almost obscure today. He roams through Mesopotamian, the Egyptian, the Assyrian, the Babylonian, and the ages of Zoroastrianism and Hammurabi. He talks with their kings and ordinary men to show how they thought about their lives and surroundings. In between them, he discusses at length the Christian theologians, and the western philosophers since the sixteenth century A.D. by naming each philosopher and explaining the gist of their philosophies.

Under this background he declares “The way to the Rosegarden lay in/ The Self’s efflorescence/ Not in its subjugation or annihilation/ In God’s Name.” After his sojourn to his Garden of Secrets, he declares that the perfect “God-Man relationship is most eloquently expressed in the person of the Holy Prophet who was the Perfect Exemplar of what the Creator expected”.

In the end, after the monumental discussion of all prophets, scientists, philosophers and intellectuals, Ejaz Rahim holds the Holy Prophet as the perfect model for man’s conduct in this life and Allama Iqbal, as the seer and guide for our youth who was so deeply inspired by the precepts of the Holy Prophet.

I have a feeling that perhaps under the weight of prolonged discussion of the entire wisdom of the world through several centuries, Mr. Ejaz Rahim could not adequately explain away Iqbal’s philosophy and its universal application for all humanity. Iqbal as poet being his ultimate goal deserved a more detailed discussion which we hope may be done in the next revision of this monumental work.

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