

Nissim Ezekiel's Delineation of Man and Human Relationship

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Abstract

This paper examines in depth Nissim Ezekiel's social idealism by representing man – woman relationship, thereby making it clear that poetry lives with a unique aliveness which does present the human experiences relationships filled with struggles and miseries and through his poetry, Ezekiel draws the cognizance about living creatures and shows how he symbolizes the polluted society by its condition. Through the plays of Ezekiel, one can get to know the dramatic and artistic skill of his. It reveals how through his plays he brings out the theme of frustration & suffering and exposes the reality of the hollowness of the people who contrive for themselves, using his skill to picture human psychology. He is known as philosophical, religious and Nature's poet whose commitment is nothing but the experience of human life in the society.

Keywords: Nissim Ezekiel, Social Condition, Human Values, Nature, Emotional Themes, Suffering Of Human, Superstitious Belief

Introduction

Nissim Ezekiel holds, no doubt, a significant place in post Independent Indian-English Literature. Even since he came back from England in 1952, he has wielded great influence as leading poet, editor of many journals an occasional playwright and consistently a bright and notable critic. While critical works brought out on Ezekiel's poetry are available in abundance, the ones on his plays are quite negligible in number, for he has written only a limited number of too, all in the second half of his artistic career, the first half have been entirely devoted to the writing of poetry. He himself stated as follows: "I have been writing poetry for more than twenty years, while my plays are written in 1968, q recently" (Blackwell 265). Every work is nothing but "an extension of myself" says Ezekiel. Whether a poetic piece or a play it comes from the salient and lively moments of its creators inner self and therefore, the message of the one is inextricable intertwined with the message of the other. Thus, to a reader of Ezekiel poetry, some sort of familiarity with psychological and social dimensions of his plays will be a rewarding experience. Almost like Yeats and Eliot, Ezekiel has chosen a different medicine for there has been real panicky of Indian drama in English. This is evidently brought out here: "Nissim Ezekiel plays do not present any philosophical, historical or psychological problems" (Rahman 51). On the contrary, "Plays like put forth a psychological profundity for a careful reader" (Parameswari 4). The play Nalini the frustration suffered by two aimlessly wandering executives while Marriage

Poem epitomizes the agony endured by an incompatible couple. Laying focus on the ps and profundity, the play The Sleep Walkers on the Indo-American relationship, picturing a group of mindless Indians cringing before a dull American in order to win the American's favour where as deals with two nameless youngsters, a "He" and a "she" who indulge in a se – oriented telephonic Conversation for an unimaginable long time and at last wind up their talk by coming together last play Who Needs No Introduction exposes the absurdities of the ale they think, no introduction to anytime as they are prominent personalities. All these five plays are an effective expose of reality, of the hollowness people contrive for themselves. Through the creation of these plays, Ezekiel content of Indian – English drama. His play really contain multiple layers of meaning if read from a social, political and psychological point of view. Through the plays of Ezekiel, one can get to know the dramatic and artistic skill of his. It shows the theme of nuisance & suffering and exposes the reality of the hollowness of the people who contrive for themselves, using his skill to picture human psychology and his own inner self. In this regard, the observation of Murali Das Melwani may be noted here: "As against every play performed or published, three novels or si collections of poetry are published" (Karnani III) Critics of Ezekiel often point out that his plays suffer from absence of psychological reality. This is evidently brought out here: "Nissim Ezekiel plays do not present any philosophical, historical or psychological problems" (Rahman 51). On the contrary, "Plays like Nalini and Marriage Poem profundity for a

careful reader" Nalini is nothing but a picture of the frustration suffered by two aimlessly wandering executives epitomizes the agony endured by an incompatible couple. Laying focus on the psychological, social The Sleep Walkers might be a farce American relationship, picturing a group of mindless Indians cringing before a dull American in order to win the American's favour where as Song of Deprivation s with two nameless youngsters, a "He" and a "she" who oriented telephonic Conversation for an unimaginable long time and atlast wind up their talk by Who Needs No Introduction exposes the absurdities of the alleged great men who need, as they think, no introduction to anytime as they are prominent personalities. All these five plays are an effective expose of reality, of the hollowness people contrive for themselves. Through the creation of these plays, Ezekiel has enriched the English drama. His play really contain multiple layers of meaning if read from a social, political and psychological point of view. Through his experiments in various fields, he has extended the range of Indo-Anglia drama and the possibility of making innovations in new forms. He not only wrote a comedy a tragic comedy and a force. Each play enacts a new form and novel technique with a presentation of new themes Ezekiel has structured all his plays from the point of view of human psychology in general and his own inner self in particular. A brief synopsis of his plays seems relevant.

Nalini is about the relationship of the two young advertising agents with Nalini, a young painter. At the center of the play lies the conflict between Nalini, a phantom figure of Nalini, the real woman, enacted in the consciousness of Bharat. The play Nalini as a social satire, impresses all. Here Ezekiel tries to show the immaturity of a whole class through the portraiture of two young men who are the types one can meet anywhere in urban India. Raj is not interested in paintings for their own sake. Instead, he treats paintings as a vehicle for getting closer to Nalini. When Bharat wants to know whether the paintings of Nalini are worth exhibiting, Raj cynically replies: "Does this matter? They are paintings, Canvass with colour on them, Plenty of colour in various forms" (Three Plays 23) Most people, like Bharat and Raj are not interested in paintings but only in publicity, so in presenting the shallow world of business executives, Ezekiel offers a lot of barbed social comments. The play presents a lot of wry commentary on the current art scene in India. The success of the exhibition seems to depend more on the way the publicity is arranged than on the intrinsic worth of the paintings. It is through the portrait of Nalini that Ezekiel projects the struggle of a genuine artist who wants to establish herself by her own effort. It is a fine social satire where the playwright comments on the American peace corps trying to increase Indian's production of eggs, the desire to go abroad for "encounters with women, false values, materialism and wrong notions of superiority" (Karnani 118). In the presentation of all these themes, Ezekiel has managed to hold a mirror upto vulgarity of the middle class in India as a realistic satire, Nalini may be his finest play.

The Sleep Walkers emerges not from the encounter of a wise group with a foolish gang but from the world of dunces where each in equally hollow, thoughtless and unintelligent. Therefore, Ezekiel's message in the play is how men, whether Indians or Americans, could be mean opportunist. "The play is humorous, but at the same time uncomfortable to Indians as well as to Americans" (Blackwell 266), because all the characters in the play in some way or the other expose their absurdity and foolishness. All characters in the play wear masks to show that they are not authentic Indians. Except Mr. Varma and Miss Ganguli all the other characters are accompanied by their wives these women character refuse to participate in any intellectual discussions; they remain silent throughout. Most of the men like professor shah, Mr.Rahman, Mr.Morris, Mr.Kapur and Mr.West bring their wives to parties for reasons of social status, but at home these men are so domineering that their women will have to endure all their stubbornness and eccentricities. In such a domestic set up, the words and deeds of the women are of no real value or consequence whatsoever. Almost all the women in the play remain more as dolls to decorate the venue of their meeting than a intelligent human begins capable of participating in learned discussions. Obviously, the playwright hints at the chauvinism of his male characters. The discrimination of woman against men and in India has been portrayed through Mrs.Raman and Mrs. Kapur.

Truly speaking, the prime concern of Nissim Ezekiel is man and his life in the universe. In his poetic realm, he seems to be engaged in an attempt to find out whether life, when stripped bare of its illusions and ideals is worth living and if so, the requisites for man to face it, and to make it meaningful. He obviously directs his focus on men who are unsuccessful in their lives and whose lives are governed by uncertainty, frustration and misery. He suggests that man be armed with courage and love to remedy these evils in life. Mankind, as it is commonly held, is one, though divided by geographical, cultural, religious and linguistic barriers. Basically, it is the same heart that feels and the same head that thinks. Fundamental emotions like love, hate, jealousy etc., are the same and fundamental intellectual factors knowledge, intelligence, etc. are the same too, which work in much the same way. A study of any writer either separated by time or space is bound to bring to light one important and interesting truth – that the raw material is the same – which is, human nature. Since time immemorial, man has had a pivotal place in literature, thereby providing the never-changing, ever-interesting staple of the writer's pen. Man deserves such importance because he is endowed with a remarkable nobility which enables him to fight against the prodigious forces he is pitted against. He is capable of heroism in the face of the ultimate mysteries fighting valiantly and emerging triumphant in the challenging struggle with the forces that are beyond his control. This makes him superior to any other creature. Now more than ever, the concept of man has acquired new.

Significance and great importance because the twentieth century is the epitome of the highest progress of man in all fields. Yet man has to work within certain limitations. This awareness of his limitations, his undying faith in the yet unknown and his heroic effort to fight and his admirable resolve to surrender to that which he cannot conquer have inspired many a writer to write on man. One such a writer is Nissim Ezekiel whose special focus is on his never flagging interest in man. As he is fascinated by man, he does consistently draw from the common repertoire of human experience. Human beings form the fulcrum of the major bulk of his poetry. His poetry lives with a unique aliveness, because it presents living people who work, walk about converse and tell their stories with the freedom of common speech, depicting human situations that are stark real. No doubt, it may be said that Nissim Ezekiel's first love is man. The struggles and miseries of man in his cosmos have never failed to interest him. Man caught up in the corrupted city life is the prime subject of his creative works. H.M. Williams writes: "Many of his poems derive their effectiveness from the poet's puzzled emotional reaction to the modern Indian dilemma which he feels to be poignant conflicts of tradition and modernism, the city and the village" (P 116). This is well exemplified in *Night of the Scorpion* where the peasant superstitions about the scorpion bite are seen in juxtaposition to the modern skepticism of the father and the poetic image of religious ritual, and in the poem "In India" (Later – Day Psalms 50).

With its tormented awareness of Bombay:
 Here among the beggars
 Hawkers, pavement sleepers,
 Hutment dwellers,
 Slums Dead souls of men and gods.

Ezekiel's poetry is nothing but the criticism of life in the best sense of the phrase. He is at his best when he attempts hard to answer questions and reconcile differences. That is the reason why he deals with situations where man is sulking or dreaming or is puzzled in the world. Ezekiel himself says that the major themes of his poetry are "love, personal integration, the Indian contemporary scene, modern urban life, spiritual values" (P 56). Laying focus on humanity, Ezekiel is found to be familiar with humanity in its urban milieu. He is "a poet of the city" (Hess, 3). To Ezekiel, the imagery of nature symbolises the pure and tranquil state of being as opposed to the earthly humdrum. The images of hills, river, wind, skies, sun and rain, as seen in "urban", for instance, attain a definite significance in their contrast with the images of the city. The two worlds of fanciful dreams and stark realities are set in opposition to each other. The images derived from the world of nature are the archetypal life symbols. K.D. Verma observes:

"They project a pastoral vision of a fully refulgent and harmonious life, a pattern in which man enters into sacred communion with his cosmos, including objects of nature as a metaphoric condition of his integrated humanity and of his desire to foster a community of beings" (JSAL 231). Ezekiel's awareness of nature is not only limited to earth, air, water, fire, etc. but also includes birds and beasts. He

mentions "worm" in *A Time to Change*, crows, cats and squirrel in *Sixty Poems*, Sparrows in *The Third*, elephants, cats and birds in *The Unfinished Man*, scorpion and paradise fly-catcher in *The Exact Name* and monkeys in *Hymns in Darkness*. In "Totem" published in JSAL, he gives a bountiful catalogue of birds, goats, cats, phoenix, crocodile, lam and ant. "In the country cottage" published in the same journal, a mention of lizards is made. This wide variety of images is symbolic of primitive simplicity. The poet considers these birds and animals to be more humane, and warm than the polluted city dweller. While man assumes many masks and conceals his identity so much that it is ultimately lost, birds and beasts are always unmarred by the ugly hand of affectation and corruption. Though Ezekiel is far from being a religious poet, he wishes to resort to private meditation. Yet his humanism drives him to reject "all that is grand and mystical in the Indian religious tradition" (Jussawalla 67) and desire "a human balance". As he is the poet of man, he has an undying interest in man. Human beings engaged in talking, going about their work, making love, committing mistakes, worried over problems, puzzled over mysteries – all that is human, hold an interest for him. He loves out and out the voices of the people for he is "a poet of human situations, human concerns and human voices" (Seetha 183).

Nissim Ezekiel's philosophical commitment is to the experience of life and his people live amidst us. They belong to a modernized urban world. Theirs is the problem of search for truth and love in this world of deception and corruption. Subjected to the paralyzing influence of the western culture for several centuries since the British rule in India, they are still unable to come to terms with it. They can neither accept it fully nor throw it. The Indian mind with its singular capacity for inclusiveness enabled us to accommodate a variety of races, religions, languages and their costumes, food habits and social customs. But these foreign features coexisted with the Indian elements and in spite of all these the Indian retained his identity. C.D. Narasimhaiah writes:

"The western – educated gentleman who donned his three – piece suit crowned it with a lace turban all right. His house is furnished with Persian carpet, mahogany chairs, seven branched Candelabra, Japanese crockery and Belgian cutlery along with wattle mats, earthen lamps, the green thoranam across the door over the threshold and the rangavalli in front of the house, as the European rose coexisted with the Mysore jasmine and English cricket with the age-old chinnidandu" (P 2).

This is true with the elder generation of Indians. But in the present day, the younger try to ignore the call of their own tradition and culture, lured away by the dazzle and glitter of the siren that is the western culture. They lose their fights against the claims of culture because the very atmosphere of today is enveloped in a shroud of artificiality and hypocrisy. They practice all kinds of absurdities in the name of modernism. They are free in their ways with everything – costume, character, outlook towards life, etc. It is this picture of the corrupted modern world that Ezekiel captures in his poems. But beneath this assumed exterior lurks a mind which is purely Indian or

purely human in its wider connotations. There is a violent storm raging in the minds of every citybred man caught between the two worlds. While the women, like reeds, try to resist it, the men succumb to it. There are exceptions on either side. Ezekiel is chiefly preoccupied with these "inner conflicts of the human mind, and that particular malaise of modern urban man caught up in the ugliness, Shallowness and meaningless routine of city life denuded of spiritual values" (Schomer 353).

Ezekiel's very first volume of verses titled *A Time to Change* (1952) is introspective in tone. It expresses Ezekiel's frustration and his search for identity. He realizes that salvation is not to be found outside life but in it. Fulfillment in life is to come through two sources: marital bliss and human relationships. In the title poem of the volume, he writes:

This "personal ideal" (Karnani 16) is contrasted with the social ideal where the poet has to know the various lives and dreams of man. In the second collections namely *Sixty Poems* (1953), Ezekiel's widening range of interests manifests itself in his greater preoccupation with sex. In the third volume of poems collected under the title *The Third* (1959), Ezekiel exhibits broad sympathies and a deep understanding of the human situations. In his fourth volume *The Unfinished Man* (1960) he explores the relationship between man and woman. He is depressed by the hollowness and deception that characterize this relationship. The fifth volume *The Exact Name* (1965) and most of the other poems published in journals after this collection, "reveal the human interest that his poetry always had" (Karnani 77). The personal ideal of Ezekiel's prompts him to materialize his social ideal.

To conclude, it may be said that Nissim Ezekiel as a man has been tried most by the tragedies in his life, that too, as a Bene Israelite living in India, that too, in a polluted city like Bombay, has known and tested the hardships of life in the truest sense and has realised the need for personal human relationships if one does not wish to despond over the distressing and depressing trials of life. What he seems to agree upon is that life with all its painful experiences is worth living. Ezekiel, like a true Indian, would say that redemption for man is to be won not by renouncing life, but by living it.

In brief, it may be said that the play *Who Needs No Introduction* discloses the ludicrousness of the ostensible great men who think they need no introduction. Their absurdities have been clearly portrayed by the playwright. It is the foolishness of the chief guest and the chairman which make the readers laugh at them. Ezekiel conveys a very serious message in this comedy. He says that one should beware these great men so that one can save the society from them. To conclude, Ezekiel is no doubt essentially a serious poet. However, as a 'playwright, he has not been known to many readers of Indian Wright in English. Though some of his plays are really good, he is not considered as a great playwright because the critical works on his plays are quite negligible in number. He himself avows that he does not "think too badly of his plays" and at the same time does not "think very high of them either" (Blackwell 265) Ezekiel plays are based on the theme of social satire. Some of them exhibit an extraordinary psychological profundity. His plays reflect his personality and also express some of his personal experiences. Through his characters he reveals the mental states of men and women and also the progression as well as the degradation that take place in the world around His themes are mostly social, all undoubtedly satirical.

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