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Changing Aspects of Women in Nissim Ezekiel's *Nalini & Marriage Poem*: Feminism in Trouble

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The inequality between sexes has been vying attention of the scholars. The feminist scholars from different corners of the world have criticised discrimination between sexes and they have expressed their views of women's freedom. The feminist scholars from India like Pandita Ramabai, Kamini Roy, Vandana Shiva, Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak, Lata Mani, Tanika Sarkar and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan advocate women's equal participation with men. They criticize women's confinement within the four walls of the house. They reject patriarchy and women's exploitation in a male dominated society. In their opinion, women are entitled for equal rights; therefore, they are free to make their own decision. They want women's equal footing with men in every walk of life. Nissim Ezekiel is one of the dramatists who focused his attention on the discrimination between man and woman. By writing plays, Nissim Ezekiel intervened intellectual debates of women's issues. In his plays, *Nalini* and *Marriage Poem*, Ezekiel depicts changing aspects of women. He describes different issues associated with women's freedom and equality between sexes. Patriarchy, marriage, domestication of women and freedom to make their own choice are some of the examples which Ezekiel discussed in his plays. The purpose of the paper is to reveal Ezekiel's views of womanhood.

In the play *Nalini: A Comedy*, Raj and Bharat have hidden motives. They help Nalini for the publicity of exhibition of her paintings because they want to satisfy their wishes. Both of them have double personalities. They have their public life and inner life. The publicity is one of the ways for Raj and Bharat to come closer to Nalini. They are no more art critics than Nalini herself. For them, it is body of a woman that is important for them and not her skill in the area of painting. In the play, the dramatist describes Bharat's attitude towards Nalini when he writes, "He remains close to her, looking down at her breasts" (27). It is, therefore, an evident that women are treated as objects of male desires by their counterparts.

Virginity of women is another issue which is still prevalent in the male dominated society. Therefore, the girls who lose their virginity before marriage are considered to be worthless creatures on earth. They suffer throughout their lives. The different types of virginity tests are projected against them. On the other hand, Bharat's question to Nalini is an example of women's virginity which reveals that women are required to prove their virginity before their marriage. Even in some male oriented societies, women are forced to undergo virginity test. If they fail to prove their virginity, they suffer throughout their lives.

BHARAT. You're not a virgin. (Pause)

NALINI. Did you want me to be?

BHARAT. No.

NALINI. Well, then, at least you're not disappointed.

BHARAT. I'm not disappointed. I'm envious of somebody.

NALINI. Forget about it. I told you, there are plenty of other women in the world.

NALINI. Not like you baby. (37)

The changing aspect of Nalini is visible in her speech when she says to Bharat, "Every time I created a painting, I created myself. I could not remain what I was. I had to change. Then something frightening happened to me" (40). It is thus a woman who accepts her own change but the changing image of Nalini does not make her an independent woman. On the other hand,

Bharat imagines bifurcated image of Nalini. In his opinion, there are two Nalinis. The first image of Nalini is what he see her dreams, the second image of Nalini is what he expects to be: "The first Nalini I dreamt about, a day-dream in which she was what I expected her to be" (45). It is evident that a male character like Bharat expects a woman to conform his desires; therefore, his attitude towards Nalini is anti-woman in nature.

In the play, *Nalini: A Comedy* Bharat thinks that a woman cannot be an independent creature. In his opinion, it is possible for a woman to be an independent being only with the intelligent of a man. "She's an independent woman, with the intelligence of a man and the determination of an orthodox Indian mother-in-law. She's a living insult to me and to you, to all of us. Damn her" (45). The misogynistic traits are also obvious in Bharat's attitude towards Nalini. The term like "Damn her" is an example of misogyny which is derogatory to Nalini's personality. The term "Damn her" also reveals Bharat's hatred of Nalini.

In the play, Nalini's image in emerges as a woman who is available for advertisement. She is known as a fashionable woman who is famous among people because she is advertised in the well known journals like *Femina* and *Eve's Weekly*. It is also obvious that Nalini's image is

BHARAT. Come in, come in. We know you are not real.

RAJ. You are our dream girl. We've read about you in *Femina*. We've read about you in *Eve's Weekly*.

NALINI. O Raj. (She laughs and giggles every time she speaks)

BHARAT. We love you.

NALINI. O Bharat.

RAJ. You are a familiar sight at fashion shows. (48)

The objectification of women's body is another way of their suppression. Sometimes, their body is exposed through captions, at others; they are forced to perform their bodies before the audiences. Catharine A Mackinnon opines, "Sexual objectification is the primary process of the subjection of women. It unites acts with word, construction with expression, perception with enforcement, myth with reality. Man fucks woman, subject verb object" (124). On the contrary, the playwright shows his belief in the objectification of women's bodies. Nalini is an example of such anti-woman acts. She has to expose her body before the audience merely for exhibition of her paintings. Bharat unhooks her bra before the audience: "You will learn everything. (Nalini turns round swiftly just as he unhooks the bra. Her back is to the audience as the bra falls off. Nalini covers her breasts with her arms and bends her head" (29). It is obvious from the above statement of Bharat that a woman cannot achieve popularity about her works on her own. Consequently, she needs help of a man to earn popularity of her paintings.

Domestication of women is another way of their subjection to men. Suruchi Thapar-Bjorkert denigrates women's domestication. She argues that women's domestication limits their spheres and confines them within the four walls of the house. She holds: "The domestic sphere enveloped women's lives with ambiguities uncertainties and both gender and generational dynamics became important as a means or support of contestation" (264). Therefore, ignoring women's education is another way of their domestication. In a male oriented society, women's education is marginalized by their counterparts. Men consider that if women need education, they need in the area of homemaking. Therefore, they allow women to get education in Home Sciences. They think that a woman's duty is to excel herself in keeping the house, remain within home and involve in knitting and sewing the cloth. In their opinion, women are intellectually weaker sex, hence; they cannot learn the subjects like mathematics and science. Therefore, if

women are given opportunity to educate themselves, they are allowed to excel the subjects which maintain their domesticity:

BHARAT. You graduated in Home Science.

RAJ. You excel in knitting and sewing.

NALINI. Only when I have time for it.

BHARAT. You can convert old castaway pyjamas into fanciful underwear for children.

In her book, *A Vindication of Rights of Women* (1792) Mary Wollstonecraft describes marriage as a “legal prostitution” (156). Similarly, Margaret Jackson considers marriage as “the pivotal institution of male power”, “a form of institutionalized female sexual slavery”, “the legalized equivalent of prostitution” and through marriage “women were forced to earn their living by selling their bodies to men” (8). Marriage thus, is a socio-cultural practice which is projected against women’s freedom in a phallocentric society. On the contrary, in the play *Marriage Poem*, the dramatist maintains his faith in the traditional roles of women in marriage and he discusses marriage as an institution. He depicts marriage a necessary institution which should continue in the society. Further, in the play, female characters are depicted as objects of men’s desire. They are simply playing roles of passive wives to their husbands. For example, there is no harmony between the protagonist Naresh and his wife Mala. His wife is shown as a typical possessive creature to him. Mala’s question to Mrs Lall, “What would you do if your husband became attached to another woman?” (65) visualizes the fact that the dramatist gives freedom to Naresh to run after another woman and satisfy his wishes. Naresh thus, uses woman as object of his desires. Further, Mala remains subordinate to her husband. She is not given freedom to protest against Naresh when she comes to know that her husband is flirting with another woman. Such relationships between wife and husband reveal that women are forced to live within the limits while their husbands can have relationships with other women as well. Naresh treats women as imaginary beings and he wants to live with them merely for satisfying his desires. Women thus, are associated with illusion and men are associated with reality. The biased attitude of the playwright makes it clear that he does not consider women’s equality with men. It is another aspect of discrimination between sexes and is subtly expressed by the author. It is, therefore, simply a caricature of the modern woman who tries to be an independent being.

In the play *Marriage Poem*, satire on woman is also obvious from the dialogues between Naresh and his wife. It is a woman, Mala who is an object of satire. She not only serves her husband as a traditional wife but she also tolerates her husband’s satirical remarks which are derogatory in nature:

MALA. . . . Shall I pour out some tea for you?

NARESH. Yes (satirically). And dip a slice of bread in it for me. (she freezes)

Put a slice of bread dipped in tea into my mouth.

MALA. I will, I will.

NARESH. (Chewing) Thank you. That was delicious.

MALA. I love it too.

NARESH. (Raising his voice) I hate it. (61)

It is obvious from the above conversation between Naresh and his wife that Naresh simply treats his wife as a domestic slave. He thinks that a woman is subordinate to her husband therefore, she is expected to conform herself to male desires. The conflict of wills between husband and wife is also clear from the above speeches where Naresh is dominating Mala.

Similarly, Naresh hates his wife if she speaks anything which does not conform to his wishes. Naresh's hatred of Mala is an example of misogyny which is projected against Mala. Naresh thus exploits domestic labour of Mala and he considers her merely a slave whom he has got through marriage. Marriage gives him further opportunity to possess her body as an object to be used merely for satisfying his sexual needs. Elizabeth Jackson criticizes exploitation of women's labour and their bodies. She opines, "It is, of course, possible to see patriarchy as based on male exploitation of women's labour as well as their bodies, and to make connections between production and reproduction." (54) Further, Jackson identifies socio-cultural acts which are constituted within a phallogocentric society and imposed on women. Marriage is one of them which is projected against women's emancipation: "The 'family values' of the anti-feminist movements could therefore be interpreted as an attempt to reinstate an older patriarchal bargain, with some women calling for increased responsibility and control by men." (Jackson 113). Simone de Beauvoir rejects ideology of marriage. She equates marriage with prostitution and she writes, "For both the sexual act is a service; the one is hired for life by one man; the other has several clients who pay her by the price" (569). The socio-cultural practice of marriage is, therefore, constituted and forcefully imposed on women by men to relegate women to the secondary status.

The feminist scholars have been raising their voice against exploitation of women's labour. They advocate that women are equally entitled to be paid for their domestic labour. In *Women and Economics*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman writes, "The labour which the wife performs in the household is given as part of her functional duty, not as employment. The wife of the poor man, who works hard in a small house, doing all the work for the family, or the wife of the rich man, who wisely and gracefully manages a large house and administers its functions, each is entitled to fair pay for services rendered" (7). On the contrary, the playwright depicts Mala as a woman who looks after her husband and her family yet she suffers from economic exploitation and her domestic duties are simply ignored by her husband. She remains within the four walls of the house and takes care of her children, husband and family. It is thus a woman who dedicates herself for caring and rearing of her children. Besides this, she takes care of her husband's health, shabby dress and his hair. She is wife-mother-sister-nurse all in one. Mala tells her plight to Mrs Lall, "I look after him well. . . . He's happy with me but he doesn't know it. He was as thin as a stick. He dressed shabbily. His hair ran wild. He dresses well now. Everybody says so. His hair is under control. I force him to have a hair-cut every three weeks, I love him. I care for him" (66). In the play Mala's economic dependence on her husband is another issue which shows playwright's staunch faith in the economic dependence of women on men. Mala's makes decision that she will not give up her husband because she has two children to survive them: "I won't give up my husband either. He's married to me. He's my husband. We have two children. I'll never give him up (65). Furthermore, Mala's meekness and obedient nature reflects in her speech. Her submissiveness to her husband manifests in her statements:

NARESH. What about my wife?

LEELA. She doesn't exist.

NARESH. She does, for me.

LEELA. As a ghost only.

NARESH. The ghost who talks.

LEELA. The ghost who nags.

NARESH. The ghost who bore me two children. (68)

Another image of Mala is visible in her role as a nurse to her husband. She not merely cares for her husband but she also begs him when she comes to know that Naresh is angry with her. When she realizes that Naresh is reluctant to take tea, she begs her to have his tea:

NARESH. I don't want it.

MALA. Please, I beg of you. (61)

The playwright caricatures women's demand of equality. He thinks that they are intellectually weaker sex, therefore, they do not know how to make decision. The playwright's sense of caricature manifests in the description of Mrs Lall's character: "Mrs Lall, a non-descript middle-aged woman in a white sari, enters sits on one of the sofas, lights up a cigarette and smokes blandly" (63). The dramatist's attitude in the description of Mrs Lall's character reveals that he treats women as ridiculous creatures. He thinks that if women are given freedom of choice, they cannot take decision. Mrs Lall in the above description is an example of such ideology who is depicted as a woman who shows her interest in smoking cigarettes. Such depiction of womankind is derogatory in nature because the habit of smoking cigarette is harmful to women's bodies.

Women are also treated as gossip. Both the male characters namely, Naresh and Ranjit consider that it is quite impossible for women to live without parting their tongues at every moment. They think that women are very talkative and they always involve in meaningless talk about others. It is one of the characteristics of male oriented society which is projected against womankind. It is obvious from their conversation about women:

NARESH. It will be completed in ten minutes all right. A world of talk in ten minutes. For every ten minutes of talk, there should be twenty minutes of silence.

RANJIT. That may be possible for man, not for a woman. (72)

The playwright depicts that women constantly chase men to control their sexuality. Mala and Leela are examples in the play. On the one hand, Mala is tied to her husband for lifelong she cannot give up her husband, on the other hand, Leela wants to grab Mala's husband for her own sake. It is, therefore, a man like Naresh who is chased by two women. Further, Mrs Lall's utmost faith in male supremacy reflects in her advice to Mala. She says to her that she cannot live without her husband if he runs after another woman: "... I would behave like a mad woman. I would tear my hair ... I would scratch my face ... I'll shout. I'll scream" (65). Mrs Lall tells Mala that she cannot give up her husband.

Bharat does not accept that a woman can be an independent being. He thinks that it is merely an illusion for a woman to be an independent being. When Nalini tells him that she wants to be an independent woman on her own, he laughs at her. He considers a woman's independence merely a dream: "An independent woman, eh? How romantic" (30). It is also obvious from the above statement of Bharat that he associates women with romance and men with reality. Bharat, therefore, does not consider women as rational creatures.

For centuries, writers have used women's image in their own way. Women have been source of inspiration and subject of their writings. Nissim Ezekiel is one of them who deliberate on heterosexual relationships to participate in the debates of women's issues and their changing aspects. He therefore, gives importance to love, sex and attraction of women in his plays. Neeru Tandon opines that Nissim Ezekiel uses love, sex and attraction of women as devices to overcome his despair and maintain his interest in life. According to Tandon, "Love, sex and the attraction of women help Ezekiel to overcome his despair and find interest in life." (196)

The above discussion about Nissim Ezekiel's *Nalin: A Comedy and Marriage Poem* reveals that he had staunch faith in the traditional roles of women. He presented women as secondary to men before the audiences. He propagated that women's role is within the four walls of house, therefore, they are expected to excel themselves in homemaking, cooking, washing clothes, cleaning utensils, giving birth to children, looking after them and their husband. Further, they are required to be submissive, meek, graceful devoted and obedient to their husbands. He does not advocate equality between sexes. In his plays, female characters are relegated to the secondary position to male characters. They are not given power to exercise equal choice like men. If the dramatist depicts changing aspect of women, he presents them as "new wine in old bottles". He does not offer them equality with men. Such writers are writing to challenge feminist movement of women's equality. The entire womankind, therefore, need to save women's existence.

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