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Portrayal of Woman in Nissim Ezekiel's Poetry

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Abstract:

A study of Nissim Ezekiel's poetry brings out a gradual evolution of his art and genius. A number of major themes run through his poetry. The poets before him mainly preferred to write on themes which were considered 'Poetic'. It was Ezekiel who first time used 'unpoetic' themes into Indian English Poetry. The theme of love and sex recurs frequently in Ezekiel's poetry. 'Love' has always remained an irresistible theme for poets in all languages. It is a sentiment which is all pervasive in Indian Poetry, especially after Independence. The theme of love and sex cannot be imagined without existence of feminine character. So, it is but natural to find the image of woman in a characteristic manner. The interaction between man and woman is a major concern of Ezekiel's Poetry. There are highly sensuous descriptions of the human body and love - making in the bed. His treatment of the act of love, and of the charms of the female body is characterized by extreme frankness. Ezekiel speaks very thoughtfully about the physical pleasures that are quite necessary to the body; hence sex becomes the carrier of blessed moments.

Keywords: alienation, blessed moments, female anatomy, potboiler, fibres of flesh, sexism, chauvinism.

Nissim Ezekiel is called as one of the trinity of indo-Anglian poets. The other two are Kamla Das and A.K. Ramanujan. As a prominent poet, he has attracted enough critical attention from many scholars. He has also brought fame and recognition to a number of Indian English Poets. The poetry of Nissim Ezekiel has keenness to realities of life, its sorrow, happiness, forms, varieties, vacillations, hopes and disillusion.

He was born in Bombay in 1924. He was a Jew by birth. His father was a Principal of a college and his mother of school. As his parents were teacher administrators, he got extremely academic atmosphere in home. Nissim Ezekiel was educated at Antonio D'souza High School

and Wilson College, Bombay and Birbeck College, London. In 1964, he was a visiting Professor at Leeds University. Under International visitor's program by U.S. Government, he was an invitee in 1974 and in 1975, to a Cultural Award Visitor to Australia. He was also the Director of Theatre Unit, Bombay for some time. During 1948-1952, he was in England. When he returned to India in 1952, he worked as Professor and Head of Department of English at Mithibai College of Arts, Bombay. Thus after trying various professions, he joined the English Dept. of the University of Bombay. He retired as a Professor in 1984.

This great poet in Indo-Anglian Literature had a charming personality. He always guided the younger poets who had dreams of becoming poets. There was hardly anything he would not do for an individual who deserved encouragement. He was more enthusiastic about helping women than men. R. raja Rao in 'Nissim Ezekiel: The Authorised Biography' calls him 'a ladies' man'. He had romantic relationships with quite a number of women. At Wilson College, he was the male student most chased by girls. He stayed for some months at National University of Singapore as poet-in-residence when he was in his mid 60's. He became popular among the students, especially the girls. He conducted a poetry reading and collected a group of female admirers. But such a person of towering personality was unfortunate as far as his married life is concerned. There was one woman with whom Nissim Ezekiel didn't have romantic relationship; and it was his wife, Daisy Ezekiel nee Dandekar. Their married life ended in separation. He had many extra marital relationships. But this was not the main reason for the break up to his marriage. Daisy could have neglected them, if he had been more attentive, considerate and responsible husband. Theirs was not a love marriage. It would be right to call it 'a semi-arranged marriage'. The proposal came from a community matchmaker. When Daisy's father introduced her to Nissim Ezekiel, he was not swept off his feet by his feelings for Daisy. And Ezekiel was a man who found himself repeatedly swept off his feet by feelings of women.

In Nissim Ezekiel's poetry, there is the confession of what is felt and experienced in its complexity, contradictions, pleasures, fears and disillusionments without preconceived ideas. He set an example of a poet; intellectually and morally concerned with living in the modern world and making poetry out of experience. Primarily, he is a poet, but his interests are not confined to poetry alone. He is also a great critic. He has also tried his hand at drama and has some good plays to his credit. He has played many roles, but primarily; he has always been a poet. He had a long creative span covering over 28 years. During this span, he has published six collections of his poems. Ezekiel's significance is not only as a promoter of poetry, it is his wish to be a poet. He made 'Poetry Writing' his vocation. He brought a sense of discipline, self criticism and mastery to Indian English Poetry. He brought openness to style and made his poetry contemporaneous. 'Life in city, 'sexuality', 'the problems of marriage', and 'alienation' are the various themes of his poetry. Woman's portrayal peeps into his poems dealing with the theme of Love, Sexuality and the problems of marriage etc.

A study of Nissim Ezekiel's poetry brings out a gradual evolution of his art and genius. A number of major themes run through his poetry. The Indian poetry in English before Independence consists of love poetry. But the poets generally avoided treating the physical dimensions of the relationship between man and woman. Ezekiel set out to make up for this failure of his predecessors. The poets before him mainly preferred to write on themes which were considered 'Poetic'; anything ugly or ordinary was taboo. It was Ezekiel who first time used 'unpoetic' themes into Indian English Poetry. The theme of love and sex recurs frequently in Ezekiel's poetry. 'Love' has always remained an irresistible theme for poets in all languages. It is a sentiment which is all pervasive in Indian Poetry, especially after Independence. Love and sex breathe in an atmosphere of rare frankness in Ezekiel's Poetry. Love is predominant theme in the most of his poems. The theme of love and sex cannot be imagined without existence of feminine character. So, it is but natural to find the image of woman in a characteristic manner.

Perhaps no other Indian poet has dealt woman so vehemently as Nissim Ezekiel. The interaction between man and woman is a major concern of Ezekiel's Poetry. There are highly sensuous descriptions of the human body and love - making in the bed. His treatment of the act of love, and of the charms of the female body is characterized by extreme frankness. Ezekiel speaks very thoughtfully about the physical pleasures that are quite necessary to the body; hence sex becomes the carrier of blessed moments. This experience is expressed in his poem *In the Queue*—

Insatiate the carnal sense
 Behind its stiff sartorial fence
 Though manners play the gentleman,
 A passing bosom lifts the ban.
 ... Adam in the busy street
 Is tempted to indiscreet. (Ezekiel 96)

He is often exposed to the charge of being a poet of the body, of the female anatomy, of wallowing in sex; but such criticism is superficial and unjust. He is neither a platonic nor a romantic dreamer, nor does he reject the claims of the body. He considered sex and love as a part of the universal plan. So he did not prefer the Victorian type of mentality. It is significant to note that nowhere is there any indication of the poet's falling a prey to putrid love. On the other hand, he tries to understand the nature of real love and passion through his indulgence in the act. In *An Affair*, one comes across the naïve heroine who is taken to a cinema to see a movie, which unfortunately for her escort, happens to be something of a run of the mill potboiler with its usual dose of sex and violence. The villain's efforts to frustrate the lover's plans prove abortive.

And then she said: I love you just like this
 As I had seen the yellow blondes declare

Upon the screen, and even stroked my hair.
But hates me now because I did not kiss (11)

The woman in *An Affair* shows lack of experience or judgment.

The woman in *An Affair* shows lack of experience or judgment. Commenting on the poem, A. Raghu says: "The poem can, because of its tonal levity, be compared with John Betjeman's 'A Subaltern's Love Song'. However, the comparison should not be pressed too far: the Betjeman poem concludes with the speaker getting engaged to Miss Joan Hunter Dunn. By using a visit to a cinema to highlight the chasm between reality and illusion and the human, especially feminine, inability to accept its existence, Ezekiel, then a young man in his twenties, was doing something which had never before been attempted in Indian poetry in English." (Raghu 31)

Nissim Ezekiel is acutely aware of the fibres of flesh and desire. He has strong liking for drawing the woman's features in different ways. They are sometimes extremely sensual, sometimes sacred, sometimes defiled. The woman's body to him is one of the wonders of creation. The poet has dealt sexual love in all its various forms and varieties; but always there is an attempt to transcend the physical act of sex and to transform it into something spiritual, something nobler and higher.

The poet emphatically negates absorption in sex which he confirms in *Conclusion* –
The true business of living is seeing, touching, kissing, the epic of walking the street and loving on the bed. (Rahman 27)

In *For Love's Record*, the poet has portrayed the woman who gathers men as shells and puts them by. She does not care for their love. The protagonist keeps his distance with her, but it is not too far.

Against my will but somewhat reconciled,
I let her go who gave but world not bind.
She grew in Love abandoning her ties,
No matter how they loved she put them by. (Ezekiel 111)

The thinking of the woman in *For Love's Record* is identical to the philosophy of personal relationships observed in *The Apple Cart* by King Magnus to his mistress, Orinthia.

Every star has its own orbit; and between
it and its nearest neighbor there is not only
a powerful attraction but an infinite distance.
When the attraction becomes stronger
than the distance, the two do not embrace: they
crash together in ruin. (Shaw 83)

In his poem *The Old Woman*, Ezekiel describes the old woman who takes to ‘Churching’ and to ‘Politics’ after a timid childhood and a cautious youth and after letting her husband ‘die of too much dying’. She subsists on ‘cornflakes’ ‘hate and sweetened milk’.

A woman in *Event* is uncertain about the expectations from her. She, in an effort to please her lover speaks of an unread book called ‘Wine and Bread’, a film, a speech and ‘Art’. But –

Remote from the exploring act
I knew that both were undefined,
Who lived in day-dreams, not in fact,
Reflections of the cheated mind. (Ezekiel 123)
On the other hand, there is the woman of whom *Haiku* says –
Unmasked, as the day
declined, she brought out her small
breasts to be caressed (174)

In *Situation*, Ezekiel has painted an image of ‘she’ who has sweet voice. She places one hand unconsciously upon the protagonist’s knee to press “home the facts I might have failed to see”. (43) Then both of them take coffee seated in the shade, she reveals that she knows her trade.

A girl, once a wife and a mother but now alone in *The Old Abyss* is a peculiar one as she takes pleasure in tormenting men. Her ‘magnificence in movement’ makes the men to see the old abyss again.

We find the vivid description of woman body in most of his poems. About Ezekiel’s attitude towards woman,

Ezekiel looks at women not merely as a lover looks at his beloved; but as a botanist looks at a flower. (Raghu 33)

It is true that as a botanist looks and dissects the flower in order to study it thoroughly; Ezekiel also looks at a woman and dissects the woman body with the help of his words. His words are his instruments.

In *Motives*, the poet refers to ‘your body’ and says –
I dwell on it
as on a landscape
or a beloved painting. (Ezekiel 154)

In poem after poem, he celebrates the female body. But in his celebration there is not the least desire to gloss over the unpleasant and the ugly.

Your skin is white

but black or grey
would do just as well. (154)

As Ezekiel goes on drawing image of woman in poem after poem, we find a strong realism at work behind the celebration.

His *Gallantry* is an ironic poem. It creates the vivid picture of woman body. The focus gradually moves from the face to the ankles of woman's body:

This is a face
A man may look upon
Do I stare too long?
Well, then, I shall
Lower
The gaze –
Your bosom likes me well.
Or let me be humble,
Taking in the thighs.
Forgive me, madam.
Now I bend my eyes
Lower still
To fall upon your knees. How
Low shall I fall?
Down to your ankles then –
But now
It's time to rise
And look again upon your face
Do I stare too long?
Well, then, I shall
Lower the gaze..... (105)

Similarly *Beach scene* brings the focus on the entire body, but it is viewed from a distance by male eyes. Ezekiel's *Beach scene* may be contrasted with Das' *The Looking Glass* wherein the male body is viewed through female eyes.

As in *Nakedness II*, Ezekiel, sometimes brings male body under observation –
He stripped and lay down on his bed
And watched his naked limbs, remote
As love and lonely as a dream.
He wondered why his torso seemed
So unfamiliar and his thighs
As though they were not part of him. (60)

Similarly, *Description* brings out the description of woman body –
I will begin – but how should I begin?
with hair, your hair,
remembered hair,
touched, smelt, lying silent there
upon your head, beneath your arms,
and then between your thighs..... (48)

The study of Ezekiel's poems discussed earlier depicts 'Ezekiel as a poet of woman body'. However it would not be right to call him merely the poet of flesh as –

To say that Ezekiel sees in woman nothing more than her physical fabric, is untrue.

(Raghu 35)

In *Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher*, he calls woman 'myths of light'. (Ezekiel 135). For him woman is butterfly of light that elevates and illumines earthly existence. Ezekiel is keenly aware that there are some states in life more wretched than the state of being unloved. His pain of loneliness is highlighted in *Virginal*. In *Encounter* he seems to convey that it is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.

In Several poems, he celebrates the happiness of love. Love and sex breathe in an atmosphere of rare frankness in his poetry. Love is predominant theme in the most of his poems. The need of love is paramount and this feeling is apparent in many of his poems. Love and sex in his poetry is directly related to the image of woman. The poem *Love Song* is enriched with frankness of love and sex. In many of his poems, he speaks about the recurrence of the desire for sex and love making. The poem *Old Abyss* clearly speaks about the recurrence of the temptation of sex. The celebration of the happiness generated by love is seen in *Tribute* where the narrator goes to see the lights at the invitation of a girl who knows the thing to see. It would be wrong to say that Ezekiel is unaware of the problems and pains that love generates. In *Situation*, he presents an extramarital relationship built on foundation of falsehood. She lies to be with him. So also he. Finally end of meeting is nothing but despair. It is much surprising that a poet who believes in frankness and, should believe in sanctity of the institution of marriage. But he believes that fulfillment in life can come only through marital bliss. It is fact that married life leads to quarrels as well as indifferences. However, the sanctity of marriage must be preserved at all costs, is the sense of many love poems of Ezekiel. Despite frequent breakdowns of married love, co-operation between the husband and wife is necessary. In the concluding section of *To a certain Lady* comes the philosophical realization –

Always we must be lovers,
Man and wife at work upon the hard
Mass of material which is the world. (30)

In *Report*, he says 'Love is essentially a vast and extremely complex emotion' –

And those who love are not,
As people think, happy
Because they love, but nearly
Sad because the sea
Of passion is nothing precisely. (84)

In some poems, Ezekiel focuses on the blissful aspects of marital and domestic life. The famous lines in *A Time to Change* express the desire –

To own a singing voice and a talking voice,
A bit of land, a woman and a child or two. (04)

The representation of woman in Ezekiel's poetry attains the sharpness and strength from the poet's personal experience lying underneath the verse. Most of the female characters depicted in his poetry relate to his life.

There is hardly any female character in his work who is not a counterpart of some real-life woman. (Raghu 39)

The charge of sexism in Ezekiel's poetry remains to be considered. Ezekiel likes the company of women. He is prepared to go to any length to help them. Male chauvinism is one of the aspects of his psychological make-up. He sees woman as woman rather than as person. Naturally, a trace of sexism remains present in his work. The representation of women in poetry is closely based on the reality around him. In his poems, he has drawn naïve girlfriends, the nagging wives, the untalented female artists from that reality.

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