

The image of a Woman in Nissim Ezekiel's Poetry

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Abstract

The opening up of Indian English poetry to reality in its many guises is perhaps Nissim Ezekiel's most significant influence -- An influence that sought to acclimatize Indian readers to newer climates of finer sensibilities and deeper insights. Life with all its delectations and desires, pains and pangs, losses and lamentations are very intensely felt and expressed with a rare candid stance. The high watermark of the poet's talent lies in the various engaging pictures of a noble old woman, a coy damsel, a submissive mistress, a lady of the house, a seducer, or a benevolent mother. His work is replete with a series of continuous and interdependent pictures exquisitely balanced. Indians seem to suffer deep anxieties about the precariousness of the image of a woman wherein they fascinatingly adore an erect and immaculate image. But very remorselessly Ezekiel did not corroborate this dominant image of a woman in Indian imagination.

Keywords: Indian english poetry, nissim ezeziel's

Introduction

The opening up of Indian English poetry to reality in its many guises is perhaps Nissim Ezekiel's most significant influence - - An influence that sought to acclimatize Indian readers to newer climates of finer sensibilities and deeper insights. Life with all its delectations and desires, pains and pangs, losses and lamentations are very intensely felt and expressed with a rare candid stance. Ezekiel as a cosmopolite with his distinct dispensation unravels the various complex nuances of a life in a city, sexuality, equations of marriage, alienation etc with an unblinkered vision. Nissim ezeziel's prolific poetic career that stretches well over fifty years needs to be exhaustively studied from various critical perspectives and has rightly so been discussed by various eminent critics globally. Scholars all over the world have been steadily contributing their personal estimates of this maverick from diverse critical paradigm. It would not be in the fitness of things to try to unravel the intricate layers of his copious verses in a single paper. In spite of every masterpiece of his having been categorized under various creative phases of his long and fluid career it is increasingly difficult to encompass his vision in a single paper. He has published six anthologies including *A Time to Change* (1952); *Sixty Poems* (1953); *The Third* (1959); *The Unfinished Man* (1960); *The Exact Name* (1965); And *The Hymns In Darkness and Poster Poems* (1976).

Over the years his poetry underwent a reshaping from the corporeal to the other worldly. Even a cursory glance at his poetic journey reveals a promenade from the physical to the spiritual and from doubts and ambivalence to a more complex and holistic knowledge. We can assess a clear sense of radical shift in his thought. But his early works have laid a strong foundation in establishing a cohesive, coherent and certain craft in his later poetry. For Ezekiel reality is in flux, we can perceive a consistent seeking of continuity in the experiences of life, those experiences that were absorbed in spirit and

flowed from the core of his being. Though his poetry has always been anchored in reality with considerations like identity, love, commitment, religion and nature it is a process of steady growth.

A Poem Of Dedication may be regarded as the poet's poetic manifesto and his poetic programme for time to come.

*Not to hanker for a wide, God like range
Of thought, nor the matador's dexterity,
I do not want the yogi's concentration,
I do not want the perfect charity
Of saints nor the tyrant's endless power.
I want a human balance humanly
Acquired, fruitful in the common hour.*

CP pg40

He wishes to be a poet of human relationships and serve humanity in his own humble way. We perceive his uncanny efforts in trying to restructure his relationship with the self. In this kind of neo humanism Ezekiel's preoccupation with man's predicament is clearly visible.

Commenting upon his multifaceted approach Gieve Patel opines, 'Notwithstanding the regularity with which the words God and soul occur in these poems, Ezekiel is not primarily a religious poet. If he were it might have been a simple matter to accept him as a seeker of divinity; and then study him as such. But he holds discomfiting truck with matters concerning this world. Sexual passion compulsively holds sway and is often given full rein. The daily business of living, day to day mundane irritations, large and small angers, large and small enjoyments, moral quibbles and philosophy of the hour share equal space with God. However, He remains a persistent presence, coming up every few pages later, just as we and the poet had all but forgotten Him^[1]. Gieve Patel, "Introduction" Ezekiel Nissim, *Collected Poems* (Delhi: oxford, 1989), pXVii.

The poets of the pre-independence era definitely indulged in love poetry but avoided treating the physical dimensions involved in a relationship between a man and a woman. In fact love has always been an irresistible theme in ancient Indian poetry, a sentiment which is all pervasive. But love and sex breathe in an atmosphere of rare frankness in his poetry. And this theme of love and sex as a predominant theme cannot be imagined without the existence of a feminine character justifying why Ezekiel's poetry abounds in the image of a woman in a very characteristic manner. On commenting upon his early love poems he claims that they are not merely love poems: "if I seem to 'advocate' male-female relationship, I am surely in a perennial human tradition that cuts across all national and cultural boundaries" [2].

"In Love With Poetry" Youth Times, Vol. VIII, No. 17 Feb 1-14, 1980,17.

There are more women characters in his poetry than can be evidenced in the poetry of any other Indian poet with highly sensuous and vehement descriptions of the human body. The charms of the female body and the pleasures of love making are characterized by extreme sincerity. Sex for him becomes the carrier of very blessed moments. He unmistakably believes in the weaknesses that the flesh has inherited but at the same time seeks a synthesis of the body and soul, both the extrinsic and intrinsic bearing of life.

The conspicuous image of a woman peeps into his poems dealing with the insistent themes of love, sexuality, marriage etc. In a letter to Anisur Rahman Ezekiel confides that "there is a frequent focusing on and preoccupation with pagan woman in my poetry" [3].

{Anisur Rahman Form and Value in the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel p.43 Abhinav publication. New Delhi}

In poem after poem we witness a palpable image of a woman that blows up like a sudden wind from the south, hot and tempestuous. These sensations of melting and softening in the warmth of flesh press against the protagonists in his earlier poems. The portrayal of the unconventional pagan woman in *An Affair* and *For Love's Record* can only be interpreted as the poet's mature tolerance and emphatic acceptance of a woman's carnal desires. When Ezekiel projects this aspect of a female's personality he also means to vociferously propound that even a woman has a right to her body undermining social censor and subjection to constraints of religious sanctions. Ezekiel intends to emphasize on the myriad dimensions of a woman's compulsion.

*When the female animal no longer
Haunts the bed in flesh or dream
'Something to Pursue'*

CP pg18

Ezekiel believed that the apparent paradox of the mundane and the mystical is organically related to one another. Spiritual destiny can be acquired only after undertaking the rigors of the temporal journey. He takes a perfectly affirmative view of life with its simple, emotional, spiritual and sensuous pleasures. Ezekiel supports uninhibited enjoyment of the flesh. He believes that Sanskrit poets who wrote of 'breasts and buttocks' are his poetic ancestors. These love poems add to the wholesomeness and unity of his experimentative and explorative poetic growth.

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. Ezekiel is neither a Platonist nor a romantic dreamer. He never rejected the claims of the body and love and sex constitute the equivocal unusual plan. He tries to fathom the intricacies of a relationship with a woman in all earnestness and by his own indulgence in the act. The body of a woman is one of the wonders of creation. It is sometimes extremely sacred and sometimes extremely sensual. Ezekiel is acutely aware of the claims of the flesh and the demands of desire but there is always a sincere attempt to transcend the physical act of sex and experience something nobler and ethereal.

A Raghu says 'though one gains the impression that the speakers in some of his poems are not complete strangers to brothels, the professional prostitute is conspicuous by her absence from Ezekiel's poetry, thus offering a contrast to the work of 'Jayant Mahapatra' into which whores walk quite freely, to say that Ezekiel sees in woman nothing more than her physical fabric is untrue' [4] A Raghu, "The poetry of N.E" Atlantic publishers and Distributors, New Delhi (2002) 35. Thus it is entirely unjust to tag him merely as a poet of flesh. In *Poet, Lover, Bird watcher* he calls woman 'myths of light', a butterfly of light who elevates and illumines earthy existence.

*And there the women slowly turn around,
Not only flesh and bone but myths of light* CP pg135

In many of his poems Ezekiel speaks about the recurrence of the desires and fervent temptation of sex and love making-- something that cannot be undermined. He captures beautifully the essence of lust, passion, the uncertainty and sheer adrenaline that sex conjures up. *The Old Abyss* candidly portrays his need for gratification and indulgence in physical appetites. His protagonist never shy's away from his biological urges.

*This girl, once married, with a child,
But now alone, torments
The men she knows
With such magnificence in movement
(I have died beholding it)
They see the old abyss again---
Desire with object near and far.* CP pg48

But in *Love Sonnet* he has very delicately depicted the triumphant mood of young lovers:

*This café, on the hill, among the birds
could house a passing cloud.
The city's lights
Are coming on.
You and I wait for words;
Our love has formed like dew on summer nights.* CP pg120

Such purely amorous encounters between the lovers without raw sexual intimacies and insistent carnality bring forth Ezekiel's unusual insight for sophistication and savoir-faire. He stresses on the lovers deep emotional desires to connect

with the beloved romantically. For him intimacy offers deep communication, friendship, and long lasting sharing. The protagonist conducts himself graciously, bestowing upon the beloved utmost courtesy and attentiveness. He seems to have developed a sense of appreciation in the relationship.

On similarly it is quite surprising to see Ezekiel advocating sacredness in the institution of marriage. He seems to emphasize that the basis of happy and fulfilling married life is the sense of unity, intimacy and love --- physical, mental and spiritual. It is not only for self indulgence but is considered a lifelong social and spiritual responsibility helping partners grow into soul mates. Though married life may lead to indifference its sanctity needs to be preserved. In the concluding section of *To A Certain Lady* Ezekiel comes with a philosophical realization.

*Always we must be lovers,
Man and wife at work upon the hard
Mass of material which is the world* CP pg30

Though he presents a world distinctly split into male and female realms he believes in the solidarity of gender. Things can never be purely black or purely white but there are always complex emotional shades of grey to be appreciated. Through an explorer's mind he discusses and unapologetically affirms satanic indulges on the one hand and a dutifully sanctioned fidelity on the other. He stresses on the centrality of love and trust.

*Between the acts of wedded love
A quieter passion flows,
Which keeps the nuptial pattern firm
As passion comes and goes,
And in the soil of weeded love rears a white rose* CP pg46

Through his considerable rhetorical skill he simultaneously underscores and attacks the antifeminist traditions of the time. With a vast array of cultural and ethnical perspectives he breathed in a fresh air of intellectual rationalism insisting on a break from the past. Though at times the women in his verse may be adjusted to conform to the protagonist's needs and may be treated as playthings Ezekiel never tried to look at women through a huge haze of distortions and cheap mystifications. He endorses his credence not only in a girl's flesh but also in a woman's spirit. He understands the various nuances of a relationship with faith and feelings. With absolute acumen he comprehends that a man woman relationship is not only a lifelong love alliance but an institution that encompasses many other equations of life.

Further in *A Time To Change* Ezekiel focuses on the serenity and tranquility of life which could be attained in the company of a wife and family.

*"To own a singing voice and a talking voice
A bit of land, a woman and a child or two"* CP pg3

Ezekiel avoids the specious linguistic elaborateness but makes a mark and transfers even the casual and ordinary into a compelling and crucial necessity. This is another of his

confessional poetry wherein he believes in the strength of his personal lived experience.

Ezekiel considered his marriage with Daisy as 'the worst mistake of all'. Ezekiel with all his charms and a number of flamboyant affairs certainly failed to have a romantic relationship with his wife. He found himself repeatedly being swept off his feet by his feelings for women. Thus we see him longing for stability and loyalty. Marriage and romance were not harmoniously in tune with each other. In his marriage with daisy, romance remained peripheral. He was disillusioned and had a strong desire to escape. He wished for a woman who would anchor him to the security and serenity of life. R. Raj Rao also believes that "In advocating caution and moderation, rather than brashness and violence, Nissim was settling for the familiar 'middle path', which to some of his friends (Toni Patel, for instance) is responsible for the lifelong suffering he brought on himself. These friends feel that if he was dissatisfied with his marriage, he should have divorced Daisy and set both of them free"^[5]. Nissim Ezekiel, *The Authorized Biography*. R. Raj.Rao. Viking, Penguin Books India 2000. Pg 170

This pain of loneliness is highlighted in *Virginal*. The woman protagonist with her profound longings and yearnings is very sympathetically dealt with by Ezekiel. The poem explores the agonizing loneliness of a single woman who lives in denial, and who has reconciled to the societal inhibitions but deep within longs for a lover and a child.

*Your face suggests that you are reconciled.
Its gentle sadness as it slowly grew
And crushed your liveliness, Oppressed me too.
The universe is much too small to hold
You're longing for a lover and a child.* CP pg139

The protagonist has compromised with her situation but for a woman to repeatedly subsume her wishes and needs to such state of affairs in one's life is definitely not healthy. Ezekiel evinces a rare eye for such marginalized women who have given away prioritizing their own desires. Through his poetry he seems to propound that women need to withdraw from social and cultural constraints and be vocal about these primal experiences. He believes that there are few states in life more wretched than the state of being unloved.

Chetan Karnani gives credit to Ezekiel for his genuine human interest:" He shows the same human concern in 'Virginal' where he tries to create a picture of sympathy for one who has denied herself the play of her natural instincts. Ezekiel's portrait is unlike that of Pope. The latter's attack on dowagers -- "Alive, ridiculous and dead, forget" -- was bitter and satiric in its tone. But Ezekiel feels pity for the ageing virgin who is remote from prospect of the wedding kiss and first tunes a radio or reads a book to put up with her listless existence"^[6] pg 82. Nissim Ezekiel. Arnold Heinemann publishers (India) private limited.

Nissim Ezekiel has a unique observant disposition. In *In India* he has drawn a perfect image of Indian women depicting their shyness and traditional apprehensive attitude. These women in the party are averse to western culture of kissing their male friends and maintain their dignity and gravity in all earnestness.

*“The wives of India sit apart
They do not drink,
They do not talk
Of course, they do not kiss.
The men are quite at home
Among the foreign styles
(What fun the flirting is!)
I myself, decorously,
Press a thigh or two in shy innocence.
The party is a great success”.* CP pg133

The projection of a woman here is very dramatic. She too wants to enjoy but some religious and moral assumptions prevent her from doing so. The poet presents this conflict between the ideal and the sensual beautifully.

*This she said to herself
As she sat at the table
With the English boss,
Is IT. This is the promise:
The long evenings
In the large apartment
With cold bear and Western music
Lucid talk of art and literature,
And of all the changes Indian needs* CP pg133

The woman no longer wishes to be a wilting damsel. She is a completely admirable and a compelling personality. Through the protagonist Ezekiel depicts the changes in Indian society making an argument for female assertion and a woman's right to control her body and aspirations. Traditional cultural practices such as enforced modesty and chastity have placed severe restrictions on a woman trying to nullify her sexuality. But Ezekiel is insisting on a break from the past by reassessing the accepted norms and insisting that sexual desire in women can be totally normal. His woman protagonist does not wish to accept these impositions placidly. Here the woman is not impersonated within the man's defined sexual norms.

Linda Hess rightly calls Ezekiel “A poet of the body; and an endless explorer of the labyrinths of the minds, the devious delving and twisting of the ego, and the ceaseless attempt of man and poet to define himself to find through all the myth and maze a way to honesty and love”^[7].

Linda Hess: ‘Post independence Indian Poetry in English’ (Quest 49, 1966) P32.

There is certainly a great interest in sex and a freer and franker discussion of it. *Love Song, Marriage Poem, The Old Abyss* and many such poems are throbbing with uninhibited sex. Ezekiel as a passionate votary of unrestrained exuberance proves how efforts to suppress our physical urges could be futile. In *The scriptures* the poet takes a very modernist view of the situation and proposes a healthy release of these sexual urges. Without trivializing the issue with salacious and sordid love scenes he contemplates with rare sophistication. Though his protagonists seek indulgences in physical appetites Ezekiel should be appreciated for his aesthetics. Likewise in *Declaration* he shows a genuine concern for the demands of the body, but he also believes that physical and emotional aspects of sexuality include bonds between individuals that is expressed through profound feelings of love, trust and care.

*Obedience to a comprehended law is freedom, peace and power. Creation moves in submission timelessly.
Unyielding men are broken by the hours’.* CP pg 34

Conversely he could at times be very indelicate and unrefined while treating women as things to be apprehended. Comparing vases and women in the same breath is too crass and greatly insensitive. He refers to a woman as a possession who is clubbed along with material possessions. Such sham-casual and flippant remarks on women only prove his superior masculine reason.

*That women, trees, tables, waves, and birds,
Buildings, stones, steamrollers,
Cats and clocks
Are here to be enjoyed.* CP pg 96

Such poems strike us as being less subtle but he is only singing the song of every man's youth. Ezekiel seems to be voicing the prejudices of his age and the general masculine self consciousness. He too belonged to a world endorsing values and prejudices of the past. His female protagonists were majestic ways of defining men. Ezekiel could not remain immune to the infection of beliefs and attitudes of his age. Such derisory portrayal of women has earned him much contempt from feminist quarters. It is hardly surprising that Ezekiel should be condemned by feminists on account of this incriminating evidence. But the eloquence, virtuosity and intensity of these verses is exemplary inspiring fascination, admiration and dedication. Debunking verses as abusive and opprobrious to womankind is only misinterpretation of his innocuous efforts to depict a woman's features in diverse ways.

All his verses so pervasively embody all that Ezekiel stands for. When we remind ourselves of the deep and profound knowledge of a true traditional woman that he has drawn in *The Night of the Scorpion* he can be easily exonerated of all such allegations. The exoticism that he attributes to the feminine body remains outside and in comes the recognition and awareness of a true woman with its unmistakable image of an ‘Indian Mother’. The Poem depicts the pain and suffering of the mother of the poet who is stung by a scorpion. The mother's reaction after her recovery is a symbol of motherhood and its sublime nature.

“My mother only said;

Thank god the scorpion picked on me and spared my children” CP pg131

Ezekiel has drawn a very emotionally poignant and a stirring image of a mother. How her love knew no law, how it dares all things and crushes down remorselessly all that stands in its path. How the mother displays nobility of character and selfless love all has been aptly presented. She is a teacher of compassion, love and fearlessness. This touching representation of a simple rural mother is quite contradictory to the nudity depicted in the love making scenes in poems like *Lines* where the protagonist exudes bohemian insistence on the claims of the flesh.

*Unmask the mind, know the hardness
Of the hidden and oppressive bone,
Locate the source of shallow breath,
Hear the throb of loins in love.
Listen to the secret marrow,
Lung and liver speak the word,
Accept the long tormented breath
And tremble in the thick of love.*

Cp pg 43

Sanjit Mishra objects: The Animality best defined by living on the sensual plane imputed to woman who is on the lookout for her innocent victim the man, hypnotized and helpless is unfair to womankind even from the Neo- Classical norms. No abuse can be more insulting than comparing a substantial section of humanity to animals and thereby ignoring their innate potentialities “to regain the blissful seat of heaven”^[8]. [Poetic Art of Nissim Ezekiel P.52] Women’s sexuality is evaluated and criticized in every era with society peddling opinions about what women are expected to feel and participate when it comes to sex. Various aspects and dimensions of female sexuality have been addressed not only by principles of crassly physical but by principles of ethics, morality and theology. In almost every historical era the arts present a ‘substantion views on human sexuality which also includes implicitly or explicitly female sexuality.

Next Ezekiel alludes to various associational images in an attempt to bring about the exotic beauty, appeal and winsomeness of a woman’s body. A Raghu of observes: ‘Ezekiel looks at women not merely as a lover looks at his beloved but also as a botanist looks at a flower’. As a botanist dissects and studies every part of a flower Ezekiel also takes a look at a woman and dissects her body. His words are his instruments. In ‘Motives’ he refers to ‘your body’ and dreamily explains

*I dwell on it
As on a landscape
Or a beloved painting*

CP pg 154

Authenticity rings true in his poetry. He has displayed absolute maturity and poise while displaying his innate ability to feel the urgency and importunity of ordinary events. Rooted firmly in the personal and social experiences his art transformed the prosaic into poetry, earthly into heavenly and the worldly into wonderful. Many of his poems have autobiographical overtones graduating from his earlier emphasis on the physical to the later speculations on the philosophical. ‘Poem of the Separation’ is one such love lyric contending greater disengagement, subtlety and wisdom.

Simplicity is the most striking feature of Ezekiel’s poetry. His lines are clean and direct lending the worse an ease and modesty as his verse acquires a rare elementariness and singleness. His poetry abounds in contrasting images of women, she could be savage and superb on the one hand and an emblem of our traditional Indian society on the other. His woman protagonist is an embodiment of deep contradictions: bad and beautiful, holy and sinful and conventional and radical.

The high watermark of the poet’s talent lies in the various engaging pictures of a noble old woman, a coy damsel, a

submissive mistress, a lady of the house, a seducer, or a benevolent mother. His work is replete with a series of continuous and interdependent pictures exquisitely balanced. Indians seem to suffer deep anxieties about the precariousness of the image of a woman wherein they fascinatingly adore an erect and immaculate image. But very remorselessly Ezekiel did not corroborate this dominant image of a woman in Indian imagination.

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