

TREATMENT OF HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS IN NISSIM EZEKIEL'S POETRY: A THEME OF LOVE, SEX AND MARRIAGE

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Abstract:

“He is a poet of the body...who has explored sexual love in all its myriad 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....”

Linda Hess

Most probably, Ezekiel derived inspiration for writing verses from his parents who basically belonged to Israel. The theme of alienation remained central to his work for some time. He found himself in the past to be “a refugee.../ of the spirit” in a “loved and troubled country/ which is my home and enemy”..... “in my bitter native city. He reconciled to his fate taking India for his home, as a last resort. Ezekiel is a very Indian poet, completely Indian in his sensibility. As an upholder of ancient Indian social and moral values, he is quite optimistic that everything in India is coming slowly- ‘Regeneration, Remuneration, Contraception’.

No doubt, the acceptance of Indian reality is an important characteristic of Ezekiel's poetry. Against the background of Indian sensibility, he treats the themes of love and sex which occupy a conspicuous place in his poetry and which he has dealt with carefully in all its varieties-expression, meeting, indulgence, fulfillment, consummation, fear, possessiveness, passion, surrender, thrill, excitement, joy and impatience. Ezekiel is conscious of the urge of flesh. He is the poet of body and an endless explorer into labyrinth of the flesh and desire. Delving deep into human psychology, Ezekiel says whereas man's motive is sexual, love is an appetite to a woman. In sexual union, the colour of the skin- white, black or grey; the size of eyes or breasts does not matter for a man, only sex matters. He seeks pleasure in flesh and not in spiritual beauty. Similarly, Ezekiel reveals the psyche of a woman in his poem “Appetite”. He writes that she too is for lust.

However, Ezekiel believes that love and sex have refreshing power. They are stimulant and motivating factors thus we can observe Ezekiel's Indian sensibility in his treatment of human relationships. In other sphere of life, he also has a feel of Indian culture, a convention that guides people's attitude, behavior and movement. He always takes himself to be an Indian national, a piece of Indian soil.

Key Words- Indian sensibility, love, physical need, values, relationship.

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Nissim Ezekiel, born of Jewish (Bene-Israel) parents, is one of the most notable poets in Indian English tradition. He has so far published six collections of poems besides a considerable number of essays and articles. For much of his success he feels indebted to his parents who were sincerely devoted to the cause of education. Secondly, his profession as a teacher of English Literature

for a number of years at Bombay University shaped his literary personality. Besides being a poet, he is a renowned critic of arts and literature. His poems have been published by Oxford University Press in 1989 in one volume under the title 'The Collected Poems of Nissim Ezekiel 1952-1988'. He has also edited Quest, Imprint, Poetry India (Six Issues), The Indian P.E.N. and books including The Emerson Reader, A Martin Luther King Reader and Writing in India. His articles have appeared in prestigious journals and newspapers like Span, Quest, Observer, Fulcrum, The Sunday Statesman Free Press Bulletin and Indian Writers in Conference etc. However, he is the pioneer of new poetry in Indian English. K.R.S.Iyengar writes:

Nissim Ezekiel is the sea green incorruptible among the 'new Poets', almost the equivalent of a poets' poet for them.¹

Most probably, Ezekiel derived inspiration for writing verses from his parents who basically belonged to Israel. The theme of alienation remained central to his work for some time. He found himself in the past to be "a refugee.../ of the spirit" in a "loved and troubled country/ which is my home and enemy"..... "in my bitter native city." M.K.Naik comments on his theme of alienation:

".....substantially alienated from the core of the Indian ethos, Ezekiel is acutely aware of this alienation being accentuated by the fact that he has spent most of his life in highly westernized circle in cosmopolitan Bombay."²

Fortunately, Ezekiel came under the influence of great thinkers and writers like M.N.Roy, C.E.M Joad, Auden and T.S. Eliot. He learnt his poetic art from T.S. Eliot and Auden whom he often recalls in his early verses. He thought himself a refugee and in his pursuit to find his roots he roamed here, there and everywhere. But he could attain the consolation of being an integral part of any particular land. He reconciled to his fate taking India for his home, as a last resort. Ezekiel is a very Indian poet, completely Indian in his sensibility. As an upholder of ancient Indian social and moral values, he is quite optimistic that everything in India is coming slowly- 'Regeneration, Remuneration, Contraception'.

M.K. Naik writes: "A refuge of the spirit" in search of his 'dim identity' which in Different moods appears to him to be either a 'one man lunatic asylum' or 'a small deserted holy place', Ezekiel experiments with three different solutions to his problems. In a more generous mood, he gives himself the testimonial of being 'a good native' and tells himself..... 'I cannot leave this island/ I was born here and belong. My backward place is where I am.'³

No doubt, the acceptance of Indian reality is an important characteristic of Ezekiel's poetry. Against the background of Indian sensibility, he treats the themes of love and sex which occupy a conspicuous place in his poetry and which he has dealt with carefully in all its varieties- expression, meeting, indulgence, fulfillment, consummation, fear, possessiveness, passion, surrender, thrill, excitement, joy and impatience. Ezekiel is conscious of the urge of flesh. He is the poet of body and an endless explorer into labyrinth of the flesh and desire. Admittedly, he is endowed with strong poetic skill for depicting picturesquely the physical features of a woman. Just as the English poet John Keats has described the feminine charm of a woman in his poem 'La Belle Dame Sense Merci', similarly in his poem 'Description', Ezekiel too has given a pen portrait of a woman. His description seems to be satirical against the background of Indian norms of morality. He writes:-

"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 a wonder
 of hair, secret

.....

Reluctantly
 Binding up your hair”⁴

The poet’s aesthetic sense may be observed in the description of various things in the light of his fascination for beauty suffused with romance and love. In his sensuous word picture of urban maidens’ he exhibits that he has observed the world of romance very keenly which is guided by Indian sensibility. He gives voice to a young lover’s feeling for his beloved. He writes satirically:

“Beneath your dress I find you young
 Rewarding to my explorations, certain,
 Soft and flowing,
 And tender to the touch, love.”⁵

Ezekiel maintains that real beauty, which is eternal, is insignificant to a romantic youth. He worships only the physical charms. Ezekiel puts it:

“But you are old,
 With the shop soiled wisdom
 Of drawing rooms and dowagers
 You are not sky, nor river
 You are not river
 You are city-cramped, my love
 Only flesh remains what it was meant to be.”⁶

Delving deep into human psychology, Ezekiel says whereas man’s motive is sexual, love is an appetite to a woman. In sexual union, the colour of the skin- white, black or grey; the size of eyes or breasts does not matter for a man, only sex matters. He seeks pleasure in flesh and not in spiritual beauty. Similarly, Ezekiel reveals the psyche of a woman in his poem “Appetite”. He writes that she too is for lust. Poet compares her with an animal or bird who does not understand the real price of true love. They only need sex not love. Ezekiel says:

“She- animal
 She- bird
 She- insolence
 burning herself consciousness
 in friend and timely lover
 or even startled stranger
 solid fare-she said
 and ordered more”⁷

However, Ezekiel believes that love and sex have refreshing power. They are stimulant and motivating factors. At times, he feels disillusioned with the hardships of life. At that time the

attractions of women help to overcome his despair. Ezekiel calls the union of bodies “scheduled flight”, “bumpy ride” and “perfect landing” in flight. He realizes that physical pleasures are worth enjoying and that this union of bodies must lead to stronger ties beyond sex. In Indian’s tradition ridden families relationships are very sensitive. Ezekiel deals with ideal man- woman relationship in his poem “Sparrow”. He admits that love making is the root of happiness, he writes:

“I fancy this and then I face
The facts- the mating and the nest
Primeval root of all the rest”⁸

Ezekiel may be recognized as a poet of ordinary human situations and common human relationships. He picks up ordinary human characters and common events from Indian life to make the theme of his poetry. Out of these common human conditions, he has sought to compose some of his poems. He has focused his attention largely on family relationship. The three important parts of family- children, wife and parents find proper place for discussion in his poetry. Admittedly, more than any other Indian English poet, Ezekiel has highlighted various aspects of family life which is storehouse of humanism. One learns the lesson of sympathy, kindness, service and sacrifice from family. However, there are some glaring defects of family life. The poems related with family life have the touch of gentle humour and irony. The most prominent event of human life is marriage which he treats conspicuously in several of his poems. His poem “Marriage” reveals two aspects of marital life. At the first stage, the newly married couple feels satisfied. They enjoy each other’s company happily:

“Lovers, when they marry, face
Eternity with touching grace
Complacent at being fated
Never to be separated
The bride is always pretty, the groom
A lucky man. The darkened room
Roars out of joy of flesh and blood
The use of nakedness is good”⁹

But soon happy fate begins to slip away. All the joys are transitory. The marital joy, peace and complacency gradually lose charm. The game of hide and seek begins. The use of irony is remarkable:

“The bride-groom begins to realize
....many times we came
Apart, we came together , the same
Thing over and over again
The suddenly the mark of Cain
Began to show on her and me”¹⁰

Ezekiel observes how the male-partner soon after his marriage, begins to repent over his marital status. He realizes his ‘hamartia’ and feels damned. ‘Beginning with a foolish love affair’ he enters into marital bond, enjoys, repents and resigns, his marriage proves bringer of disappointments and frustrations. Ezekiel reveals the harsh reality of married life in its true spirit. The bride-groom’s dreams of marital harmony, joy and peace are soon shattered. He moves to and fro in search of jobs and roams about with vain hopes. In this respect the poet’s suggestive idea brings a ray of hope to him when he meets an experienced wise man who advises him:

“The pattern will remain, unless you break
It with a sudden jerk, but use your head
Not all returned as heroes who had fled
In wanting both to have and eat the cake.
Not all who fail are counted with the fake”¹¹

Ezekiel asserts that every married couple has to face and undergo the same kind of circumstances. The ordinariness and sameness of experiences always spoil the charm of married life. The poet seeks to portray skillfully the- anti romantic attitude towards married life. Ezekiel’s observation of every aspect of marital status with keen journalist’s eye is based on experience. His poem “To A Certain Lady” unravels the mystery of love and marriage. He presents a true account of woman’s gesture and behavior in the process of love making:

“At first you hesitated in your white blouse
And skirt of velvet, soft as hair,
But finally arrived in nakedness,
So, Now to meet the future,
Drop your fear and come with me,
The best defense in love is just defenselessness.”¹²

Poet then comes to reveal the mysteries of the mature stage of love and writes in a direct and simple language that joys derived out of love begin to change; a distance becomes perceptible between the two. In place of warmth, there is ‘absence and quarrels, indifference’ which begin to suck ‘like a leech upon the flesh.’ There is only a ‘crude acceptance of the need for one another.’ They seem mechanical in ‘tasteless encounters in the dark.’ What remains is simple ‘companionship with neither love nor hate’. Ezekiel writes:

“By an image are redeemed,
By a mode of love expanding to a way of life,
In high gentleness and power from the perfect will
Enduring all and coming through at last
From a not-this, not-that to the final goal.”¹³

Ezekiel comes worried about the harmony, good-will and mutual understanding in the sphere of domestic life. He believes that husband and wife can play a vital role in creating an atmosphere of trust, peace and acceptance for the smooth running of family life. Such an attitude would strengthen their sweet relation and encourage them to render best possible service to the progress and prosperity of family. Whatever they do, their integrity and sincerity should be clear and spotless. Ezekiel takes up the bright aspect of married life where husband and wife develop mutual understanding. They love, understand and co-operate with each other. They share each other’s feelings and bear the mild yoke of the domestic liabilities on the true spirit. Then the stage of the indulgence in physical pleasure is over, and the mature stage of family life arrives. The sincere husband and wife take delight in the best kind of upbringing of their children. The father still thinks “he is the unfinished man” but he prays to God for better prospects. Ezekiel gives voice to the feeling of such a father:

“protect my children
from my secret wish

to make them over
 in my image and illusions
 let them love
 to the music that they love
 dissonant perhaps to me.”¹⁴

Marital disharmony at times, seems to be an integral part of the whole drama of married life. The stage happens to come when husband and wife are fed up with marital joys. Ezekiel believes that the happiness of married life does not last long nor are the pleasures of love permanent. He seems to accept life as a bundle of sorrows and suffering more than a storehouse of happiness. The warmth and intensity of love fades shortly after happens to taste it. Mutual affection is reduced to satiety, and frustration comes as its sequel. The poet describes, with a touch of humour, the gloomy aspect of married life, when the husband seems ready to give back what he received or enjoyed earlier. In the poem “Jewish Wedding in Bombay”, he lays threadbare the grievance of a husband:

“During our first serious marriage quarrel
 She said why did
 You take my virginity from home?
 I would gladly have
 Returned it, but not one of the books
 I had read instructed me how”¹⁵

Ezekiel has very minutely and maturely analyzed various stages and aspects of love, marriage and sex against the background of Indian social ethos. The partners have to sacrifice a lot to win each other. He admits the presence of self-sacrificing sublimity in love, sex and marriage. These, according to him, are the basis of human relationship. It seems that he is constantly growing as a man and poet. Stability becomes the substitute for instability, tolerance for intolerance, maturity for immaturity and faith for unfaithfulness. At later stage, he depicts their actions and reactions as those of responsible parents. They carry out their duties sincerely. Ezekiel’s “Poster Poems” highlight all situations of family life. He pays respectful homage to his professor- father who inspired him to be a man. “Poster Poems”, “Cows”, “Night of the Scorpion” and “Daughter’s Illness” presents mature stage of married life. Dr. Satish Kumar comments on the theme of the poem, “Night of the Scorpion” and writes:

“Night of the Scorpion integrates the family with the community, the superstitions with the rational, the concern of the father, the children and the neighbor for the mother’s strong love for her children.”¹⁶

Ezekiel has experienced the realities of domestic life. He has witnessed a number of ups and down. He observes that generally married people face the same kind of troubles and complaints. They experience the fever and fret of the world. They cry, groan and sigh. Ezekiel, in his family poems, gives expression to the human sorrows and suffering in domestic sphere of life, and reveals frankly and conspicuously the comedy and tragedy of human relationship. He conceals nothing from the world. There is note of confession in his poems. Some critics hold the view that he is at best when he writes in an ironic mode and when he is writing below, he, at times, lapses into faded romanticism, e.g. tumult of despair. But M.K. Naik writes:

“A happy use of cool understatement (e.g. ‘A certain happiness would be to die’) and lapidary quality have made him one of the most quotable poets of his

generation(e.g. ‘home is where we have to gather grace’) though hardly a poet with the shatteringly original image, he employs the extended metaphor effectively poems like “Enterprise”¹⁷

Sensuousness is another notable feature of Ezekiel’s love poems especially his early poems. Gestures, actions and body language give the feel of warmth and intensity of love. He seems willing to take pains to delve deep into the psyche of the lovers as well as husband and wife. He makes sincere attempts to observe the aspirations of male and female partners. However, at a later stage, the intensity of love is diminished. K.R. Srinivas Iyengar’s remark may be cited in support of the view:

“Ezekiel’s poems, as a rule lucid- a merit of the days, are splendidly evocative and satisfyingly sensuous. In the first two volumes, poems and places, memoirs and situations, literary echoes and moments of vision, all inspired Ezekiel to poetic utterance. He was poignantly aware of the flesh, its insistent urges, its stark ecstasies, its disturbing filiations with the mind.”¹⁸

Indian sages advocate a combination of love and maturity in married lives. India traditionally is a country where love happens after marriage and is handled with full commitment and conviction. In Indian culture marriages are considered to be destined in heaven and been followed on earth. It is not men and women who marry; it is rather a marriage of two families more over two different cultures. Physical love or consummation of love in the form of sex is considered to give birth to children for expanding the clan. No doubt, Ezekiel’s later poetry highlights human relationships in a fairly balanced and judicious manner. He exhibits signs of maturity and wisdom in the treatment of subjects. Urges of flesh are replaced by rationality, intellectuality and wisdom. The lovers, husband and wife are guided more by mutual understanding than by sentiments. Emotional approach to win each other’s heart is substituted by judicious, timely decisions; mind begins to dominate the heart.

Domestic relations are different in cities from those in villages as is reflected in Ezekiel’s poetry also. However, filial love is guided by parental sensibility everywhere. “Night of Scorpion” deals with the response of parents. The members of the family apply different methods to treat the lady stung by scorpion. The father prescribes herbal treatment while the mother believes in the treatment given by a local quack. But she thanks God for sparing her children. John Thieme comments on the event keeping in mind the motherly sensibility and human relationship:

“Night of the Scorpion” drawn on an incident from his youth, is most obviously an account of his parent’s response to his mother being stung by a scorpion culminating as it does with his mother saying, ‘Thank God’, the scorpion picked on me and spared my children.....”¹⁹

Ezekiel has raised the issue of values artistically. One can witness clash of values in and the same family. The poet’s father (since it is an autobiographical poem), believes in medical science but his mother is conservative lady who believes in the magical effects of *mantras* and local treatment. It evinces her in Indian method of treating and removing the poisonous effect of scorpion-sting. In spite of the fact that father is a responsible person and runs the family smoothly, he does not utter a word about the safety of his children while the mother who suffers severe pain, thinks of the welfare and happiness of her children and thanks God for defending them. However in spite views, they live together happily. John Thieme interprets the incident in some other way:

“Yet it also provides a powerful depiction of conflicting belief – system coming

into dialogue during a moment of family crisis, with his father's rationalism being influenced by the simple piety of the Hindu villagers, who provides a chorus of commentary on the consequences of a scorpion-sting. As such it is a piece that is typical of Ezekiel's verses both a very personal poem and a social poem that investigate the relationship between different social strata."²⁰

Indian belief haunts the minds of the peasants and the members of family. Some of them chant prayers, others say that her previous sins might be paralyzed, implicitly declaring that the event is likely to have been the outcome of some evil done by her. Commenting on Ezekiel's Indian sensibility, Bijay kumar Das writes:

"Ezekiel here evokes the Indian belief that the previous birth as well as the next birth, after one's death are determined by one's *karma*. The protagonist's father has different notions of life so he disregards the farmers' superstitions and puts a match to a little paraffin."²¹

Ezekiel changes his themes from conventional to unconventional subjects like love, sex, city and self, but he depicts them in the light of Indian sensibility. Leela Gandhi glorifies Ezekiel's Indian sensibility and writes:

"But what of Indianness and nation - love in all this? Both are amply manifest in Ezekiel's writing, as elsewhere in accomplished Indo-Anglian poetry."²²

Thus we can observe Ezekiel's Indian sensibility in his treatment of human relationships. In other sphere of life, he also has a feel of Indian culture, a convention that guides people's attitude, behavior and movement. He always takes himself to be an Indian national, a piece of Indian soil.

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