

## **ROLE OF SOCIAL RELATION IN THE PLAY OF NISSIM EZEKIEL**

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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 presents the human experiences knowingness relationships filled with struggles and miseries through his poetry, Ezekiel draws the cognizance about living creatures and shows how he symbolizes the polluted society by its condition. 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, Man- Women,, emotional themes, suffering of human.

Man-woman relationship is as old as human existence. It was, (in olden times,) a biological necessity. The present sophistication of it is an addition of civilization. In literature, which is a reflection of life it forms the core. Right from the ancient epics and legends, literary endeavor effect has been to portray this relationship along with its co-occurrence, and to bring out the tragedy or otherwise resulting from it. Fiction, the most characteristic and powerful form of literary expression in modern times, also hinges on it. It is "one of the staples of the European novel,"<sup>1</sup> and occupies a similar position in modern Indo-English fiction which is generally taken to be an offspring of the former. Ezekiel is one of the post-Independence India's finest poets, and much of the strength of his writing lies in its individuality. While his earliest verse bears the imprint of his European Modernist influences, the more mature Ezekiel is a poet whose verse defies easy categorization. His distinctive poetic practice draws on a range of traditions--Judaic and Hindu, ancient and modern, Western and Eastern – creating a highly personal. Indian landscape, albeit one that also has broader resonances as an embodiment of Post- Independence secularism. Ezekiel's thematic range is very wide. He keeps his mind and ear open and tries to be an objective in his approach. He accepts life on life's terms. He does not idealize life nor denigrate it either. To use Eliot's phrase, he 'sees life steadily and sees it whole'. Love, city and self are the major pre-occupations of Ezekiel in his early writing. Unrequited love and resultant disappointment dominate the mood of his early poetry. Torment of the flesh and the spirit

resulting from the unfulfilled love governs the poet's attitude to life. 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 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 surroundings milieu. He is "a poet of the city" (Hess, 3). To Ezekiel, the imagery of nature symbolizes the pure and tranquil state of being an 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 (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 are 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 the experience of life and his people live amidst us. They belong to a modernized urban world. There is a problem of search for truth and love in this world of deception and corruption. Subjected to the parlaying 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 chinidandu” (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: “To own a singing voice and talking voice, A bit of land, a woman and a child or two, Accommodated to their needs and changing moods, And patiently to build a life with these” (JSAL 12).

Ezekiel’s concept of love transcends the bonds of matrimony.

The following lines of

“I told the Thames” reveal this concept: I told the Thames I was afraid, Attracted to Another maid. Beside the Thames I watched the waves, And I was one Of passions’s slaves. (Collected Poems )

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 sympathizes 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).

Thus there is a comprehensive portrayal of man-woman relationship in Malgonkar's novels. He speaks of what it was in the medieval period in India, and how it extended to the modern times without much change. He describes how superstitions and infidelity affected conjugal relationships. We are given a beautiful picture of how some women reacted to male chauvinism and how others acceded to it. As a novelist with a keen observation of life, he analyses the reasons for happy and unhappy marital lives. With the keen insight of a psychologist, he portrays pre-marital and extra-marital relationships, and shows sex as the primary instinct in man-woman relationships. He has a clear and correct understanding of the working of the masculine and feminine mind. He portrays the frivolous attitude of man who casts away women like worn-out shoes in the presence of new ones. He shows that man is not able to fathom the mysteries of the feminine mind. He wants man not to consider women merely as a means for the release of his sexual energy.

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. Ezekiel incorporates the heat and dust, the sun and floods, the sense of poverty and deprivation into the texture of his verse. The images of 'India' pervade all through his poetry. The changing reality of love and the human relationship on the one hand and the unchanging configuration of Indian landscape on the other, are, as it were, the spiritus mundi from where he draws all his images. The commitment to 'self' and the city of his living help him to create central images like those of his hero, the city and the woman. In *The Unfinished Man* and *The Exact Name*, one notices that the city has moved forward to a prominent position in the poet's consciousness.

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