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Love, Sex and Man-Woman Relationship in Nissim Ezekiel's Poetry

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Abstract

Nissim Ezekiel is undoubtedly the fountain-head of Modern Indian English Poetry post-independence. The present paper explores the various dimensions in his treatment of the theme of love, sex, and man-woman relationship in his poetry. He is a keen observer of life and human nature in all its diversity. He prodigiously projects love in its exquisite variety beginning from physical and culminating into divine. He considers sex as the source of joy and a conduit to express love towards someone in best possible way. He has described the vivid vignettes of man-woman relationship in his poetry nonchalantly. He uprightly upholds utility of love and sex as the foundation of happiness and joy.

Key Words- *Love, Sex, Man-Woman Relationship, Divinity and Salvation.*

Love, sex, and man-woman relationship are the primal pre-occupations of Nissim Ezekiel at the early stage of his illustrious poetic career. Love in his eyes is not a social stigma, rather it is a rendition of dynamic human tradition. Love tenaciously transforms into various forms and strands- from physical to ideal, and ideal to divine.. He envisages love a panacea to attain bliss and happiness. In an interview to a famous literary magazine *Gentleman*, he bares his soul out:

And writing is, for me a way of coping with tension of my inner life and the outer life. Looking back, this from the earliest days seems to be main source is

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somehow related to it, even the experiences of other people. My poems are often introspective and, therefore, express self-criticism and self-doubt. I also write about my relationship with other people: love, sex, the individual in society etc. (7).

His love poems attired in vivid and eloquent language are the tangible touchstones of varied moods of a lover. Love is serene, subtle, sublime, and sustains him through his entire life inalterably. At the outset, he considers love to be spice of life and music to be the food of love. In the poem "A Song, a Violin he seeks salvation through love. See the following lines of the poem:

Salvation
is in that song,
that violin
across the road;
song and stars
violin and winds
can be drawn
closer to the great within
where love is trapped
if cannot speak
to a song, a violin (*Collected Poems* 65).

Ezekiel's love poems diversify the concept of love. Love can be genuine, physical, emotional, and spiritual; love can be transient and temporary, love can be eternal. "The Couple" is very scintillating poem woven around the theme of love, throws light on the concept of love that is propitiously physical. Love transcends all the barriers of cast, colour, creed, time, and space. Mark the following lines of the poem:

You're a wonderful woman, he said,
and she laughed happily,

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having heard it before from many men,
all trapped in the desire
to see her naked
and to know she surrendered
who was so hard and vain.
In that moment of mutual deception,
She was truly beautiful
And almost beautiful
And almost lovable.
She did it prettily enough,
Demonstrating
With childlike glee
A trick or two (*Collected Poems* 183).

Ezekiel considers love as the bedrock of our life. His love poems offers downright description of love and longing, pain and parting, amour and adultery, remorse and resilience warped around the lovers. The pangs of separation, the subtle tricks employed by young fell as to woo their partners is deftly depicted into silken fabric of his romantic imagination. In the poem "Aside", he pinpoints the intensity of love lurching around the romantic chemistry of lovers. Mark the following lines of the poem:

One cannot imagine
Elephants making love,
But it seems they do.
So also tortoises
And snails,
Or even other men
With women doing
What it seems they do.

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No, one cannot imagine it,
Except as a song
In which we the lovers
Are sung and saved
From too much separation.
Love is ultimate reparation (*Collected Poems* 93).

Unfulfilled and the consequent frustration emanating from it dominates the mood of his early poetry. Bruce King observes quietly that “The poetry of the period implies there was a love life (3).” He contrives to be successful in love life but it remains a desire of the moth of the star. Love remains a farfetched reality in his poems. He doesn’t eulogise love nor glorify it, but emphasises emphatically its consummation. Like his mentor T. S. Eliot, he yanks to impersonalise his poetry. “A time to Change” is a very luminous poem reflective of his effervescent craving for true love: Mark the following lines:

Yet as we progress
From the things we think are known,
To what we so are sure can easily be mastered,
Sly rust encrusts the the aspiration,
Youth runs out of the song
Until one learns to start again-
Love of life can always be renewed (*Collected Poems* 4).

Ezekiel is bold, brisk and belligerent in the depiction of love and sex in his writings. He has ruthlessness and has no qualms in exposing the hollowness of modern denizens. The woman is objectified as a consumable commodity. The dexterity and adroitness that he exudes in the use of wit and irony becomes the pervading charm of his poetry. His early poetry is, however, imbued with the cravings of physical union between the lovers, and the eventual experience emerging out of unsuccessful and unrequited love relationships. V. A.

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Shahane, a consummate critic is quite quotable here for his chiselled appraisal of Ezekiel's early poetry:

Ezekiel's earlier verse is marked by an awareness of physical passion, sexual impulse, intermingling of the corporeal and the spiritual and a sensitive reaction to the objects of sensory pleasure and pain. The promptings of the spirit are audible through the limbs of the flesh and the consequential significance of the intellectuality and abstractions are obtained and realised only through the emotively stimulating effect of the human body (22).

"The Couple" is a very beautiful piece of verse from his philosophical treatise *Hymns in Darkness* (1976). In this poem, he dwells upon physical love that amounts to lust: lust's effect is always tempestuous miserably. In the poem, the man is shown intriguing woman by the dint of sycophancy and luxuriant phrases in order to get piquant pleasure during sexual encounter with the woman whereupon she blushes and yields gleefully. The poem propounds that sex has become a mechanical routine or chore for modern people, the woman fully supports the man as her vanity is inordinately gratified. Mark the following lines of the poem:

You're a wonderful woman, he said,
and she laughed happily,
having heard it before from many men,
all trapped in the desire
to see her naked
and to know how she surrendered
who was so hard and vain.
In that moment of mutual deception,
she was truly quite beautiful
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a trick or two (*Collected Poems* 183).

With firm frankness and candour, he validates that sex impulse is irrepressible. He has no moral inhibitions to sexual urge inherent in people. People try vaguely to pretend to be righteous and virtuous, but when temptation devours, the mask comes off and man's thirst for sexual gratification appears in all reality. In the poem "Love Song", he remarkably reveals the reality lying behind the veneer of virtuosity:

Beneath your dress I found you young,
Rewarding to my explorations, certain,
Soft and flowing,
And tender to the touch of love.
But you are old
With the shop-soiled wisdom
Of drawing-rooms and dowagers,
You are not sky, not river;
You are city-cramped, my love.

Only flesh remains what it was meant to be (*Collected Poems* 74).

In the poem "Scripture", the poet illustrates vigorously that men oscillate between the mores of morality and impulse of temptation. When the impulse of titillation superimposes upon morality, we are lured to temptation. The satiation of sexual and biological urge is not merely sufficient to lead healthy and happy life. Sex must be immersed in the limpid pool of love. Like Shakespeare, he observes human nature closely, and discovers the various layers of feminine psyche and demeanour by juxtaposing them to their male counterparts, when women's sexual urge is aroused. Mark the following lines of the poem "Night and Day":

Abstracted from the night of marriages,
The tumult of the bawdy darkness,
The lovers leave; wives or mistresses
Put up their hair, restore

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The silk or rayon swiftly shed
When kisses called the blood
To act again the ritual of mortality,
And variously remembers...
About all this, not a word.
Eyes do not see, hands do not touch (*Collected Poems* 108).

In “Passion Poems”, Ezekiel enlivens the eroticism of Sanskrit poetry. He depicts different types of interplay and foreplay flourishing between lovers. The poet beautifully emblazons the summer and the monsoon season romantically conducive for love making. Ezekiel showcases the various postures, gestures, and movement of lovers. The woman is shows coyness in the beginning, then clings in the arms of lover and merges with him physically. The following lines of the poem “Loss”:

I have lost my reason-
Let it go.
Did I create this woman,
untameable and yet
willing to be tamed?
Only Shiva, meditating,
could be immovable
in her moving presence.
As for me,
I hardly meditate at all (*Collected Poems* 216).

“Two Nights of Love” is a very curious blend of the spiritual and the sensual. The poet excellently elaborates his experiences of lovemaking on two successive nights with a woman. He enjoys the woman’s warmth, the golden touch of her thighs, the electric musk of her breasts and caressing and canoodling her. Now he wants to disengage himself with such feeling and physical act as his spiritual impulse pricks his conscience:

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After a night of love I dreamt of love
Unconfined to threshing thighs and breasts
That bear the weight of me to be bound
Within a freedom fresh as God's name
Through all the centuries of Godlessness (*Collected Poems 47*).

In his poems, he explores man-woman relationship from different viewpoints. In this regard, he is typically Indian, for in male-dominated Indian society woman assays a subservient role. In close relationships, he projects the different image of woman as a mother, daughter, sister, wife, whore, seductress and passive woman. Ezekiel deals man-woman relationship with curious analytical eyes. In "To a Certain Lady", he enthusiastically describes the vignettes of camaraderie and compatibility between man-woman. They face the hurdles in their course of love bravely and bracingly. They are shown immersed in the conviction that love ultimately triumphs defying all odds. The poem concludes with the message that harmony and mutual trust is the key blissful conjugal life: Mark the following lines of the poem:

Destroying or creating, moving on or standing still,
Always we must be lovers,
Man and wife at work upon the hard
Mass of material which is the world,
Related all the time one another and to life,
Not merely keeping house and paying bills
And being worried when the kids ill.
Teach us, Love, above all things, fidelity to music,
Sharpen our responses to the colours of creation,
Lead us undeceptively to what comes after passion,

And, let us dive, Love, as though we chose to, for a reason (*Collected Poems 30*).

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In one of his most famous poetic collection *Hymns in Darkness* (1976), he projects the image of woman as a sex object. The man's only desire is to consummate love in order to insatiate his sexual desire. Ezekiel describes the sexual encounter between man and woman unabashedly. Mark the following lines of the ninth section of the poem:

That which has to be is being here.

Don't, she says, don't,

conniving all the same.

Short of tearing her clothes

He's using all his force.

Soon, he's had what he wanted,

Soft, warm and round.

Wasn't it Blake who said

That the nakedness of woman is the work of God? (*Collected Poems* 221).

"Marriage" is one of the most famous poems Ezekiel that shows his views on love, sex and man-woman relationship. The poem is highly reflective of plethoric hues of love. In the beginning, the poem presents the ecstasies and enjoyment of marriage, and culminates into an illusion drawing our focus on early raptures of the bonhomie existing between husband and wife. Ezekiel projects three levels of growth in marriage ironically and realistically. The initial excitement and pleasures of married life fully felt by couple is described in an ebullient way. They feel paradise on earth as their marital journey goes along, but soon Ezekiel seems deserted and unable to condone sordid realities of life. However, he finds his relationship with his wife a hard pill to swallow. The camaraderie, closeness and compatibility between the two suffers a jolt, and their conjugal life becomes bitter and monotonous. The poem ends in defining and depicting his social role not to reveal his trauma. Mark the following lines of the poem which shows his search of various strands of love and man-woman relationship:

The darkened room

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Roars out the joy of flesh and blood.
The use of nakedness is good.
I went through this, believing all,
Our love denied the Primal Fall.
Wordless, we walked among the trees,
And felt immortal as the breeze.
However many times we came
Apart, we came together. The same
Thing over and over again.
Then suddenly the mark of Cain
Began to show on her and me.
Why should I ruin the mystery
By harping on the suffering rest,
Myself a frequent wedding guest? (*Collected Poems* 124)

“Nudes” (1978) is a resplendent repertory of some charming pieces of verse. Ezekiel depicts the desires of women and nudity in all its fairness and diversity frankly and fiercely in very eloquent, embellished language and sweet tone. Ezekiel is of the view that nudity is by product of the faculty of mind, and it must be construed the fruit of artist’s vision. We witness parallels analysed by poet across whole section of the rendition between human carnal urge and the reality of its object, between the painter and reality depicted, and between poetry and its origin. Ezekiel endeavours to depict dichotomy between a poet and an artist with respect to nakedness of Homo sapiens in general and women in particular. Bruce King rightly observes:

‘Nudes1978’, a sequence of fourteen sonnets, uses varied angles of perception to explore the relationship between reality and ways of seeing. The poems play on various distinctions between nudeness and nakedness. In ordinary usage nakedness is associated with shame, while nude is more neutral yet

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refined in its associations. Nakedness, however, is the natural state of being without clothes whereas is often shown cultural products such as art. “Nudes1978” might be the title of an artist’s group of paintings or sketches; the relationship of the nude to the naked is analogous to poetry’s relationship to reality. Although the poems themselves seem ‘naked’ in being unrhymed, they are ‘nude’ in their fourteen line form and such varied techniques as careful repetition and placement of key words, including the recurring allusions to nakedness and nudeness. (105).

Ezekiel’s “Nudes” shows the spirit of Indian sexual scripture *Kama sutra* in verse liber. Sex is regarded as the source of joy, gay and blessedness. We find fine expression of love and sex in the poem. The poet lays emphasis on consummation of love and maximum mirth underlying it. Mark the following lines of the poem:

For her, I am the same,
possessed and possessing.
I am given to nakedness,
A pleasure in itself, doubled
now by the nakedness of the other.
We cannot be transcribed: how
Express identity
in the formal feeling? She and I,
limbs intertwined, retain our names (*Collected Poems* 246).

Ezekiel employs his tools tenaciously dealing with the themes of love, sex and man-woman relationship in his poetry. He creates a novel vocabulary and idiom to accomplish this daunting task. Love and sex are no longer considered social stigma in our society. The consummation of physical has become the leit motif in his poetry. The words “threshing thighs”, “searching eyes”, “naked body”, “naked soul”, “singing breasts”, “breasts and buttocks like fruits”, “thighs as tree-trunks”, “neutral wall”, “quickened breath”, “plopping

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breasts”, “unruly thighs”, “midriff moist”, “sated lips”, “burning breasts”, “body yielding”, “stripped bodies”, “orgasm”, “dancing minute”, “orgasm” etc. make the expression evocative, erotic and elegant.

In conclusion, we may affirm that Ezekiel has incorporated the themes of love, sex and man-woman relationship boldly and brazenly. He has presented immensely daring and downright description of love and sex in his poetry. He minces no words in unravelling the vivid vignettes of man-woman relationship. He looks love, sex and man-woman relationship from male’s viewpoint voraciously. He enunciates that sex and sensuality are the indispensable part of life, it must not be suppressed rather be celebrated fervidly. Physical enjoyment is the spice of love, bereft of it may turn insolent. Sex is a centripetal force and can bind man-woman in steady and stationary relationship. Like, T.S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats and W. H. Auden, he relentlessly pens his poems about love, sex and man-woman relationship. We end the discussion with some appreciative words of K. R. S. Iyenger:

He was painfully and poignantly aware of the flesh, its insistent urges, its stark ecstasies, its disturbing filiations with the mind. In his later poetry, however, there is revealed a more careful craftsmanship, a more marked restraint and a colder, a more conscious intellectuality (657).

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