

Marital Disharmony in Nissim Ezekiel's Poetry

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Abstract- *The portrayal of married life in contemporary Indian literature is diverse and complex, reflecting the changing social, cultural, and economic landscapes of India. Indian literature in English highlights societal expectations, family interference and the pressure to conform. It also depicts a prolific reflection of the impact of urbanization and globalization on marital relationships and India's cultural diversity and regional nuances. Nissim Ezekiel is one of the greatest post-colonial Indian English Poets. Due to his affluent works, he has been undoubtedly supposed to be a founding father of Indian English poetry. His Jewish background hardly alienates him from social commitment and Indian society. His poems reveal their dimensions of the marital discord, love and sexuality, relationship dynamics etc. They also reveal the struggles and challenges coming with marriage that lead to the tensions and conflicts between partners. The man-woman relationship is shown by such institutions in the Indian society as love-institution and marriage-institution. Though marriage has so many pains, it has been accepted by the society. The present paper is an honest attempt to study Nissim Ezekiel's concept of marriage as majorly reflected in his select poems.*

Keywords: portrayal, family interference, man-woman relationship, love-institution, marriage-institution

Ezekiel's poetry is marked by a natural sense of Indianness and is characterized by an intense involvement with the milieu. (Pathak, 2003: 26). Most of the poems of Ezekiel deal with his desire for getting himself harmonious relationship with the outer environment. He himself puts it "India is simply my environment. A man can do something for and in his environment by being fully what he is, by not withdrawing from it. I have not withdrawn from India" (Parthasarathy, 1992:5). But most of his poems also reveal his inner disharmonious movement of his soul towards conjugal life. His highly realistic outlook towards human life has led towards the seamy side of married life.

In the poem 'To a Certain Lady', the poet shows how the monotonousness in the married life mars the beatitude of human being:

Then, absences and quarrels, indifference
Sucking like leech upon the flesh,
Crude acceptance of the need for one another,
Tasteless encounters in the dark, daily
Companionship with neither love nor hate

And he further says

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. (CP,

29)

This reveals anti-romantic and pessimistic attitude of the poet towards the relationship between husband and wife. "Though love is never satisfied/Time never still, trouble always on the boil/And nightmares whisper to our sleep/Of terrors past and yet to be" (CP, 27).

As a confessional poet, Ezekiel portrays the bitterness of marital life through lived experiences. In his autobiographical poem 'Case Study' he expresses: His marriage was the worst mistake of all.

Although he loved his children when they came,

He spoilt them too with just that extra doll,
Or discipline which drove them to the wall.
His wife and changing servants did the

same—

A man is damned in that domestic game. (CP, 125)

He feels that every man like him is punished and also confused in pattern of the Indian family "The pattern will remain, unless you break/It with a sudden jerk; but use your head.../Not all returned as a hero who had fled/In wanting both to have and eat the cake/Not all who fail are counted with the fake" (CP, 125).

In 'Marriage Poem', the poet shows the act of wedded love that causes the nuptial pattern.

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 wedded love (CP, 46)

He further appeals to bring in ability to every lover to keep this wedded pattern safe and secure for the sake of peaceful life.

Earthly love, O earthly love,
Be active when you will,
But let the quieter passion come
To every lover, till
The nuptial pattern is secure (CP, 40)

The lovers come to know such 'quietude of sense' 'between the acts'. This sense then leads them playfully to think.

In his poem 'Marriage' he makes his remark on the strata of matrimonial status. The stage of honeymoon is a kind of overwhelming emotion and erroneous mental representation. This condition invariably follows the disillusionment which cannot ground peace and joy.

Lovers, when they marry, face
Eternity with touching grace,
Complacent at being fated
Never to be separated. (CP, 123)

Marriage has so many pains. Ecstasy is short-lived due to the later frequent quarrels and sufferings. The poet believes that other men's marriages are doing well, in contrast to his own. By sharing his own disappointment, annoyance, and sour experiences with them, he does not want to ruin their marriages. Thus he himself rhetorically questions:

Why should I ruin the mystery
By harping on the suffering rest
Myself a frequent wedding guest? (CP, 124)

The terrible realities of marital life are dominantly reflected in Ezekiel's poetry. The initial state of exhilaration was fleeting. The initial burst of married happiness fades into emptiness. The inevitable phase of disappointment which is characterized by frequent arguments starts at the very point instead of later. The sensation of satiety follows the initial thrill:

However many times we came
Apart, we came together. The same
Things over and over again. (CP, 124)

Ezekiel deploys two biblical references to depict the disillusionment and frustration of marital life effectively. The initial fall of Adam and Eve from Eden is compared to the lovers' departure from their

passionate and fantastical paradise. Marital unrest and violence are similar to Cain's curse which caused him to walk restlessly and ceaselessly after killing his own brother, Abel. The poet confesses:

Then suddenly the mark of Cain
Began to show on her and me. (CP, 124)

The poet cogitates himself as a contemporary Cain who dooms to wander and never be content. Tragically, he knows what is going to happen to him but he keeps silence. He presents himself to the world in a cheerful manner. Why should he reveal the secret that the newlyweds must discover for themselves? He thus takes pleasure in his role as 'a frequent wedding guest'.

The poem 'Jewish Wedding in Bombay' shows the paradoxical and tragic-comic situation of matrimony ceremony.

Her mother shed a tear or two but wasn't really

crying. It was the thing to do, so she did it,
enjoying every moment. The bride laughed

when I

sympathized, and said don't be silly. (CP, 234)

Being 'modern', the poet cannot claim dowry but rather feels proud to be idealism. He bears the loss and pays the cost of the commitment:

There was no dowry because they knew I was
'modern'

and claimed to be modern too. Her father asked me how

much jewellery I expected him to give away
with his daughter.

When I said I didn't know, he laughed it off.
(CP, 234)

He endures the controversy in the matrimony delight as the psychological crisis. Her initial delightful expectation later on turns into serious interrogation.

We lay on a floor-mattress in the kitchen of
my wife's

family apartment and though it was past
midnight, she

kept saying let's do it darling let's do it
darling

so we did it.

More than ten years passed before she told
me that

She remembered being very disappointed. Is
that all

There is to it? she wondered. Back from
London

eighteen months earlier, I was horribly out of
practice.

During our first serious marriage quarrel she
said Why did

you take my virginity from me? (CP, 234)
Both of them suffer having no idea of healthy fighting.
The misunderstanding between them generates more
bitterness in their relationship. But the nuptial debacle
one or the other compels him to the domestic confines.
The poet makes communication with his wife in an
ironical way. In addition, he assures his wife that he
doesn't make fun of her.

Lady, don't nag.

If want that expensive lipstick
Buty it, for God's sake— not mine—
I mean, really, why should I approve it?
That goes for dresses, hats, shoes,
Slips, knickers and brassieres,
So long as they're not on the installment plan.
I 'm not trying to be funny, dear. (CP, 29)

The poet shows his interest in the domestic matter in
one hand and seems to be kept himself away from it
“Sometimes I like to be alone, that's all/But I am
interested!” (CP, 29).

To conclude, Ezekiel's most of the poems reveal his
confession about the disharmony in the nuptial life.

REFERENCE

All references to A. K. Ramanujan's poetry have been
taken from the following:

- [1] Ezekiel, Nissim. *The Collected Poems of Nissim Ezekiel: 1952-88*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989. Print. (All references along with the page numbers are drawn from this edition which is abbreviated as CP.)
- [2] *The Unfinished Man* (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1960), no pagination.
- [3] Parthasarathy, R. (ed.). *Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1976. P.5. Print.
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