

# **NISSIM EZEKIEL'S POETRY : ITS CYCLICAL MOTIFS**

Dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University  
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**Dedicated to**

**my parents**

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(Jyoti Narain Singh)

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**CHAPTER — I**  
**INTRODUCTION**

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Nissim Ezekiel (1924--) is a name more or less synonymous with the beginnings of modern Indian poetry in English. He is also, by fairly general consensus, India's best-known English-language poet who irrigated the landscape of post-independence Indian English poetry with a new sensibility. The pain, the anguish, the dilemmas of being alive in the twentieth century with all the burden of the past and its traditional beliefs and orthodoxies, the ironies and the affirmations of modern life, the search for roots and their discovery -- all these find a voice in Ezekiel's poetry. And so poetry, to him, is precisely a path to the discovery of truths:

A poem is an episode, completed  
In an hour or two, but poetry  
Is something more. It is the why  
The how, the what, the flow  
From which a poem comes.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, Ezekiel ponders in the beginning of his creative path. That is why he prays for those times which are inspiring and full of avidity for creation:

Whatever the enigma,  
The passion of the blood,



Grant me the metaphor,  
To make it human good.<sup>2</sup>

An Ezekielian poem combines both the passion of the blood while keeping an eye on human good. Not without reasons, Ezekiel's poetry has elicited considerable critical response in recent years, especially after the Sahitya Akademi Award and the Padma Shri were conferred on him in 1983 and in 1988 respectively. And one of the reasons for this special focus on his work might be related to the fact that he gives himself the testimonial of being a "good native" with the firm commitment, "I cannot leave the island, / I was born here and belong."<sup>3</sup> In poem after poem, Ezekiel stitches together pieces of great confession. It is significant to note here that in 1950 and 1951, he studied Philosophy at London University. Nevertheless his reading of Existentialist philosophy has gone into the making of his poems and scores of his poems were first written for personal and therapeutic purposes. Such poem as 'Enterprise', 'Background, Casually' and 'Poem of the Separation' reveal poetical mind endeavouring to explore and communicate intimately pangs of love and deprivation.

In his autobiographical poem, 'Background, Casually' he declares

I have made my commitments now.

This is one : to stay where I am,  
As others choose to give themselves  
In some remote and backward place.  
My backward place is where I am.<sup>4</sup>

Another Ezekielian comment further clarifies his relationship with India: "I am not a Hindu, and my background makes me a natural outsider; circumstances and decisions relate me to India."<sup>5</sup> These statements point to a conscious decision on the part of Ezekiel to speak from within India. And his aim "to do something for India....." , both as a poet and dramatist, is admirable. Ezekiel pursues India in all his works in his own peculiar way. This commitment to place and time makes Ezekiel one of the major poetic voices of our country who takes pride in singing about India-- its cultural, social, artistic and political milieu. Chetan Karnani's critical study<sup>6</sup> of Ezekiel's work published by Arnold Heinemann in 1974 is in some ways a tribute to the above fact. Karnani says, "Nissim Ezekiel occupies a position of considerable importance in post-Independence Indian English literature".<sup>7</sup> The same can be said of a special issue on Nissim Ezekiel in 1976 brought out by Michigan State University (Journal of South Asian Literature). A review of the above criticism and others available on Ezekiel points to a recognition among the critics that in him they have an articulate and authentic Indo-Anglian poet.

Nissim Ezekiel, during his stay in England (1948-52), thoroughly acquainted himself with different poetic trends. Critics associate his works with the works of T.S. Eliot and Auden although Ezekiel himself acknowledges that at different periods he was influenced by Rilke, Yeats and Pound. The poet confesses that this influence was sometimes felt so much that it drowned his own voice, notwithstanding the fact that he always endeavoured to find his own path. It is not accidental that Nissim Ezekiel is considered to be a poet who has combined in himself various traditions : the English poetic traditions, mainly in the sphere of form; problems of Indian literature; and the assimilation of modern poetry the "existential immersion in the life of cold-analytical disgust."<sup>8</sup> However, Ezekiel succeeds in achieving creative originality, shunning imitation and lack of individuality.

This study is an attempt to find out the amount of emphasis Ezekiel has imparted to his central metaphors and to trace his poetic development from A Time to Change (1952) to Latter-Day Psalms (1982). Perhaps, the secret of the peculiarity of Ezekiel's poetry lies in a certain synthesis of contradictory and at times incompatible principles, which seems to make his works an amalgam of two opposite poles. His aesthetic position is similar to it, and his vision of the world is aptly described as an attempt to restrict himself to wearing "a Cezanne around

his neck as he rides improbably through the discordant world that he has not yet reconciled: this is his declaration that assimilation will be achieved in the new style; that a form will be put on life without the rejection or alternation of any part."<sup>9</sup>

Many a critic has tried to understand Ezekiel in the light of the poet's personal and variegated chronology but an objective assessment of his rich and many-splendoured poetry has been neglected. This study aims at a refreshingly original appraisal of Nissim Ezekiel in terms of his thematic concerns in his poetic cosmos. It seeks an intensive and perceptive scrutiny of the cyclical nature of his representative and major poetic themes and establishes that the poet's response to his experience and its execution in his poetry accounts for his development as a poet of significance. There is a theme which runs through the whole poetic creation of Ezekiel, that is, an idea about incomplete, unfinished man. The poet longs for the "perfection of human personality", the traits of which are rather unspecified. Ezekiel is constantly engaged in the task of defining himself and evaluating and interpreting experience in relation to the self. In his famous poem, 'Background, Casually' he remarks, "The London seasons passed me by" and his poetry is full of such personal utterances. To him the man who suffers and the mind which creates are often one and the same. This is why he "feels the flesh of the poem."<sup>10</sup> Urdu Poet Shakeel Badauni

has put the same theme in this couplet "Main Shakeel dil ka hun tarjuma ki muhabbaton ka hun razdan / Mujhe fakhar hai meri shairi meri zindagi se juda nahin". (Shakeel asks : "whether I am the expression of my heart or one who keeps the secrets of love?" And he answers "I am proud of it that my poetry is not divorced from my life.") Herein lies the essential difference between the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel and that of T.S. Eliot. In an Eliot poem, the man who suffers and the mind which creates are never the same. An Ezekiel poem offers us a clarification of life delightfully mingling tradition and modernity, past and present, walking through the universe like some modern sage gathering gems from life. Ezekiel always penetrates deeper into new areas of life and tries to see in the intricate web of circumstances of human existence, the inner core of reality. He has an exceptional awareness of the lost dimensions of hope and faith. That is why he projects the image of the unfinished man and suggests, by implication, the points of contact where wholeness may lie. In his pursuit of self-discovery, he is incessantly occupied with the quest of the right idiom -- the exact name. Ezekiel's authentic voice came to be recognised with his first collection A Time to Change (1952), but he began to matter as a poet of some distinction with his third anthology, The Third (1959). The course of his development till the Latter-Day Psalms (1982), shows that he has built up the standards by which we may appreciate the poet.

Thus, Ezekiel's poetry, by fairly common critical consensus, is a personal quest for identity, commitment, and harmony in life. Chetan Karnani observes in Ezekiel's poetry a "first-hand record of life's growth."<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Michael Garman remarks, "He is a poet of whom it is not trivial to say that his poetry and his life are inextricable, and whose purpose in writing is to make a harmony (life, poetry) out of purely biological fact (existence)".<sup>12</sup> Inder Nath Kher, too, calls attention to this aspect in Ezekiel's poetry by referring to it as an endless quest for identity.<sup>13</sup> Linda Hess says that Ezekiel strikes her as "an endless explorer of the labyrinths of the mind, the devious delvings and twistings 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."<sup>14</sup> Another critic who notices a close relationship between Ezekiel's life and his poetry is V.A. Shahane, and for him Ezekiel is "primarily a poet seeking, sometimes in vain, other times successfully, a balance between an existential involvement with life and an intellectual quest for commitment."<sup>15</sup> Also, H.M. Williams in his survey of Indo-Anglian poetry draws our attention to Ezekiel's pursuit of self-discovery through poetry. He says that Ezekiel uses his "poems as experiments, he seeks to dive deep into the psyche, into his own psyche."<sup>16</sup>

Thus, Nissim Ezekiel's reputation, as one of the brightest meteors of the modern post World War II phase of Indo-

Anglian poetry, has been accepted by both the Indian as well as the foreign litterateurs. Dr. M.K. Naik holds him as "first of the 'new' poets" and "one of the most quotable poets of his generation."<sup>17</sup> Dr. Dwivedi rightly calls him "the barometer of modern India's literary atmosphere."<sup>18</sup> Of late, Bruce King maintains that Ezekiel has "emerged as the leader"<sup>19</sup> of the group of poets attempting to create a modern English poetry in India. Thus, Ezekiel's contribution to the Indo-Anglian poetry has been unanimously and duly acknowledged.

However, none of the researches has, most unfortunately, sought to examine and discern the cyclical nature of Ezekiel's major poetic themes so far. They have examined how well Ezekiel has Indianized English in his works, how Indian his sensibility is, how Indian his style, theme, setting, language, attitude imagery etc. are, besides perceptive studies of the technique, irony and different strains in his poetry. Thus, the examination of his poems from one or the other perspective has always encompassed some and missed the other aspects, resulting naturally in fragmented and lop-sided judgments. The reasons, I think, are two : the first and obvious reason seems to be the critics' preoccupation with single objectives on the thematic level. For example, Rajeev Taranath and Meena Belliappa hold him as a poet of metropolis<sup>20</sup>, Mr. Lall as a poet of woman<sup>21</sup>. Mr. M.K. Naik has noted some similarities<sup>22</sup> between Ezekiel and Ted

Hughes because of a number of bird and animal poems, etc. Some of the critics have just made a passing survey of Ezekiel's major themes throughout his poetic volumes. The second and more valid reason appears to be that Ezekiel's poetic corpus, so far, has been scattered here and there. This perhaps has discouraged the people from taking an overall and unified approach to his themes. The publication of his Collected Poems 1952-1988<sup>23</sup> has, indeed, forced me as a reader and lover of his poems to form a unified opinion about his poetic experiences.

Ezekiel's own prosaic and poetic statements definitely suggest that right from the beginning his aim has been to present a unified vision of the modern Indian subcontinent. A survey of his Collected Poems shows that his thematic canvas is limited. In 'A Poem of Dedication' he says : "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." He reflects, and comments on the contemporary Indian life with a complex sense of commitment to it. His justification of the inclusion of his unpublished poems in Sixty Poems (1953), on the plea that it provides him a sense of continuity, is significant. Despite the technical and thematic bankruptcy of these poems, he includes them. This shows Ezekiel's concern for a unified vision which results in a wave of multi-layered cycles throughout his



collections. His poetic statement in the same volume further adds force to his prosaic statement. Does he stick to his poetic manifesto and create a cycle of themes to reinforce these experiences or not ? This study attempts to find an answer to this question.

This study proposes to examine some of the representative and major poems of Ezekiel in all the seven volumes of poems, A Time to Change (1952), Sixty Poems (1953), The Third (1959), The Unfinished Man (1960), The Exact Name (1965), Hymns in Darkness (1976), Latter-Day Psalms (1982) as its primary source materials. In addition to these, it seeks an analytical survey of some other poems (not yet collected in book form), literary essays, articles etc. of Ezekiel besides a critical review of some major opinions about his poetry.

This study makes an incisive and in-depth analysis of Ezekiel's poetic collections in terms of their thematic burden. It proposes to dissect his poems into smaller units on the basis of their motifs and positive and negative traits. The central metaphors of the pagan woman, putrid city and the moral self are explored. Working synergically, they lead towards a realisation of the ultimate vision and testify how Ezekiel has become a major and living voice of both the contemporary and the human situation.

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**CHAPTER - II**  
**MAN-WOMAN RELATIONSHIP**

## CHAPTER II

### **MAN-WOMAN RELATIONSHIP**

Adil Jussawalla, the reputed Indo-Anglian poet, groups Ezekiel's poems under two categories : "those which are portraits, descriptions of people, and encounters with them which generally end in impasses of depressive regularity; and those which deal directly with his subjective state at times of personal crisis."<sup>1</sup> A perusal of poems under the first category reveals Ezekiel's interest in the man-woman relationship. In a way, his poetic pilgrimage may precisely be called a pilgrimage from sex to superconsciousness. The obvious reason is that the theme of love and passion, of man-woman relationship recurs more frequently than any other theme in his poetry. But surprisingly enough, it has missed due critical attention. The present chapter seeks to investigate this theme and examine critically the female image as characterized in Ezekiel's poems that deal with the kinship between man and woman.

However, before pursuing the analysis of these poems, it is necessary to include two points of view : one on the image of woman in English literature and the other on the role of woman vis-a-vis man in the Indian context. Writing about literature and western society, Mary Anne Ferguson states : "One peculiarity of the images of women throughout history is that social stereotypes have often been reinforced by archetypes. Another

way of putting this would be to say that in every age woman has been primarily ... as mother, wife, mistress, sex object -- their roles in relationship to men."<sup>2</sup> Fritz Blackwell characterizes traditional India as male-oriented where "individual rights are subordinated to group or social role-expectations."<sup>3</sup> Therefore, he says, "The point is that personality must not dominate the role. And this insistence upon identity through type or role makes a man-woman social, platonic or intellectual relationship nearly impossible, as contemporaries like Nirad Chaudhari and Nissim Ezekiel have frequently noted."<sup>4</sup> These observations are highly useful in analysing the man-woman relationship in Ezekiel's poetry and in the understanding of man's image of woman as viewed by the male persona in these poems.

What K.R.S. Iyengar remarks about Ezekiel's first two anthologies of verses is, in fact, true of his other poems too : "He was painfully and poignantly aware of the flesh, its insistent urges, its stark ecstasies, its disturbing filiations with the mind."<sup>5</sup> Throughout his poetic corpus, Nissim Ezekiel treats the man-woman relationship in frank and straightforward manner, but consistently from the male point of view. Neither a romantic dreamer nor a platonic, he holds an altogether different stance in his approach to sex and woman. Even though there are highly sensual descriptions of the human organs and love-making in the bed, his ideal of love implies a wider and warmer

assimilation of the woman persona in her myriad characteristics. She keeps on appearing again and again, in various possible forms, but only a true understanding of sex can validate this metaphor and confer meaning on it. Consequently, in this relationship, woman is identified as mother, wife, whore, sex object, unattached woman, passive woman, and seductress, with woman as sex object being the dominant image. But it is significant to note that in some later poems, Ezekiel's persona views woman differently. K.D. Verma refers to this as Ezekiel's positive view of woman.<sup>6</sup>

We can trace the various identities given to woman in the man-woman relationship from the very title poem of Ezekiel's A Time to Change (1952). In 'An Affair' the persona describes the naivete of a woman whom he had taken to a "cinema". She could not distinguish between the real and the unreal world, since after the visit to the movie theatre the persona is surprised by her profession of love for him : "just like this/As I had seen the yellow blondes declare/Upon the screen, and even stroked my hair,/But hates me now because I did not kiss." In depicting the woman's expressions of love and his refusal to reciprocate, the persona points to the fact that the woman is truly naive to think that she can convince him that there is love between them by playing the role of a seductress. Similarly, in the third section of 'Something to Pursue,' woman is viewed as an enchantress who "Haunts the bed in flesh or dream" causing

distress and disjunction in man seeking "unity/Of thought sensation purpose deed," a situation similar to the knight's experience in John Keats's 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci.'

The sonnet 'The Old Woman' traces the various shifts that take place in the woman's personality in her relation with man. The theme of wife-husband relationship has been explored in the octave. Here we find that the wife is portrayed as a murderess because of her attitude towards her husband, whom she killed with indifference, "She let her husband die of too much dying." The portrait of the woman who once had a specific role-expectation has been summed up in the sestet:

She lived on cornflakes, hate and sweetened milk,  
Came into the world to be a woman,  
Reflect a poem in the hearts of men  
And feed their delicate virilities,  
But hardened at the core she lived alone,  
Her ethic symbolised by stone, by stone.

Ezekiel's concern is a serious one and it finds expression in a number of poems in various ways. This theme with a variation occurs in 'To a Certain Lady' in which Ezekiel probes the "mystery/Of man and woman joined," and in the process identifies the conflicting emotions that husband and wife experience in their relationship. The poem has a five-part structure and each of the sections represents a different mood and tone. The first



section recollects and describes the wife's virginal coyness as well as the persona's definition of life within this new relationship.

Life can be kept alive  
By contact with the unknown and strange,  
A feeling for the mystery  
Of man and woman joined, exhaustion  
At the act, desire for it again;

The second section reads like an epithalamion and has a very suggestive typographical arrangement.

A quiet woman  
Stands by me  
While the seasons  
come and go  
Flow phoenix love  
And constant be  
While the turtle's  
Voice is heard  
For we are young  
And we are wed,  
Smell of myrrh  
Spikenard

In section three, the sensual intimacy which the joyous song

celebrates gives way to disenchantment, because now, "absences and quarrels, indifference" must be reckoned with. The persona's belief, that the love between them will prevail over the temporary odds and setbacks, gets a severe jolt in section four, where the persona sounds exasperated, "Lady, don't nag" and continues in this tone throughout the section. The interjections and choppy sentences express the persona's displeasure towards the woman : "O.K. I don't love you !" and "There's no need to sulk, ... I shout at you/Because I love you, didn't you know?/Well now, let's change the subject,/I can't make poetry out of this." The final section registers a shift in mood, for the voice is toned down and the persona speaks about a compromise, "Always we must be lovers,/Man and wife at work upon the hard/Mass of material which is the world."

What one observes here is an effort at achieving human balance, even in the failure of love. The persona is sharply aware of the woman's potential for bringing in discord; therefore, the prayer towards the conclusion of this section "Teach us Love, above all things, fidelity to music." As harmony is essential to music so is it to a husband-wife relationship, and this is what the prayer implies.

The final view (rather a persistent and unanswered view) seems to be that "charity, absorption of body and mind, a passion beyond sex, is the true commitment."<sup>7</sup> The protagonist is not

allowed a free play of passion owing to his desire to remain pure and chaste. Like Prufrock, he fails to affirm anything. In the poetic apprehension of Nissim Ezekiel, we mark three obvious stages of observance, indulgence and experience which also explains his pattern of life. Sin is a nagging threat and the woman is associated with it quite naturally. The need to transcend and travel beyond is constant and it finds expression in the bulk of his writings.

There is a shift of attitude from poem to poem but the poet seems to repeat his theme quite often. Ezekiel's second anthology, Sixty Poems (1953) also contains studies of the man-woman relationship and carries the impulse even further. 'Situation' is much like 'An Affair' where the relationship is based on sex. The woman's position vis-a-vis man is stated in the following lines:

She had no axe to grind but knew her trade,  
And turned the conversation when I sighed.  
To what I loved in secret but denied.

Ezekiel's use of the noun "trade" identifies the woman as a whore. In such relationships both man and woman know the limitation and the persona's comment towards the conclusion of the poem points to this awareness,

..... I recognize  
The haze of self-deception in our eyes.

One of the poems of this volume, namely, 'Tribute', projects a different image of woman. This poem reflects the happiness the persona experienced in the company of woman. He says,

Remembering what she had done  
For me, I promised her a song.  
Who made me feel at home in crowds,  
This girl, to whom the lights belong.

But in 'Preferences' the persona alludes to the viperish desires of woman, and this creates a negative image of woman.

There are two more poems that speak of woman as "seductress" and "beautiful object". In 'The old Abyss' the persona narrates how

This girl, once married, with a child,  
But now alone, torments  
The men she knows  
With such magnificence in movement.

They envision her to be the source of the old abyss or some primeval chaos. The persona confesses that he too has been affected by this "girl" for he says, "I have died beholding" the girl's body movement. The second stanza is a repetition of the first and is a comment on the image of woman in the eyes of man as well as a criticism of such a stereotypic image. The other

poem entitled 'Question' starts with the query whether the road to happiness is

"Prolonging kisses till the world/  
Of thought and deed is dim?"

The persona drifts from the world of thought and deed into the world of sensations in the company of one about whom he says, "Your loveliness makes all things hard / To bear that are not beautiful."

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Ezekiel is acutely aware of the fibres of flesh and desire, "a poet of the body; and the endless explorer of the labyrinths of the mind, the devious delvings and twistings of the ego, and the ceaseless attempt of the man and the poet to define himself through all the myth and maze a way to honesty and love."<sup>8</sup> He has a penchant and a strong poetic talent for representing the woman's features in a number of ways. They are sometimes extremely sensual but always a rare gift of God -- now sacred, now defiled. The woman's body to him is one of the wonders of creation. The poem entitled 'Description' may be cited here as one such instance:

I will begin-but how should I begin?  
with hair, your hair,  
remembered hair,  
touched, smelt, lying silent there

DISS  
O, III, I, N24:8  
NI



upon your head, beneath your arms,  
and then between your thighs a wonder  
of hair, secret  
in light and in darkness  
bare suffering with joy  
kisses light as air.  
And I will close-but is this fair?  
with dawn and you  
reluctantly  
binding up your hair.

The image of hair, a single element in the woman's total composition, has been rendered both poetically and with a touch of wonder, excitement and novelty. The poem is reminiscent of William Carlos Williams' 'Portrait of a Lady', where the poet is ecstatically aware of the wonders of the female body. Although Ezekiel's commitment to the demands of the flesh and his incessant search for the firm relationship are nowhere apparent in such portraits, yet the poet explores the labyrinths of human passion in all its myriad forms to catch up, even once, with the real and the eternal. The point he wants to drive home is that the hollow men of the modern world, lacking in vitality and resonance, suffer miserably while the genuine survive with their real commitments. Ezekiel's commitment to this theme results in the creation of genuine poetry.

In all the anthologies of Nissim Ezekiel up to the latest, the nature of this experience is not radically different. This experience of the poet may well be compared to that of a character in his own play Nalini, who said :

"I painted for several years and enjoyed learning how to do it. Gradually, I began to understand that what I did to colour and form and composition was also being done to myself."<sup>9</sup>

Nissim Ezekiel, similarly, has been occupied with this since long and every time he writes a poem with one such idea, he recreates his own unsatisfied, questing self.

In the poems included in The Third (1959) woman plays diverse roles ; wife, mistress, seductress, and sex object. In 'Night and Day' the poet-persona observes that a woman, be she wife or mistress, when sexually aroused, behaves identically because

wives or mistresses  
Put up their hair, restore  
The silk or rayon swiftly shed  
When kisses called the blood  
To act again the ritual of mortality.

Similarly, the poem 'Episode' blurs the image of wife with that

of mistress in its discussion of a clandestine affair between a couple whose rendezvous was ruined by beggars :

Thus ended what was ill begun.  
She lied to be with me.  
I lied to myself.  
We sought romantic restfulness.  
God sent three beggars.  
We went back to our separate bonds.

Since the woman lied to be with her lover the image one gets on reading this poem is that of a deceitful woman. Another poem entitled 'Situation'<sup>10</sup> also reflects a relationship built on lies and here too, as in 'Episode,' the couple experience frustration.

In some of the poems woman has been portrayed in the role of a seductress. In 'Tonight' the man-woman relationship is compared to a captivity and the persona describes the woman as one "Who loves me till my world is waste." In his association with the woman he experiences ruination and not inspiration for he says, "I see the legend and the lie, / How in the kiss the eye was cured." So love, in this context, becomes life-negating instead of life-affirming. The other poems which depict woman as a seductress, causing ruin, are, 'For Love's Record' and 'In the Language of Lovers.' In 'For Love's Record' the power that the woman enjoys over the men who associate with her is frightening :



I watched the woman walk away with him.  
And now I think of her as bold and kind,  
Who gathered men as shells and put them by.  
No matter how they loved she put them by.

The persona maintains his distance from her in fear of her destructive power, which he thinks she possesses because she is a "sorceress." This is echoed in the poem entitled. In 'The Language of Lovers,' for here the persona says,

Poetry, some foolish critic said,  
Is the natural language of lovers--  
Looking at her destroyed even my prose.

The comparison suggested in these two poems leads me to extend the analogy to connect with the courtesan heroine in Indian literature. Fritz Blackwell in an article cited earlier in this chapter describes the female character aptly:

"The courtesan is viewed ambivalently as she is at once an object of fascination and of fear; she is an enchantress, whose allure is not only sexual (in the more restricted sense), but social and intellectual as well. But that allure is dangerous, and her hypnotic nature is a peril -- economically, psychologically, and even spiritually; she is literally draining. Perhaps most dangerous about her is the fact that her dharma is not passive, built upon devotion to husband and family, like the

wife's; it is quite active, designed by its very nature to destroy man, at least financially, and even his family if necessary ..... The courtesan is "evil" not as a particular individual so much as a type." (p.39).

On the other hand, woman has been portrayed as mere sex object in such poems as 'Encounter,' 'Conclusion,' 'Aside,' 'At the Party,' 'At the Hotel,' and 'In the Queue,'. In 'Encounter' woman is presented as a receptacle for man's passion; such is the case in 'Aside,' too : "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." 'In the Queue' endorses this image when the persona says, "Her skin is warm and golden brown --/Unhurriedly I catch the bus,/Must carry on, without much fuss." The male point of view on this theme is given more exposure in 'At the Party' and 'At the Hotel.' In the first poem, the poet-persona looks at women through the eyes of the male protagonist:

Ethereal beauties, may you always be  
Dedicate to love and reckless shopping,  
Your midriffs moist and your thighs unruly,  
Breasts beneath the fabric slyly plopping.

Whereas in the second poem, the persona tells us the reasons why he and his companions were at the hotel :

Our motives were concealed but clear,  
Not coffee but the Cuban dancer took us there,  
the Naked Cuban dancer.

On the dot she came and shook her breasts  
all over us and dropped  
the thin transparent skirt she wore.

Was it not this for which we came?

The noise, the smoke, the smell of flesh we relished...

And 'Conclusion' sums up this attitude in succinct terms: "The true business of living is seeing, touching, kissing, / The epic of walking in the street and loving in the bed." Further he confirms his ideal relationship in 'Sparrows': "I fancy this, and then I face / The facts -- the mating and the nest -- / Primeval roots of all the rest." With the metaphors of bird and nest, Ezekiel drives home the importance of the real relationship and the place of dwelling, and echoes back, in this process, his central concern in 'A Time to Change' where he desired "a bit of land, a woman, and a child or two".

The Unfinished Man (1960) enjoys a pivotal position in Ezekiel's poetry as it testifies to his creative stamina and to his continued concern with the theme of man-woman relationship.<sup>11</sup> Its title comes from the second section of Yeats' 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul' [The Winding Stair and Other Poems (1933)], and the first stanza of this section is used as an epigraph for The

Unfinished Man.<sup>12</sup> Ezekiel's use of Yeats' poem is significant because Yeats too was much concerned with the relationship between man and woman; his poem about Maud Gonne 'No Second Troy' [The Green Helmet and Other Poems (1910)] supports my observation, as does the "Self's" comment in the third stanza of the second section of 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul' which says that a living man should accept the experiences of the "unfinished man" within him even if it means the repetitions of follies such as "The folly that man does/Or must suffer, if he woos / A proud woman not kindred of his soul."

In the 'Love Sonnet' a sense of harmony is conveyed through the line "We look in consort at the distant sea" and the role that the woman assumes in this relationship is that of a wife or a beloved. However, a caveat is sounded early in the poem, when the persona says "Our love has formed like dew on summer nights" and the simile suggests the transient nature of the harmony existing between the couple. The awareness of this fact can be discerned in the persona's concluding line "A certain happiness would be -- to die." Karnani observes that Ezekiel's use of the infinitive "to die" should be taken to mean "make love" which it did in the seventeenth-century, particularly in the love poems of John Donne.<sup>13</sup> I disagree with the reading of the above phrase and suggest that the couple want to prolong their state of happiness and think that through death they can eternalize their happiness, as death will mean the cessation of

all activity; therefore, this life-negating thought to preserve an experience that is life-affirming.

'Event' presents a woman who wants to establish an intellectual relationship with the persona, but soon the realization dawns on her that the only way in which she can relate to her man is by offering her body. This event is described by the persona : "She lay and waited, watching me, / like a child in her nakedness, / Uncertain if it ought to be, / Awe-inspired and motionless." Here woman plays the role of a whore. So she thinks that the persona expects of her to go through with acts suggesting intimacy and companionship : "So with her love, she offered it." Professor Verma, in his critique on Ezekiel, which I have referred to earlier in this chapter, says, "Obviously the image of woman as portrayed in 'Event' is ironic; and the same terse irony and concern continue in 'Marriage' (p.237). The image of the restrictive nature of marriage is effectively conveyed :

Our love denied the Primal Fall.  
Wordless, we walked among the trees,  
And felt immortal as the breeze.

However many times we came  
Again, we came together. The same  
Things 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?

The poem is contemplated on the lines of Biblical allusions and traces the couple's diagrammatic journey from the world of innocence into the world of experience, symbolized in this context by "Primal Fall," "mark of Cain," and "wedding guest." Professor Verma suggests that woman is associated with sin<sup>14</sup> and, thus, the "mark of Cain" is a symbol to remind man and woman that they need divine mercy<sup>15</sup> to right their relationship which is understood by the man as he refers to himself as the "wedding guest," and if we trace this literary allusion to Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' we find that the last stanza of Coleridge's poem informs us of the Wedding-Guest's new found wisdom. "He went like one that had been stunned, / And is of sense forlorn : / A sadder and a wiser man, / He rose the morrow morn." The experience of the "Wedding guest" in Ezekiel's poem is similar to this. In this poem although both man and woman wear the "mark of Cain" : only the man understands its significance, whereas the woman seems oblivious to it.

In 'Case Study' the woman's role is characterized in clear terms; she destroys man and is the cause of his ruin. The

poet-persona narrates the story of the protagonist's attempts at relating to woman and states "this marriage was the worst mistake of all." The protagonist's work suffered on account of his association with woman, so the poet-persona advised him : "The pattern will remain, unless you break / It with a sudden jerk; but use your head." Thus, this poem illustrates how woman can bring the ruin of man as he is "damned in that domestic game."

Ezekiel's fifth collection of poems The Exact Name (1965) also includes some poems on this theme, but with this book there is a shift in the perspective on woman, which can be seen in 'Night of the Scorpion.' This points to a positive image of woman in Ezekiel's later poems. We can trace this shift in perspective to Professor Christopher Wiseman's observation on the significance of 'Night of the Scorpion' as a transitional poem in a volume of poetry in which "we can see a poetic in transition."<sup>16</sup> The use of the noun "transition" should be read as a warning not to expect the point of view in 'Night of the Scorpion' to blur the previous images of "woman" witnessed in Ezekiel's poetry.

Woman plays the role of mother in 'Night of the Scorpion.' The narrative begins in a casual tone, "I remember the night my mother / was stung by a scorpion". This casual tone serves as a mask to the drama that unfolds for twenty hours as the masses and sceptic work on a cure through prayer, science and

incantation. The narrative continues the peasant's invocation, "May the poison purify your flesh / Of desire, and your spirit of ambition...", then shifts again to the persona's point of view:

My father, sceptic, rationalist,  
trying every curse and blessing,  
powder, mixture, herb and hybrid.

.....

After twenty hours  
it lost its sting.

My mother only said

Thank God the scorpion picked on me  
and spared my children.

The compact emotion of the last three lines voices the powerful theme of intense feeling : that of maternal affection and readiness to suffer and sacrifice for the sake of one's children so close to the folk tradition in our country. Thus, mother in this poem portrays woman in a self-denying role and Dr. Shakambari Jayal's study of 'Woman as Mother' in the Indian Epics points to the fact that such women were willing to die for their children, thus functioning as protectors to them.<sup>17</sup>

There are two more poems from this collection in which the portraits of women have been drawn with sympathy. In 'Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher' the persona views women with understanding :



"To force the pace and never to be still / Is not the way of those who study birds/ or women." Likewise in 'Virginal' the persona views the woman with sympathy because she is a spinster who is "Remote from the prospect of a wedding kiss." So the persona concludes his address to the woman with the statement, "The universe is much too small to hold / your longing for a lover and a child."

Contrary to what we perceive in the poems discussed so far, we get a different image of woman in poems like 'Beachscene,' 'Love Poem,' and 'Progress'. In 'Beachscene' the persona presents the "Image of a female / Body nearly naked / On the beach, and bird-soft / But blazing animal / Unhinging speech and bone." The explicit contrast between "bird-soft" and "blazing animal" is indicative of a schizophrenic personality that has a propensity for destruction. In 'Love Poem' the image of woman is that of "Great woman beast of sex" and in 'Progress' it is that of a whore. Besides these poems, 'A Woman Observed' and 'In India' give us a further insight into the man-woman relationship in Ezekiel's poetry.

Though there was a gap of eleven years between the publication of The Exact Name (1965) and that of Hymns in Darkness (1976), his creativity was never dormant; two journals, JSAL and Quest, bear witness to it, particularly to Ezekiel's interest in the man-woman relationship. The JSAL special issue

on Nissim Ezekiel includes poems he wrote or had published during 1965-1974; and the July/September issue of Quest contains three poems specifically on women. In addition to these, an anthology edited by Pritish Nandy entitled Indian Poetry in English 1947-1972 includes two of Ezekiel's poems, 'Cows' and 'Servant,' that also focus on women.

From 1965-1974 period, the JSAL includes poems on the man-woman theme that later also appear in Hymns in Darkness. In poems such as 'Three Women,' 'Motives,' 'In Twenty-Four Lines,' and 'Haiku,' howsoever much Ezekiel's persona wants to change his perspective on woman, his image of woman as sex object remains with him. In 'Haiku' this image stares at us blatantly, "Unmasked, as the day / declined, she brought out her small / breasts, to be caressed."

However, there is a need to investigate the reasons why in Ezekiel's poetry the image of woman as mother receives sympathetic contemplation. 'Night of the Scorpion' points to an awareness in Ezekiel of a tradition discussed in Ms. Jayal's study on "woman as mother," in which she looks at the "mother's" functional importance in the Indian epics as creator, protector, educator, and integrating force.<sup>18</sup> Ezekiel also appears to be aware of Mahatma Gandhi's exhortations on this theme to Indian writers : "I suggest that before you put your pens to paper, think of woman as your mother, and, I assure you, the chastest

literature will flow from your pens like the beautiful rains from heaven which water the thirsty earth below. Remember that a woman was your mother before a woman became your wife."<sup>19</sup> The influence of this tradition can be observed in Ezekiel's 'A Woman Admired' which portrays the mother-figure in the role of protector, particularly as one who keeps a "watchful" eye on her daughter.

The complexity of the man-woman relationship is re-affirmed by the fact that throughout Ezekiel's poetic corpus the persona is inconstant in his image of woman. She is portrayed variously as sex object, whore, seductress, unattached woman, passive woman, and as an enigma. So in 'Background, Casually' the persona tells us "The London seasons passed me by. / I lay in bed two years alone, / And then a Woman came to tell / My willing ears I was the son / of man. I knew that I had failed..." Obviously the allusion here is to woman's seduction of man, but at the same time it is modified by the confession that temptation came with the woman, thus, the association of sin with woman refers us to the Biblical story of the fall of man in the garden of Eden, where Eve brought temptation to Adam. Within this frame of reference woman is viewed in the role of temptress or seductress.

Again in 'The Couple' man is unable to resist the seductress in woman, because although "Indolence and arrogance /

were rooted in her primal will, / a woman to fear, not to love, / yet he made love to her.... " This woman has been characterized as a whore in the second stanza:

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  
and almost lovable.

Here the relationship between man and woman is based on lies and circumscribed by "mutual deception." The poet-persona describes a similar relationship in 'Situation' (Sixty Poems), thereby calling attention to its recurrence and cyclical nature.

Ezekiel's Miss Pushpa symbolizes the unattached woman who has an ambiguous existence in traditional India, so her decision to travel abroad is a symbolic gesture on her part to move out of such an ambiguous existence.

In a series of nine lyrics grouped under 'Passion Poems,' the poet-persona continues to probe the relationship

between man and woman. In writing about this theme he adopts both subjective and objective points of view, and discusses the secular and religious aspects of love within this man-woman relationship. The first person pronoun "I" is used for the subjective point of view, and carnality is emphasized in the description of secular love. The poem 'Monsoon' from this group says, "you arrived / with sari clinging / to breasts and hips. / I put a kiss upon your lips. / No part of you / could hide / as you dried." Here, the association of "monsoon" with carnal love is significant as it implies that just as the monsoon rains in India are essential for the preservation and continuity of life so is "carnal love" in the relationship between man and woman. On the other hand, the allusion to the love-play between Krishna and Radha, in 'A Marriage,' introduces the religious aspect of love, "Kirishna's tricks / are not for him / nor Raha's wiles / for her. They have a different truth / within a kingdom of their own."

Woman has been perceived in a passive role in Ezekiel's 'Ganga' and 'Tone Poem'. The servant, Ganga, accepts her menial status without any complaint. The passivity is combined with a gentleness in the woman in 'Tone Poem,' which is evident in the description: "You are gentle, / your gestures / do not disturb / the air." But when we finally come to the title poem 'Hymns in Darkness,' we observe the re-emergence of woman in the role of sex object. In the ninth hymn the persona reveals the drama that

unfolds between man and woman and follows up with an ironical comment, "that the nakedness of woman is the work of God ? If only he could love the bitch !" The pronoun "he" has an ambiguous reference. " He " could refer to the protagonist as well as to God. It has an ironical thrust if we take "he" to refer to God, because such a reference would present the clause "If only he could love the bitch" as a challenge to the creator of the sex object to love what he has created. And as the persona in 'Hymns in Darkness' is not known for his humility or penitence, we can conclude that "he" refers to God, because this is how the persona thinks God can understand man's predicament in the man-woman relationship.

Thus, the perusal of Ezekiel's poems reveals his sincere commitment to the theme of man-woman relationship. In most of the poems, his persona is the protagonist but there are some in which he is an observer / commentator. Yet in his relationship with woman, he finds them filling biological and societal roles, those of mother, wife, mistress, seductress, whore and sex object. Even though on analysis of the poems we have discussed, one can conclude that women have been viewed as sex objects, one cannot ignore the wide frame for this image, broad enough to accommodate such descriptions as "Your loveliness makes all things hard / To bear that are not beautiful" ['Question' Sixty Poems (1953)] ; "Great woman beast of sex" ['Love Poem' The

Exact Name (1965)] ; and "I want you back / with the rough happiness you lightly wear / supported by your shoulders, breasts and thighs" ['Poem of the Separation' Hymns in Darkness (1976)]. This wide frame of reference alerts us not to lose focus of the image of woman in the man-woman relationship in 'A Woman Admired,' 'Night of the Scorpion,' 'Minority Poem,' and 'Cow' because in these poems "woman" is portrayed as creator, protector, and integrator. Also, Ezekiel wants the image of woman as sex object to be balanced by the image of woman who "sings like the wind / ... laughs like a river / ... and sleeps like a flower." Hence we find that the theme of man-woman relationship recurs in a cyclical manner throughout Ezekiel's poetic cosmos. The poet also draws our respect for women by delineating them in multiple roles.

#### Notes and References

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15. Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger, ed. The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha (New York: O.U.P., 1977), p.6. [Ezekiel's reference is to Genesis 4, v.15. He alludes earlier to this symbol in 'The Old Woman' in A Time to Change (1952)].
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**CHAPTER - III**  
**CITY-LIFE**

## CHAPTER - III

### CITY LIFE

One of the dominant cyclical motifs in Ezekiel's poetry is the sense of oppression in a crowded and cramped civilization represented by the city of Bombay. It is the "bitter native city"<sup>1</sup> where the poet was born and brought up and where he lives now. This city (i.e., Bombay) has become so central to Ezekiel's poetic thought that some critics and scholars have been led to consider him as a poet of the city of Bombay. A perusal of his poems reveals that Ezekiel's Bombay is located in the present and it lacks the historical dimension. The city is as much within him as without. As Professor J. Birje Patil has rightly observed that "Ezekiel's originality lies in his perfection of Bombay as a metaphor which defines the alienation of the modern Indian intellectual, brought up in the Judaeo-Christian and Greco-Roman traditions and being forced to come to terms with a culture whose response to life is controlled by a totally different metaphysics."<sup>2</sup>

Ezekiel began with a sense of alienation with the world around him. His poetry has been an attempt to establish some kind of recognisable order and relevance for his self in the irrational and featureless world that surrounded him. The poet's gradual emotional dissociation from the immediate environment of

the city where he was born began in early childhood. At the school he considered himself a "mugging Jew" among the Hindu, Christian and Muslim "wolves", perpetually a "frightened child". His failure to get into the mainstream of Bombay's life is symbolically expressed :

He never learnt to fly a kite  
His borrowed top refused to spin.

( 'Background, Casually' )

Later, Ezekiel wrote, " I am not a Hindu and my background makes me a natural outsider. Circumstances and decisions relate me to India. In other countries I am a foreigner. In India I am an Indian."<sup>3</sup> The original tension in Ezekiel's poetry was probably born out of this agony of being a fortuitous Indian outside the pale of India's dominant culture.

The travails of an intelligent Jew boy of "meagre bone" living and growing up in a multi-racial, multi-religious urban society have been beautifully articulated in 'Background, Casually' :

One noisy day I used a knife.

In this poem the "point" Ezekiel considers is "how to feel at home." And this is one of the early and recurring themes in his poetry. Bruce King rightly observes, "Life in the city, sexuality, the problems of marriage, the need to overcome

alienation and to create integration among the various aspects of his character are Ezekiel's early and continuing themes."<sup>4</sup> In 'The Edinburgh Interlude' (1983) Ezekiel wrote,

I have become  
part of the scene  
which I can neither love nor hate.

These lines depict an oversensitive soul at handgrips with a cruel city civilisation, unable to escape from its vagaries and consequently developing a love-hate relationship with its tormentor. Thus, a recurring note in Ezekiel's poetry is the wound urban civilisation inflicts on unattached man.

Ezekiel has seen the splendour and poverty of the great city, its air-conditioned skyscrapers and its claustrophobic slums, its marvellous capacity for survival and its slow decadence. His reaction to the city's oppression is a light-hearted, ironic and often sardonic exposure of its several hidden faces. "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 modernity, the city and the village : a somewhat obvious theme but treated by Ezekiel as an intensely personal exploration."<sup>5</sup> For Ezekiel this "Indian dilemma" is symbolised by the city of Bombay. He lived through a "life of cheerful degradation normal

in my neighbourhood" until a mature awareness ensconced him. Today towards the fag-end of his career, as a condemner of the great city's iniquitous ways, Ezekiel has come to realise :

I cannot save Bombay

You cannot save it

They don't even

want to save it.

( 'The Edinburgh Interlude' ).

In spite of his disgust with the futilities of the "sprawling city", Ezekiel, early in life, made a commitment "to stay" in Bombay and the sense of belonging to it is absolute and final. The commitment to life in a particular place (i.e., Bombay) has brought a whole new dimension to Ezekiel's poetry. He now sees India through Bombay. William Walsh says, "Nissim Ezekiel in the Indian scene is a permanent expatriate, but one who has freely elected to stay. Displaced by his own spiritual past, he is in place by an act of the will".<sup>6</sup>

I have made my commitments now

This is one : to stay where I am,

As others choose to give themselves

In some remote and backward place.

My backward place is where I am.

( 'Background, Casually' )

However, this inevitable choice to stay unsettles the poet. Instead of providing an anchor for his thoughts and hopes, it launches the poet into an unending search for stability and repose. But "Ezekiel has kept his commitments by depicting life faithfully as he finds it in the city of Bombay. He has not shown any craze for visiting foreign countries. Instead his poetry has acted as a mirror for reflecting life as it is actually lived in this backward place".<sup>7</sup> Life in the modern inferno is unbearable but the poet has to make a compromise. "The central power that lends order to life and city is love, but the city is lifeless, indifferent and inhuman."<sup>8</sup> His desire to belong to the city which he chose is often frustrated by the impact of the strange city's truculent mass culture. His desire to escape from the tantaliser city of his birth is never realised because one cannot escape from oneself. He takes a backward journey to his familiar backdrop--the city of all hopes and disillusionment in order to organise himself :

To save myself

From what the city had made of me, I returned

As intended, to the city I had known.

( 'A Time to Change' )

The poet's reluctant return to the reprehensibility of the city exposes him to the horrors of a disintegrating and devastating culture. In 'The Double Horror' irony is combined with the urban

theme and the distortions of a mass culture are mercilessly exposed:

I am corrupted by the world, continually  
Reduced to something less than human by  
Newspapers, cinemas, radio features, speeches.  
Demanding peace by men with grim warlike faces,  
Posters selling health and happiness in bottles,  
Large returns for small investments in football pools,  
Or self control, six easy lessons for a pound,  
Holidays in Rome for writing praise of toothpaste.

Here the nature of the real terror is more vividly stated in terms of images. These lines demonstrate the poet's awareness of the essential ingredients of the insatiable mass culture of his city. They also reveal his knowledge of advertising. Here we get a description of almost everything that corrupts and beguiles in the gallivanting culture of the metropolis. The subdued reference to the Hollywood film 'A Roman Holiday' in the last line anticipates the surrender of the city to the invading film culture of the West. The whole set-up is disgusting, yet the poet has to make his living here as he has struck a "frightful equivoise"<sup>9</sup> between himself and the world.

After the publication of The Third Ezekiel's preoccupation with the city deepens even more than what it was in the preceding volumes. But an acute consciousness of the horrors



is discernible in the earlier poems as well. 'Portrait' presents the image of one who is fed up with his environment:

At jazzy picnics,  
Cooking on a smoky stove,  
Shooing beggars from the backdoor wall.  
Bargaining in cheap bazars  
And their tamed or wild vulgarities.

The ironic tone is subdued but the poet's sense of incompatibility with the situation is driven home in no uncertain terms. The laconic precision of the verse and its slow, exhausted movement add up to the effect. Ezekiel shows an intense concern with the sinful woman who is a by-product of the city's horrors. 'Love Song' is an embodiment of the city's defilements:

You are city-cramped, my love,  
Only flesh remains what it was meant to be.

Almost all the poems dealing with the theme of sex and love project an image of such a lady devoid of the real vigour and resonance of life. They bear, sometimes, striking resemblances to Eliot's 'Portrait of a Lady'.

In The Unfinished Man the poet reflects sadly on his own shortcomings. He is confronted with the dullness and drabness of living. The fallen polis is an image commonly used by many

modern poets, but Ezekiel is more exclusively concerned with the Indian setting than with the continental. He develops an attitude imbued with sharp ironic perception. The epigraph from Yeats in The Unfinished Man explains, to a large extent, the position of the poet who has been brought face to face with his own clumsiness. It makes manifest the toil of the urban man examining his life in the middle of his journey. It glorifies his efforts to come to terms with life. Adil Jussawalla aptly says that "Nissim Ezekiel's poems are the records of the moral aches and pains of a modern Indian in one of his own cities"<sup>10</sup> They include, in a wider sense, the agonies of a poet not only in a particular place but anywhere in the large cosmos. 'Urban', the first poem in the The Unfinished Man, bears obvious testimony to it. It explores the divergence between the Bombay man's search for the nourished dream of a free, oppression-less existence and his perennial inability to achieve even a partial realisation of it. He never sees the skies; he never welcomes the sun or the rain; his morning walks are dreams floating on a wave of sand.

He knows the broken roads and moves  
In circles tracked within his head.

( 'Urban' )

The dichotomy between man's hopes and achievements in the distressed city is suggested by the metaphors "broken roads" and

"circles". The "broken roads" are the hazards on the path, since the path in the life of an individual or humanity is not always smooth. The disgusting routinisation of everyday life, the resulting lack of coordination between action and perception and the sense of futility of human efforts to discover meaning in hope are the outcome of the tyranny of the city over the citizen. This dichotomy between the ideal perception of one world and the real existence in the other leads to unresolved tensions. The dilemma of the poet who desperately tries to disown and reject the city which "burns like a passion"<sup>11</sup> is touchingly expressed in 'Urban'. The world is too much with him since he is acquainted with only the sick-hurry and divided aims. The following lines are worth noticing :

The city like a passion burns  
He dreams of morning walks alone  
And floating on a wave of sand  
But still has mind its traffic turns  
Away from beach and tree and stone  
To kindred clamour close at hand.

Though the city burns like a passion, the poet can find no companion and therefore he can dream of morning walk alone. "And floating on a wave of sand" is a terrifying line where the poet communicates the terrifying loneliness. "Away from beach and tree and stone" points at the loneliness of the poet which has

rendered him so incapable that he cannot look at the hills. The last line -- "To kindred clamour close at hand" -- is suggestive on account of its sound effect. The poet's distaste for the city's stir is dramatised through the alternative devices. The "k" sound produced by the words "kindred", "clamour" and "close" intones a defunctive music and represents the raucousness of the city-life and its tiresome pattern of living. Thus, the whole poem becomes a fit saga of utter futility and meaninglessness that is contemporary life. Like Yeats in the 'Lake Isle of Innisfree', the poet here longs for a quiet habitation away from the "kindred clamour" of the wild city. But all his dreams of solitary morning walks and vision of the far away hills, the beach and the trees are thwarted by an overwhelming passion that turns the traffic of his mind to urban chaos. "The hills are always far away" reminds us of Frost's memorable line "And miles to go before I sleep".

'A Morning Walk', thus, echoes the same thought. It is a great poem which translates the sense of the bustle of the "barbaric city" into a gnawing pain that oppresses the poet's memory. The picture of the city deprived of humanness, seething with poverty, dirt, noise and bustle emerges with disturbing clarity in this poem:

Barbaric city sick with slums,

Deprived of seasons, blessed with rains,

Its hawkers, beggars, iron-lunged,  
Processions led by frantic drums,  
A million purgatorial lanes,  
And child-like masses, many tongued,  
Whose wages are in words and crumbs.

( 'A Morning Walk' )

The paralysis of the will and the finer emotions the Bombay man suffers from is succinctly suggested by a chain of metaphors. The "cold and dim" city is his purgatory. The morning breeze and trees, the cool garden on the hill and the hedges-cut to look like birds are the symbols of Bombay man's unattained and unattainable hopes. The poet poses the question why:

His native place he could not shun,  
The marsh where things are what they seem?

( 'A Morning Walk' )

'A Morning Walk' is a walk intended to be out of the city's fatal grip but ends up once again as a walk towards the city's fettering fascinations. "The marsh of reality and the distant (but troublesome to the city-dweller) hills are the counterparts, in terms of landscape, to the old dichotomies in Ezekiel's work, between sex and the unrealised goal of an all-inclusive love, between body and soul, a sense of sin and the prospect of redemption, action and patience".<sup>12</sup> Hence we find that the motifs keep on recurring in a cyclical manner through<sup>ou</sup> Ezekiel's

without accepting any influence. Ezekiel does not assume a mask in such poems but accepts himself as a defeated and disillusioned man. "The city becomes hell and it is one of Ezekiel's achievements that without being quaintly lurid or straining for exotic effects, he represents it as the hopeless Indian hell it is."<sup>15</sup> At the same time, he differs from many of the modern poets in so far as he wades through this hell in order to get somewhere at a higher plane.

No one escapes from the labyrinth of the Circe-like city. This city of 'slums and skyscrapers' has seduced the poet to a gradual bitter acceptance. In 'Island' he wrote,

I cannot leave the island  
I was born here and belong.

As a "good native" he is ready to reconcile with the "ways of the island". However, the poem has ominous undertones of frustration and sadness expressed through contrasting images like "slums and skyscrapers", "dragons claiming to be human", "echoes and voice", "past and future", and "calm and clamour". There is an obvious echo of the "veils", "daily strategy" and "kindred clamour" of the earlier poems. In 'Citysong' there is a reluctant acceptance of the ways of the city. From the terrace of a friend, the poet watches the city that lies below. A sudden urge overtakes him to return to the city just as a repentant debauchee returns to his seductress at her sight.

poetic cosmos. This cyclical process reinforces the experiences of the poet.

'A Morning Walk' is, thus, reminiscent of Eliot's The Waste Land. The modern city has its dehumanising effect and it has rendered men as "men of straw".<sup>13</sup> Eliot's theme is the drabness of European civilisation immediately after the First World War. Ezekiel's theme is a walk through the decadence of Bombay's soul which began immediately after the Second World War. Both have their purgatory of existence in the turpitude of sunk values. Both are searching for new insights in a world where new insights are only those of agony and frustration. The central image of 'The Waste Land' is that of a land blighted by a curse where crops do not grow and animals are cursed with sterility. Ezekiel's morning walk resembles the journey of the protagonist in Eliot's poem to the Chapel Perilous through a parching and agonising area of horror and darkness where "one can neither stand nor lie nor sit."<sup>14</sup> But it would be rather unfair to establish the influence of Eliot on Ezekiel for projecting such an image of city. The simple recurrence of a particular image in these poets is not a sure sign of derivation or influence. Moreover, Ezekiel's city is basically an Indian one and it has hardly any affiliation with the continental cities. The distress of living in a city is a common experience everywhere and any two poets using the same image may be analogous to each other even

without accepting any influence. Ezekiel does not assume a mask in such poems but accepts himself as a defeated and disillusioned man. "The city becomes hell and it is one of Ezekiel's achievements that without being quaintly lurid or straining for exotic effects, he represents it as the hopeless Indian hell it is."<sup>15</sup> At the same time, he differs from many of the modern poets in so far as he wades through this hell in order to get somewhere at a higher plane.

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I want to return  
As soon as I can  
To be of this city  
To feel its hot breath  
I have to belong.

The poet's total rejection of Indian noise, the irony of the Iranian restaurant instructions and the different disgusting scenes from Indian life depicted in 'In India' symbolise, in spite of their bantering tones, Ezekiel's derision for the values of a culture that grips him from all around. The several vignettes of disgust and revulsion Ezekiel presents in 'In India' add up to a haunting urban picture of societal doom and individual depravity :

Here among the beggars,  
Hawkers, pavement sleepers,  
Hutment dwellers, slums,  
Dead souls of men and gods,  
Burnt out mothers, frightened  
Virgins, wasted child  
And tortured animal,  
All in noisy silence  
Suffering the place and time,  
I ride my elephant of thought.

Here Ezekiel's irony is at its best. With him irony is like a

moving searchlight that sheds its brilliance on hitherto undiscovered corners of our dark existence enabling us to see the reality that lurks behind appearances. The Roman Catholic Goan boys hastening to prayers after having their "solitary joys" with "high heeled toys", the Anglo-Indian gentleman drinking whisky in company with secretive Muslims, the wooden Indian wives who sit apart at parties and the ubiquitous Bombay typist (or secretary) who is seduced by his English boss after an initial struggle are some of the tinged close-ups presented with devastating irony in the poem.

The "unplanned city has a death-wish"<sup>16</sup> and attracts several kinds of healers. "All of us are sick"<sup>17</sup> and so need some kind of barbiturate, meditation, a "guru" or a godman.

We cannot find our roots here  
don't know where to go, Sir

( 'Family Song for Nandu Bhende' )

Caught in the vortex of a soulless city the poet longs for salvation. His poetry becomes a perpetual quest for identity and commitment in a world of eroding individuality and lack of purpose. The poet expresses his dilemma thus :

..... The door  
is always open  
but I cannot leave.

( 'The Room' )

The city like the the woman on Bellasis road fascinates and repels the poet. Like the fake guru on its pavement, the city extends its unscrupulous hands to the unwary citizen. The amorphous crowd in 'Entertainment' is a cross-section of Bombay's polluted conscience - the crowd that collects, thickens, applauds and finally dissolves in an act of involuntary, meaningless and ungrateful impulse. Thus, in Ezekiel's poetry, "the city being more than an image is transformed into a symbol of decomposed garbage, a space infected as also it is on a deeper level not a particular place in the large cosmos but a system of living shattered and corroded at the very core. The sapling of life with its freshness, vigour and innocence does not blossom here any more."<sup>18</sup>

In Hymns in Darkness Ezekiel talks about a middle-aged city-dweller, who, in a faithless environment, is unaware of reality, but in his unconscious mind (or buried self) searches after it. The loss of faith in our age is perceived in the person of the city-dweller, who could be taken as a representative of the modern man. He is a confused man without any vision of life, and "the noise of the city is matched by the noise in his spirit". He has no definite goal in life, as there is no limit to human desire, for "it multiplies like a candle in the eyes of a drunkard." The first line of the poem, "He has seen the signs but not been faithful to them", speaks of the clue to

spiritual vision which he had glimpsed but unfortunately missed. He is unable to comprehend the truth because, in his illusion of reality, he looks at "the nakedness of truth in the spirit of a peeping Tom". And it is here, he is any man, hence naming him is of no use.

The brilliantly evocative poem, 'Jamini Roy' is an exception to the general tone of frustration Ezekiel exhibits in his city poems. Jamini Roy was an urban painter who had learnt the secret of self-expression and communication by turning to the rural folk and their style of living. He was able to see things in their primitive simplicity and innocence and could establish a personal identity with what is beautiful and sensuous in rural life. He refused to recognise sex and power as main motives behind human action; he did not try to depict the soul-sickness of the urban civilisation, but "he travelled, so he found his roots."<sup>19</sup> "Jamini Roy" is an indication that Ezekiel believes in the possibility of bringing about some sort of order and assimilation through art in a world of moral chaos and ethical confusion. He discovers a new spirit of hope and declares his intention to walk the streets of Bombay "a Cezanne slung around my neck".<sup>20</sup> Only the artist can create a new and orderly world out of the ruins of the old. His advice to the artists is,

Do not be satisfied with the world  
that God created, create your own.

( 'Advice to a Painter' )

Thus, we find that the city, like the woman-image, has also many facets in Ezekiel's poems. Apart from being disgusting, it is the abode where the questing protagonist returns again and again. The poet who has gone through the travails of the city finds no alternate tabernacle of hope but to affirm and accept what he had already done in 'A Time to Change':

Home is where we have to earn our grace.

( 'Enterprise' )

This earning of grace comes in the form of an awareness in the poet of the regenerative and recuperative power of art. In 'Love Sonnet' also, the couple comes back to the city :

Floating down the hill, as on a cloud,  
Proud as lovers are, inarticulate,  
We lose ourselves in mingling with the crowd,  
Not unafraid of this ambiguous fate,  
We look inquiringly at road and sky,  
A certain happiness would be to die.

This poem depicts the sad case of a pair of lovers longing for privacy in the midst of a noisy and crowded metropolis. The crowd both accommodates and repels the poet while his helplessness lies in belonging to this scene with mixed reactions of love and hate. In spite of all its harrowing attributes,

the city is the real destination, a place of refuge, where all journeys come to an end. Ezekiel shows his typical commitment to it from poem to poem and matures in his vision of life in the process. 'Urban', 'A Morning Walk', and 'Love Sonnet' are the poems which "reinforce the appeal to the city as the purgatory before blessedness."<sup>21</sup>

Ezekiel's life and poetry are, in fact, inseparable. The activity of poetry produces a solemn harmony of existence for him in a world riddled with discordant notes. Each poem is a luminous link in that chain of continuity that glorifies and ennobles the poet's life.

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**CHAPTER - IV**  
**RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY**



## CHAPTER IV

### RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY

After examining the two important motifs (i.e., man-woman relationship and city-life) and their cyclical nature in the preceding chapters, we take up the appraisal of another strand of Ezekiel's poetry which deals with his concept of God, religion and philosophy and more particularly with his ideas of existence. This aspect of Ezekiel's poetry is especially significant, in my opinion, partly because his poetry has often been described as one of love and sex, of sensory perceptions and physical evocation.

On a closer analysis of his poems we find that Ezekiel, without any conscious striving for a philosophical dimension or a religious pattern, exhibits a deeper religio-philosophical awareness of the world and the tortured self, as is evident, particularly in the regularity with which the words "God" and "soul" occur in his poems. But 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 enjoyments, large and small angers, philosophy of the hour and moral quibbles share

equal space with God. Ezekiel is "neither a saint negating the sensual pleasures nor a yogi wandering in the thick jungle to attain light, but a man of parts, a being of the world -- participating and belonging."<sup>1</sup> He takes a unique stance of a modern quester : liberal in outlook yet strong in commitment. He claims. "If I write a religious poem, the next poem is likely to be very secular, sceptical. I attach a great deal of importance to the worldliness of the world, its independence".<sup>2</sup>

These remarks of Ezekiel lead us to investigate as to what is the poet's commitment : is it to ethics or to morality, to religion or to philosophy or to a vague striving for the essential good ? An analysis of Ezekiel's poems confirms that he does not stick to any system of thought or religion in particular but is simply content to be a man of God. "I was brought up", Ezekiel wrote to Delmer Bogner, "in a mildly orthodox Jewish home which gradually became liberal Jewish. I attended the liberal Jewish synagogue in Bombay until I abandoned religion altogether soon after leaving school".<sup>3</sup> This decision to abandon religion by an adolescent at such an early stage may not be taken seriously but it certainly points to a keen, analytical mind wedded to an individual system of beliefs. Since religion is "What the individual does with one's solitariness"<sup>4</sup>, it is quite obvious that Ezekiel is of a contemplative bent of mind and that he has brought to his use the ideals which almost every religion professes : the religion of love and charity.

The nucleus of all our studies of the poet is formed by the very first poem of the first collection, A Time to Change. He shows here his immense passion for the body, God and poetry -- the three major constituents of his essential self. There is a fine amalgam of the secular, the religious and the personal. The epigraph from the Revelation 3.16 : "so then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot , I will spue thee out of my mouth" is highly functional and underlines the tortured self, with an acute consciousness of the over-rehearsed sexual desire and defiled flesh. Thus, the poem begins with a note of exhaustion and disillusionment :

"We who leave the house in April, Lord,  
How shall we return ?" <sup>5</sup>

This quest for charity and wholeness prompts Ezekiel to undertake a journey into the heart of existence and discover the music and meaning of life. He has lost anchors with the virtuous world because of his indulgence in sinful sex. But now there is a bid to lead a life of true commitment. So he seeks to "charge our earthly love with the love of earth"<sup>6</sup> in the poem 'And God Revealed'.

Ezekiel treats the writing of poetry as a moral act and a prayer; art is, for him, the product of a secular moral conscience, its hopes and desires --

Redeemed with prayer  
The aspiration  
Found again  
I start again  
With secret faults concealed no more.

Many of his poems are concerned with judgement, conduct, behaviour or how, as in 'On an African Mask', "passion of mind or heart/Acquire the equilibrium of art". Such equilibrium between body and soul, heart and mind is the desired state in contrast to 'The Double Horror' which begins " I am corrupted by the world" and concludes "infected. I corrupt the world". 'On meeting a Pedant' begins "Words, looks, gestures, everything betrays/ The unquiet mind, the emptiness within".

Although A Time to Change shifts abruptly among its multiplicity of themes and kinds of experience there is an underlying consistency of preoccupation with moral being as revealed through social conduct. Redemption and rebirth of the spirit is the central theme of A Time to Change. The concern with spiritual wholeness takes various forms including love, religion, poetry and style of life. Often varied themes appear in the same poem as they are part of the quest. 'To a Certain Lady' proclaims that while "Change is permanent and real" "the dancing moments of a kiss / Are real too". Life requires "contact with the unknown and strange / A feeling for the mystery".

These poems are concerned with how to live sanely, fully and morally in the secular world and, therefore, may be called the "poetry of the moral intelligence."<sup>7</sup>

Ezekiel, in his second volume, Sixty Poems, had the same moral concerns:

To move within the depths

And fill the sources of our daily living.

Here the poet is more submissive than introspective. But submissiveness and introspection are not necessarily the attributes of the religious-minded alone. Nor does one's lack of commitment to any particular religion essentially make him a pagan either. Every sinner yearns to be forgiven and redeemed. It has been commonly asserted, and rightly so, that Ezekiel conforms to philosophical humanism but it would be unfair to question his habit of prayer: "It is surprising how often the word 'prayer' occurs in the work of a poet whose approach to life, far from being religious, is one of philosophical humanism."<sup>8</sup> However, an examination of Ezekiel's poems justifies the greater frequency with which this theme occurs in his poetry on the ground that the poet is occupied at some remote level with the creation of a world of his own desire. The poet is sharply aware of his "fluent wrong"<sup>9</sup> and accepts the truth that "Man is measure of mankind."<sup>10</sup> He also believes in Buddha's Dhamma which

enunciates that "blessed is the tamed mind."<sup>11</sup> Prayer is his natural recourse:

If I could pray the gist of my  
Demanding would be simply this:  
Quietude. The ordered mind.  
Erasure of the inner life,  
And only love in every kiss.<sup>12</sup>

The secular and the religious have been synthesized again in the aforesaid lines. But neither does Ezekiel crave for God's grace in the manner of George Herbert nor is his address to Him a direct one. He does not also soar higher like Vaughan but remains anchored to the earth with eyes fixed on the larger horizon of God. Though guilt and sin pervade his early poems much like the Holy sonnets of Donne, he does not seek resolution in his way: "Impute me righteous, thus purg'd of evill, / For thus I leave the world, the flesh, the devill."<sup>13</sup> Neither the world nor flesh repels Ezekiel; he is rather committed to both of these, and affirms his faith in them again and again.

Thus, a perusal of these poems reveals that, on the one hand, the poet is aware of his own sinful self and, on the other, he is constantly preoccupied with the Supreme Deity. He states his commitment quite categorically: "I am not a religious or even a moral person in any conventional sense. Yet I have always felt myself to be religious and moral in some sense. The gap

between these two statements is the existential sphere of my poetry."<sup>14</sup> Truly, Ezekiel is a liberal humanist who feels remorseful on this account in 'Penitence':

I will be penitent,  
My heart, and crave  
No more the impulse  
Of a wave.

But I am still a sea  
And hold within  
The muffled tumult  
Of a sin.<sup>15</sup>

What strikes us here is the fact that he does not conform to the tradition of purely religious poetry, even when he is acutely aware of sin. So many traditions of love, philosophy and religion -- of Judaism, Hinduism and Christianity -- are combined within the orbit of his poetry, but the final view is always the same. We may consider 'Psalm 151' in this light:

Deliver me from evil, lord,  
Rouse me to essential good,  
Change the drink for me, Lord,  
Lead me from the wailing wood.<sup>16</sup>

The tone is reminiscent of Herbert but the essential difference

lies in the nature of response and the quality of agony in both the poets. With Herbert it is the characteristic mode while with Ezekiel it is no more than an occasional outburst during passionate moments.

The difference between these two poets may be demonstrated further in the examination of the poem 'Prayer' included in the next collection The Third. Herbert never defines prayer<sup>as</sup> Ezekiel does in this poem. Herbert dramatises the toil while Ezekiel imparts a rhetorical treatment to his feelings about prayer and its need: "Prayer is transcendental speech. / To transcend is to go beyond, / Beyond is anywhere--all or nothingness."<sup>17</sup> The poet tends to be philosophical and reflective though it does not necessarily relate him to the "ideal of Rilke"<sup>18</sup>. The desire to be saved from evil is universal but the yearning is quite different:

Now again I must declare  
My faith in unseen, unheard,  
The inner music, undertone,  
The silence of a daily friend,  
The dignity of trust, the fervour  
Of an erring Choice, the Hidden  
Sacrifice, the wordless son.<sup>19</sup>

The poet's religion of love is expansive enough and his prayer encompasses all. But in the context of this poem it is unfair to



say that the poet believes in "supernatural concepts"<sup>20</sup>

Ezekiel's fourth collection of poems was published in 1960 under the title The Unfinished Man. A significance of these poems is indicated by the title in which we find an explicit recognition of another time of change. The poems speak of a time of incompleteness and record a period of personal purgatory concluding with the possibility of redemption. All the ten poems included in this collection are "a sequence regarding the discordant notes of a supposedly settled life. They are related more by theme than by story. The preoccupation with prayer is rather constant and each poem reflects a different mood."

In 'Morning Prayer', for example, many desires are distilled into one and the poet prays to God for their fulfilment. This poem has a direct tone:

God grant me certainty  
In kinship with the sky,  
Air, earth, fire, sea--  
And the fresh inward eye.

Whatever the enigma,  
The passion of the blood,  
Grant me the metaphor  
To make it human good.

From an analysis of this poem we find that each of the four stanzas is a repository of hopes and desires. The prayer is exclusively personal, and voices the vital concern in the last stanza. This poem does not demonstrate a tortured soul or a grief-ridden persona articulating his pains and anguish but only reflects a relaxed mood with an equally relaxed pace of lines.

The poems, in this collection, speak of a time of incompleteness and record a period of personal purgatory concluding with the possibility of redemption. While 'Enterprise' concludes "Home is where we have to gather grace", in 'A Morning Walk', "He" has "dreamt of being lost / Upon a hill too high for him". He sees the city and its "million purgatorial lanes". The redeeming possibilities of love are taken up in 'Commitment' in which we find that the dangers of passion are superior to the lost men.

Who wanted only quiet lives  
And failed to count the growing cost  
Of cushy jobs or unloved wives.

An analytical study of these poems and others such as 'Event', 'Marriage', 'Case Study', 'Jamini Roy' etc. confirms that the poet has not taken an escapist's stance at any stage though his moods of reverence, submission and defiance have varied from time to time, yet he has depended exclusively upon the truth of God and looked to Him for all his resolutions. The

recurrence of this theme throughout the poetic corpus of Ezekiel ascertains that his real objective has always been to enliven the rhythm of human existence. Truly, his poetry is "deeply embedded in his life (existence), and at the same time it merges into meditation (essence): 'Prayer and poetry, poetry and prayer' (A Time to Change)."<sup>21</sup>

Ezekiel uses the word "prayer" frequently in a diverse set of poems. In fact, a number of his poems known as poster prayers are included in Hymns in Darkness. These are definite improvements upon the earlier poems and prayers both in respect of content and form. These poems are unconventional and "comic" appeals to the universal egoist's silent God." The word "prayer" in the earlier poems is used quite often to denote a feeling of genuine spiritual commitment, though this is usually modified by a kind of subtle scepticism and incisive irony. Here, it would not be out of place to refer to Ezekiel's consequential LSD trip in 1967 which, he claims, turned him into a believer. "I turned to a basically religious view of the world with my first LSD trip in 1967."<sup>22</sup> That is why Ezekiel's Post-1967 poems are marked by a strain of what V.A. Shahane calls "aesthetically-inclined philosophical humanism".<sup>23</sup> On the one hand, he is conscious of his own mask, and, on the other, he aims at "stripping off a hundred veils" of creation and creator. Much earlier he had declined to accept religion but it appears that both his

declaration of abandoning and embracing a religious attitude towards things are not absolute. It is important to note that his poetry never showed any signs of negation, even when he had declined to accept God. It is highly surprising that the poet has come back to a system of beliefs with such an insignificant thing like LSD trip and all the wisdom acquired in the long years of his life was lost upon him. God remains a persistent presence, appearing again and again in the poems, as if we and the poet had all but forgotten Him.

The question is : Is He a Jewish God? Not invariably, although Judaic presence is quite discernible in the tone of lament in many of the poems, and also of course in Latter-Day Psalms. Ezekiel's God, as revealed in his poetic cosmos, has a "much more common, unpedigreed denomination to Him in His presence as a kill-all, cure-all Pop-God, a metropolitan Bombay God, an urban contemporary without hang-ups about origin."<sup>24</sup> An analysis of some of the poster prayers proves that God is addressed with reasonable familiarity:

Kick me around  
a bit more, O Lord.  
I see at last  
there's no other way  
for me to learn  
your simple truths.

or,

The vices I've always had  
I still have.  
The virtues I've never had  
I still do not have.  
From this Human Way of Life  
Who can rescue Man  
If not His Maker?  
Do thy duty, Lord.

What we find here is the poet's insolence, the attitude of "defiant questioning."<sup>25</sup> He has learnt a new gesture, not of passive submission but one of boldness. He does not consider himself to be an alien or an outsider but exercises his will to claim God's love even though he knows that it will not come to him.

But as in all else, Ezekiel is not uniform in his approach to his Maker. In contrast to the Deity who is addressed above, there is One to whom the approach is complex, deep and meditative; poems that take up the cudgels with Him are steeped in inward sophistication, and are speculative. This Deity is addressed in strict rhyme and metre:

There is a place to which I often go  
Not by planning to, but by a flow  
Away from all existence, to a cold  
Lucidity, whose will is uncontrolled.

Here, the mills of God are never slow.

or

God grant me privacy,  
Secretive as the mole,  
Inaccessibility  
But only of the soul.

That last stanza is perhaps singular in the entire poetic corpus of Ezekiel in making such a plea. Nowhere else does the poet suggest that secretiveness and inaccessibility, even if in connection only with the soul, are things worth seeking.

Thus, we find that Ezekiel addresses his God in a varying range of tones, from translucent praise, to supplication, to angry, baffled accusation. What is more, He is even corrected. And we discover this is not the least moving way He may be addressed. In Latter-Day Psalms we also find that Ezekiel introduces doubts and questions regarding many of His premises. The psalmist is frequently twitted for unreasonableness, and the Deity asked to use His hand lightly, for the benefit of all.

Lord, few there are that trouble  
me, fewer still that rise up  
against me. Be thou a shield for  
them as for me

And

How can I breathe freely if  
thou breakest the teeth of  
the ungodly?

The psalms range broadly over the originals, accepting their passion, rejecting their paranoia, introducing newer and more horrific notions of despair that only the twentieth-century could provide.

Vain is the help of man,  
and vain everything else.  
Did none pray who was caught  
in the Holocaust ?

The concluding latter-day psalm gathers together all these strands:

All that fuss about faith,  
all those decisions to praise  
God, the repeated appeals,  
denunciations, laments and hopes,  
the division of men into virtuous  
and wicked !  
How boring and pathetic, but  
also how elemental, how spiritual  
the language, how fiery and human  
in the folly of its feelings !

The largest number of Ezekiel's poems move out of the area of guilt, into wonder and redemption. Compulsive sexuality, quietly given in to, discovers its true face -- the magical life of the body, gratitude and concern for it, from the gentle 'Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher', to the superbly audacious 'Nudes, 1978'. The latter, a set of fourteen sonnets without rhyme, are surely Ezekiel's Hymns in light.

I see you here, stretched out,  
not as complex pulls and tension,  
muscle, bone, skin, resilience  
but as person, always  
human in your naked  
unposed poses, resisting form.

The artistic venture is cancelled as it faces the wholeness of a vision.

In all these poems, observes Nissim Ezekiel, the "persona is that of the self-centred self, which is strong in all of us. The tension and the dialogue between that self and poet's other self provide the inspiration."<sup>26</sup> The established norms of composition have not been adhered to. In writing such poems for the purpose of exhibition, Ezekiel has broadened the frontiers of poetry. He makes a visual presentation of the real state with great success. Ezekiel himself records:



In searching for a suitable poetic form which could be used on posters, I arrived at a number of starting points, from Vedic hymns to American Indian songs and Zen fables. Their origin is not important to me now, what is important is the distance they have travelled from it. Poetry is rarely sui generis. To go forward it has to go back first.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, Ezekiel has imparted new dimension to both the content and form of his poetry. In the earlier phase of his poetry an incompatibility between a poem and its form might be traced but in the later phase, the form emerges with the poem itself. "I now try", says Ezekiel, "as I have done in a part of my most creative moments to let the form develop as the poem develops."<sup>28</sup> The poster prayers, hymns and many other poems bear ample testimony to the fact that the poet has arrived at a point of unity when the poem and its form coalesce into one. That he has transcended the source of these prayers and has made them emerge as the movements of his own passion speak of his deft aesthetic formulations and complex and modern handling of ideas. The following hymn exhibits the poet's remarkable achievement in respect of form and meaning:

So much light in total darkness!

So much courage given, beside the abyss!

Why was he forgiven,

helped,

comforted?

Whose the voice of truth

that spoke through the imperfect words?

He has lost faith in himself

and found faith at last.

As the words and the pace of the lines suggest, this is the vision that the poet has acquired in an easy manner. But, I think, a rigorous discipline, a lot of stitching and unstitching must have gone before the poet has arrived at this point of illumination in his artistic journey.

It is quite obvious that the poet's faith in the ultimate is never in doubt and he returns to it again and again. He takes a liberal stance and pursues his quest of life and art which ultimately results into the discovery of his own self.

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## CONCLUSION

## CONCLUSION

We find that Nissim Ezekiel has traversed a long distance from A Time to Change to Latter-Day Psalms. What perhaps won him the accolades of the literary critics are the three factors he himself had predicted as the characteristic determinants of good poetry -- "literary stamina, intellectual strength, and social awareness"<sup>1</sup> (underlined by him in his essay on Keki N. Daruwalla).

Since the scope of this dissertation was limited it has made the survey of only his representative poems and themes, namely, the theme of man-woman relationship in Chapter - II, of city life in Chapter - III and of religion and philosophy in Chapter - IV and established him as a realist with an intellectual and philosophic world-view towards ordinary events and issues of everyday metropolitan life. What he declares at the very outset of his poetic journey:

Not to hanker for a wide, god-like range  
Of thought, nor the matador's dexterity.

.....

I want a human balance humanly  
Acquired, fruitful in the common hour.

( 'A Poem of Dedication' Sixty Poems )

reveals his satisfaction with realism which has remained his signature throughout his poetic marathon. Ezekiel has, in another poem entitled 'Night Piece' (belonging to the same volume though to somewhat later period), reiterated the same commitment to the here and now:

That I must wait and train myself  
To recognise the real thing  
And in the verse or friends I make  
To have no truck with what is fake.

This preoccupation with "the real thing" has stayed with him rather permanently. His endless odyssey is to explore the subterranean roots of existence and acquire a human balance. That is why love, marriage, man-woman relationship, city life, sexual encounter, religion and redemption, and a certain kind of alienation recur as themes in his poetry. This restrained semiotic canopy evinces his deeply held fascination for the immediate society in his immediate vicinity. Had he not been tethered to it, he probably would have soared into the romantic sky while riding on the wings of poesy. His social awareness, however, becomes acuter and more accurate as he turns to the Indian themes in his later poems, that is, in the poems written since The Exact Name (1965). Notwithstanding the ruminative and philosophic predilections he hardly ever severs his anchor with the earth though it is full of all sorts of ugly realities. Like

Wordsworth's skylark he remains "True to the kindred points of Heaven and Home" (Wordsworth : To a skylark). Furthermore, he expresses, without any hesitation, both beauty and blemishes in categorical terms giving us the impression of being an ambivalent poet. So ambivalence does not come in his quest of realism; it rather appears as an instrument in assessing the reality. If in his themes and their treatment he is a realist, in his technique he is a tireless modernist. So critics hold him as the first among the Indian modernists to come out with an anthology, A Time to Change (1952), replete with modernity, and one who is the harbinger of "new poetry" in the country.

We have examined Ezekiel's preoccupation with the theme of man-woman relationship, and found that the image of woman in Ezekiel's poems, not always "placed between two absolutes"<sup>2</sup> -- angel and beast, is immensely varied and connotative of the poet's large area of experience and perception. The woman in her multiple appearances is a unique manifestation of nature and many other things. She can be, in turn, regenerative, and emotional, virtuous and pagan, young and old, lifeless and inspiring. She assumes all these roles and many more. And on account of this each of these poems acquires a new dimension of meaning in as much as an altogether new image of woman is projected through them. The poet executes this image, thus, to explore an immensely wide area of love and meaning in life. Though the shades of Ezekiel's response have been, no doubt, shifting



towards woman and sex, he has retained a basic unity of approach and the commitment to love. It is his obsession ; it regulates his life and provides a pattern of living for all his life's "..... daily hell or heaven/improvised, missing/or attaining form."<sup>3</sup>

We have also dealt with Ezekiel's typical commitment to city life. Corruption of the essential self and loss of all vigour are the natural attributes of living in a modern city. The city is essentially analogous to the lifeless ladies we have seen in 'A Time to Change', 'Affair' and 'To Certain Lady'. "The city like a passion burns"<sup>4</sup> and the protagonist is given to "kindred clamour close at hand".<sup>5</sup> Though the woman is most often unworthy, she is also, at times, good, but the image of the city in Ezekiel is invariably stark. It contaminates the purity of his being to a large extent. Thus, the images of city and woman are interlinked and forms the poet's image of an inferno where he is forced to suffer and yearns to reach the primal roots of existence.

Ezekiel's growing concern with the problems of existence and the scheme of things in the large cosmos has also been examined in the foregoing pages. Though there is a sense of loneliness and suffering in his poems, yet there is a sense of belonging. Hence his poems do not lack communication with the world. The poet has acquired a large vision of art which encompasses all -- every mood, matter and phenomenon -- and

places him firmly and securely in the modern poetic tradition. He records his predicament in his poems en masse or the phenomenon that is poetry. The apologetic 'Foreword' to Sixty Poems makes it obvious that it is an "interim collection" <sup>6</sup> of self-confessedly weak poems. "What is one to do with the poems one writes ?"<sup>7</sup> and more so with the weaker ones ! The poet explains his aesthetics when he says:

There is in each a line or a phrase, an idea or image which helps me to maintain some sort of continuity in my life. If I could transcend the personal importance of these poems, I would not publish them. I am interested in writing poetry not in making a personal verse-record. But poetry is elusive, to write a poem is comparatively easy."<sup>8</sup>

Herein lies the nucleus of Ezekiel's poetic scheme and it also explains the basic reason of the cyclical nature of his poetry. It is the maintenance of this "continuity" in the poet's life which provides a sense of tide, of ebb and flow, to his poems. The ceaseless endeavour of the poet to watch and record the movements of the tide unifies the divergent strands of his poems and makes them cyclical in pattern. Naturally therefore, the poet seems to repeat his theme quite often in spite of the shifts of attitude from poem to poem. Hence we find that Ezekiel has remained true to his poetic manifesto he had declared at the

outset of his career. Gieve Patel rightly maintains that in Ezekiel's poetry there is "a continuity between the life lived and the poetry written, the same thread unravelled from flesh and blood on to the page".<sup>9</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that his poems "drift back and forth" and connect extremes of joy and despair. We begin to understand and appreciate Ezekiel's import better and more fully when we arrive at these links and bridges among his poems.

To sum up, Ezekiel's poetry is autobiographical in nature. As we have discerned, his entire poetic corpus deals with self-exploration and self-affirmation and in his famous poems like 'Enterprise', 'Pilosophy', 'Night of the Scorpion', 'Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher', 'The Visitor', 'Background, Casually' and 'Poem of the Separation' Ezekiel's tendency to explore his self and pursue his own temperament is very clear. Thus, he writes his spiritual autobiography in his poetry. And as such it is quite difficult to read Ezekiel without being involved in his baffling confusions, disillusionments, dilemmas and affirmations. Truly, therefore, "in his poetry there is the truth of acknowledging what is felt and experienced in its complexity, contradictions, pleasures, fears, and disillusionments without pre-conceived ideas of what poetry should say about the poet and life."<sup>10</sup> The greatest contribution of Ezekiel lies in writing 'poetry' and anchoring it to life and reality in its many guises.

And this commitment to poetry and life manifests itself, as we have noted in the preceding chapters, in his ironical attitude, critical self-consciousness, powerful intellectual and moral purpose and a variety of tones. So tradition and individual talent meet in his works as two eyes meet in a sight.

Most of Ezekiel's themes, thus, are interwoven into one central theme of quest -- how to live cheerfully, peacefully, and morally as an integrated human being. His development as a poet may be summed up by quoting his own words :

I act to end the acting,  
not to be known but to know,  
to be new, to become a form and find  
my relevance.<sup>11</sup>

In order to appreciate the real import of his poetry, and more especially of the later poems, we have to critically scrutinise Ezekiel's efforts to become a form and find his relevance in his poems.

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