

“Nissim Ezekiel: The Fertility Principle in Poetic Creation”

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Nissim Ezekiel the avant garde Modernist Indian poet was keenly and creatively attracted to the topic of woman and sexuality. A sizeable number of his poems deal with this aspect in which he brings out details which reveal the inner mechanism of his mind and how it relates with his poetic creativity. On close reading of his poetry an interesting fact comes to light, that of his inclinations towards the tradition of ‘Fertility’ or the Fertility Cult. His mind and body seem to be functioning simultaneously on two planes – the abstract and the physical. His poetic impulse derives from his sexual drives. The poems analysed not only confirm this belief but also fortify it : “And let him understand that in the working/Of his mind the body takes a hand” (C.P).

Nissim Ezekiel’s poetry is well known to poetry lovers across the world. His poetic journey commenced in 1948 and carried on till 1988 and thus spanned a period of forty years. He was a modernist poet and wrote on a wide variety of themes. Poems like “Night of the Scorpion”, “Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher”, “Urban”, “Island”, “Background Casually”, etc., were well appreciated in India as well as abroad. He also wrote some parodies in pidgin English like “The Patriot”, “The Professor” etc, which were quite hilarious. Ezekiel’s poetry was part of the Commonwealth English writing tradition and this was no mean feat as competing with writers from Canada, Australia, New Zealand, etc. for whom English is the natural tongue is not child’s play. Ezekiel’s work was published by Oxford University Press way back in 1976 which speaks volumes for his poetic stature.

Though Ezekiel’s oeuvre was exceedingly extensive yet there was one particular context to which he adhered with a peculiar consistency namely of sex. He was and has been called a poet of the body. Time and again he came back to this topic which interested him greatly. K.R. Srinivas Iyenger has rightly commented that Ezekiel, “was painfully and poignantly aware of the flesh, its insistent urges, its stark ecstasies, its disturbing filiations with the mind.” Sex held Ezekiel enthralled and the frequency and intensity with which he portray it emphasizes the influence it had on him. Sex provided him with an impetus and impulse, it gave him the necessary drive to create poetry.

Poetry consists of declarations or statements made with deep and utmost conviction by the creator. It is a way by which the poet affirms and asserts his ‘self’, whereby he reveals his inner or true ‘self’. A poet cannot create from nothing, he displays the core of his being through his verses. His immediate and intimate concerns are projected and thus the inner reality becomes the other one. Poetic creation needs an impulse or stimuli to fertilize the imagination which then proceeds to churn out a poem. The process is akin to a farmer planting seeds as Ezekiel says in “A Time to Change”.

Subsidised by dreams alone,
The stubborn workman breaks the stone, loosens
Soil, allows the seed to die in it, waits
Patiently for grapes or figs and even
Finds, on a lucky day, a metaphor
Leaping from the sod. (Collected Poems).

hus, Ezekiel makes a connection between regeneration in the physical world and creation in the mind of a poet. In other words the principle of fertility is common to poetic composition and to the organic reproductive process. Germination is the key word. Fertility cults and rites are associated with primitive religious in which sex played a vital role. In Hindu mythology these customs and practices are associated with the ‘Tantric’ and “shakti” cults. In such systems which were also prevalent in ancient Greece and Rome orgies, orgasmic rites, sacrifices, virgins, intoxicants, priests, music etc., played a major role. The worship of the phallus or ‘Linga’ and the female reproductive organ or “Yoni” are also part of this tradition. Keats has depicted one such orgiastic scene in his “Ode to a Grecian Urn”. One such seductive, pastoral scene is portrayed by Ezekiel in his poem, “Agony in the Morning”:

The narcissus, the Asphodel
 The smell of wheat, the sound of flutes
 Stirring on the ground of thought
 Strange rhythms beating
 At the root and on the pulse
 Phallic consciousness of dawn
 Erections of the mind. (C.P.)

Ezekiel mind is stimulated : “Stirring on the ground of thought”, by the sexual stimulus that his body is experiencing, vis-a-vis : “At the root and on the pulse”. Concomitantly, he also proposes, “Erections of the mind”, i.e., his mind has been awakened to a high point of alertness and consciousness by “Phallic consciousness”. Sensuality thus is a key ingredient for Ezekiel’s artistic creativity and he uses imagery which has suggestions of linkage with the fertility practices. He puts the matter in a clearer light in “Nakedness II” when he says “And let him understand, that in the working/Of his mind the body takes a hand” (C.P). Again he reiterates in “For William Carlos Williams”,

“I feel the flesh
 Of the poem
 Firm
 And the bone hard”. (C.P).

Ezekiel transmutes his physical sensations of the carnal sense into poetic composition. He asserts his masculinity and potency through his poetry and assigns a secondary and subservient role to woman whom he sees as an object only to enjoy : “That women trees, tables, waves and birds”, / / Are here to be enjoyed.” (“Conclusion”, C.P). As, in the fertility tradition, the phallus is the sign of male superiority, so also the male or man is assigned the dominant status. Ezekiel also asserts his superior male position wherever he can and betrays a condescending and superior attitude towards women. Unlike a true Casanova who would keep his love affairs secret, Ezekiel has no compunctions about revealing his escapades and even glorifies them and this thinking is extraordinary. He gets a boost and a fillip for further versification because he has reinforced and consolidated his manliness or authority to himself. His ego is fortified and propitiated. Propitiation and appeasement are a basic part of the ritualistic fertility tradition. If fertility is the principle by which creation came into being and is further sustained then, sex is the machinery which has to be put into operation to complete the cycle. Ezekiel’s pre-occupation and obsession with sex is because of its essential role in creation and existence. It is an act which is both mysterious as well as indispensable for him. It is both natural as well as aesthetic because he does not only enjoy it but also makes poetry from it. He validates his interest in sensuality and women in “Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher” and locates an association between a poet and a womanizer.

“The best poets wait for words

 Until the one who knows that she is loved
 No longer waits but risks surrendering
 In this the poet finds his moral proved. (C.P)

The principle of regeneration and rebirth associated with the fertility cult and ritualism figures in Ezekiel’s very first poem “A Time to Change” which has been compared to Eliot’s “The Wasteland” famous for its fertility antecedents. In “A Time to Change” Ezekiel too, is perturbed about his sterility and lack of potency: “Rehearsed desire dead in spring” (C.P). He finds strength in collaboration with femininity and the regenerative phenomenon –

“To own a singing voice and a talking voice
 A bit of land, a woman and a child or two” (C.P).

Consummation is at the back of his mind and this re-invigorates and re-juvenates him. His mind is active on both planes – physical as well as abstract, he is a farmer, a poet as well as a husband. The common factor in all occupations is regeneration or reproduction which but associates with fertility. In poems like “Lamentation” images are evoked by using typical fertility symbols which show us the inner ‘self’ of the poet:

... every part of me is withered
 The season comes and men bring forth their fruit
 But I am bare beside the abounding sea

Rivers feed my roots yet I do not prosper

.....
Desire postponed is death to me
Pursued it rots the bowels

.....
Let my leaf be green with love
And let me live. (C.P).

Ezekiel uses the sexual impulse and stimuli to propel and bolster his poetic creativity but it also creates anxiety, trepidation and fear which leads to sterility and stagnation. This causes him to become desolate and devastated. Sexual drive is like the bottle imp which can grant boons but also has the potential to cause extreme damage. Ezekiel's nature is to celebrate his sexuality and to benefit from it. In "Lines" he lays bare his raw, primeval and lusty nature which no doubt dynamically motivates him:

Unmask the mind, know the hardness
Of the hidden and oppressive bone,
Locate the source of shallow breath
Hear the throb of loins in love.
Listen to the secret marrow
Lung and liver speak the word
Accept the long tormented breath
And tremble in the thick of love. (C.P).

Ezekiel's use of fertility symbols is a pointer towards his inner convictions. Chetan Karnani observes astutely, that words like "bone, marrow, blood and flesh" appear with two much frequency in Ezekiel's poem. These words are all linked to mythical archetypes associated with the fertility cult and tradition and the learned scholar's observation reinforces the observation of the linkage between Ezekiel and the tradition.

Ezekiel's inclinations favour the atavistic and the primitive, the barbaric and the savage. He doubtlessly draws inspiration from orgiastic and orgasmic phenomena from, "The threshing thighs, the singing breasts" ("Two Nights of love", C.P). Ezekiel's poetry joyfully proclaims the value of sex and even sanctifies it. If ever the feeling of emasculation or castration acts as an inhibitor or damper on an artist, Ezekiel the poet, is careful and clever enough to keep such impotency far away from him through whole hearted and wholesale indulgence in carnality. He uses the raw, the primeval, the obscene, the pastoral, the titillating, the arousing and the sensual to provide him with material for his poetry. In the poem "Creation" he goes about his business as usual :

The sunshine of a kiss can glow
Within a dozen poems, and a body yielding
On the summer grass, with expert fingers
Can release
A spring of words as fresh as women's eyes. (C.P).

Ezekiel's urban locale curtails his creativity dampening and inhibiting his efforts, he is horrified by it, he calls it a "Barbaric city sick with slums" ("A Morning Walk", C.P). He undertakes an "Enterprise" in the manner of the pilgrimage to "Chapel Perilous" in Eliot's "The Wasteland" but fails to regain his vision or potency. He prays in "Morning Prayer" for a "metaphor to make it human good" (C.P) but only succeeds in regaining his lost vision and dynamism in "Love Sonnet" where he is in the seductive company of a lady and is resultantly in a state of euphoria, "Floating down the hill as on a cloud, /proud as lovers are inarticulate// A certain happiness would be to die" (C.P). Death in the fertility cult is part of the tradition subsequent to which the rebirth takes place, as in the myth of Thammuz. Ezekiel exploits the company of women both for the pleasure of sex as well as for the impetus that his mind gets to get into the creative mode.

While playing the role of a creator in the physical sense, being the male partner in an act of sex, he also gets a creative stimulus in his mind. The fact of being in authority lends him certitude and focus and thus his creativity swings into action. Ezekiel disregards all the pricks that conscience makes and goes ahead with his philandering as he confesses in "Poetry Reading"-

He drank, he drugged himself, he went
With wives and whores galore. In sin
And song he spelt out what they meant. (C.P).

Ezekiel's recognition of himself as the principal or dominant fertility factor makes him delegate woman to an inferior status and to label her as "Great woman beast of sex" ("Love Poem" C.P.). He only thinks of her as an object who is only fit to be used. In this context A.K. Singh states, "He negates the woman's love but returns to her again and again and affirms his predilections even for a whore". It is a fact that Ezekiel's marriage failed because of his waywardness and infidelity. He was intent on only satiating his own lust and pandering to his ego. It is a fact of psychology that those with inordinate sexual appetites are also those who have inflated and desperately demanding egos and they are obsessed with their libido. Such people can never live in domesticity nor be faithful to their partners. Though sexuality and indulgence can serve as stimulants and provide a drive yet such excessiveness can also lead to depression and desolation. Such an eventuality does happen with Ezekiel too, in "Words in a Gentle Wind" where he brings out his agony saying –

Desolation taste play the host
To broken hearted dreams
Beneath a sky
Of blizzard news know
The empty zone within. (C.P).

Sacrifices have to be made if ought is to be attained but only the person who suffers knows the pain he feels. Ezekiel's world too, is shattered and upended at times. The cost of writing and producing art is at times too high and circumstances wreak havoc on him, but there is no escape. He longs for a change, to be fresh and vigorous once more and to be the perfect aesthete once again, he says, "I act to end the acting/not to be known but to know/to be new, to become a form and find/my relevance" ("In the Theatre", C.P). The poet longs for resurrection and finally in the last phase of his career, in "Hymns in Darkness" and in "Latter-Day Psalms" he finds his poetic inspiration and impulse in religion and the scriptures. He is also pre occupied with his "Indianness" and his Indian roots.

Ezekiel's success as an Indian poet writing in English was tremendous and his verse has been complimented by numerous critics, poets and readers. His focus on woman, sensuality and affairs of the heart served to repudiate prudery and liberated Indian poetry from the shackles of inhibition. A successful poet not only validates his source of inspiration and creative process but also becomes an example to be emulated by others. Nissim Ezekiel was one such poet who inspired a number of poets like Keki Daruwala, Gieve Patel, Adil Jussawala, Dom Moraes, etc. Ezekiel was awarded both the Sahitya Academy Award and the Padam Shri. He was responsible for giving an impetus to Indian English writing and for radically revolutionising the poetic subject matter and style.

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