

Westernization in Nissim Ezekiel's Poetry; the geometry of love

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Abstract

The present article deals with the impact of westernization on Nissim Ezekiel's poetry. Human nature is the fount whence Ezekiel's poetry springs. Ezekiel has delved deeply into the realms of Indian culture and what his eyes have seized is his poetry. With him the vernal breeze of new poetry bursts into the castle of Indian English poetry to sweep the long existed cobwebs away. His poetic corpus is boundless, endless and sublime; the real image of modern India. His poems are the most precious pearls culled from Indian cultural tributaries; unsurpassed to date. His poetry is an arch dome made from Indian culture but a little damaged by westernization. The focus has been on how he has managed to present the impact of westernization on Indian culture with a style clad in good uniform of thoughts, how he has made a perfect balance between Indian culture and the western culture in his poetry, how he has painted the woman in different roles and finally how he has amazingly combined the secular and religious themes in his love poems. Above all, this study, undertaken in the manner presented in this work, will not only provide the reader with insights into the workings of poetry, but also encourage him to think afresh about the nature of that complex phenomenon we call westernization.

Keywords: eccentric, sensuality, hollowness, miracle, voyage

Introduction

A bulk of Ezekiel's poetry shows the impact of western culture on its theme. Mainly the love and sex themes do not show the exact Indian culture. There are many factors that have attracted people's mind towards the western culture. Owing to the colonization, India's people were influenced by the British culture. They had read the western literature and many had been to Britain. So, Ezekiel was likely to incline to depict the British culture in his poetry. Moreover, Ezekiel himself had been to many western countries, had read the western literature, and even stayed for some years in the surroundings of western culture. Therefore, to escape from the impact of western culture was impossible for him. The charm of the poetry of TS Eliot, WB Yeats, WH Auden, and Ezra Pound was working on his mind. It is clear when one reads his poetry. In the description of the debased city women he seems to have been influenced by modern European poets like TS Eliot and others.

Ezekiel's love poetry is a mixture of many shades and shapes, i.e. romantic love, conjugal love, devotional love, sensuous love, sexual love, urban love, pastoral love, etc. He has made an upheaval in the poetry of love with his ardent imagination, eccentric mood, realistic approach, satirical power and faculty of fusing sensuality with spirituality. Ezekiel's love poetry is a record of varied moods of the conflict between emotion and intellect, of war between sense and spirit, the body and the soul. He has sensuous apprehension of thought. For Ezekiel love is the true business of living as he says:

"The True business of living is seeing, touching, kissing,
 The epic of walking in the street and loving on the bed ^[1]."

In the poem "Paean", the lover takes pure delight in the description of the gorgeous activities of the body. Here body seems the sinews of love:

The body is awake. It is not fed

By what it feeds on. Upright, it goes forth
 To meet the world, but declining homewards
 Boldly accepts the geometry of love,
 With arm and armpit puts the mind at rest ^[2].

The "Love Poem" is full of thoughtful and romantic love that creates a "storm of love" in the persona's mind and it saves him from "tumult of despair":

Your sad and thoughtful love I heard
 Above the tumult of despair.
 You bent your head, I touched your hair,
 The sign was timed without a word. ...
 You learnt so well. Your gentle hands
 Were eloquent, your eyes were bright.
 You wondered why you feared the night
 So many years in barren lands....
 And storms of love I wish for you ^[3].

In *The Unfinished Man*, the reader finds the same love theme in "Love Sonnet". The poem has a fine setting. It depicts two lovers who go to the Malabar Hills and view the sea from the café on the top of the hill. The sea appears to them as a passionate and perpetual mystery. This makes them meditate on their own fate:

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 ^[4].

In these lines, there is ambiguity about the word "ambiguous". The lovers want to be separated from the crowd but they can't get away from that existence. At the end, the word "die" is used in the sense of love. The lovers want to be separated from the

crowd so that they may make love to each-other. And having arrived at the peak of love experience, they wouldn't mind dying.

Another poem in which Ezekiel reveals the romantic affairs is "Event". Here, the protagonist is in the company of a woman who adores him as an intellectual and a romantic lover but she does not understand him. The absence of genuine communication makes their relationship superficial. It is significant that the girl reads a book by Ignazio Silone entitled *Wine and Bread* (The actual title of Silone's novel is *Bread and Wine*. What Ezekiel wants to emphasize is that her interest in literature is so superficial and love in her heart is so prominent that she can't even get the right title of a novel she has bought):

Time offers this ironic gift
As in the middle of the way,
They feel its flow become a drift
And lose the will to act or pray.
She lay and waited, watching me,
Like a child in her nakedness,
Uncertain if it ought to be,
Awe-inspired and motionless.
Irrelevantly, then, she said,
'I bought a book some years ago
Entitled greatly *Wine and Bread*
It's true I never read it though [5].

Such lines are bound to find an echo in every heart because Ezekiel says what everyone often feels. But with a characteristic turn of thought, Ezekiel exposes the hollowness of the relationship which is built purely on sexual passions:

She stroked my hair and talked away
About a film she had admired,
A speech she heard the other day,
And Art of which she never tried.
She thought that I expected this,
So, with her love, she offered it,
Naively honest as her kiss,
And hoping that I liked her wit
Remote from the exploring act
I knew that both were undefined,
Who lived in day-dreams, not in fact,
Reflection of the cheated mind [6].

Ezekiel has amazingly combined the secular and religious themes. "Something to Pursue" is an intriguing poem in which he tries to combine the theme of love and sex with poetry and prayer so as to establish some sort of improvised unity. In the poem "And God Revealed", he believes that only love can help us in expanding the horizons of our mind. Love can confer the fantastic dreams, it will not let one go to cheat one's destiny. He manages to differentiate the physical love from the spiritual love as "We were not made for love alone, my Love" holds broader conception of love in the form of spiritual love. Here love appears "liquor sweet" and "most divine." Both the love passions and spirituality are yoked together by "A thousand small intricacies of brain." The concluding stanza of the poem is the ne plus ultra of the unification of physical and spiritual love:

We were not made for love alone, my Love,
Although our flesh and bones would have it so,
A thousand small intricacies of brain

Hold my blood-streams captive, which will not flow
Freely to serve the ends of love, until
They know the various ways of men,
The soul in solitude and God revealed [7].

In the poem "Marriage", a wish of "touching grace" for eternity, desire not to be separated from his beloved and the initial excitement of lover are described in these haunting lines:

Lovers when they marry face
Eternity with touching grace.
Complacent at being fated
Never to be separated [8].

Here, Ezekiel uses words with great freedom. The Word "Grace" has a religious association, yet the "touch (of) eternity with grace" (Brackets mine) conveys the idea of endless joy. The second stanza evocatively brings alive all the joys of the body. The following lines show so powerful a flow of love passions that the lovers are wordless. They feel immortal due to the power of love and here the lover shows what a miracle love is!

I went through this, believing all,
Our love denied the Primal Fall.
Wordless, we walked among the trees,
And felt immortal as the breeze [9].

The theme of sex has a very prominent part in Ezekiel's poetry. He realizes that sex, like hunger, is a basic human instinct that needs satisfaction. For a lover it is a woman's shape and body that excite the passions. While he talks about the relationship between the body and the mind, he explicitly says that the needs of body cannot be ignored:

Then wanting to be whole again he prayed:
That this his body may belong to him
And let him understand, that in the working
Of his mind the body takes a hand [10].

The importance that he gives to the body reminds the reader of Donne's lines:

"Loves mysteries in soules doe grow,
But yet the body is his booke [11]."

Ezekiel's poems about sex have a remarkable frankness. When one reads Keats and Donne in comparison with Ezekiel's love and sex poems, he finds Ezekiel far more forward. Ezekiel's image surpasses that of Keats "Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast [12]", in his commenting on a woman's body. He can luxuriate in the "threshing thighs and breasts [13]", can touch with his "finger-tips the breasts of harlots [14]", "sanctifies the violence of desire/Clasped with arm and breast and thigh [15]", can find "Hills, valleys, swelling river-banks,/all those landscape images/(in) praise of breasts and buttocks (Brackets mine) [16]". And how frankly he speaks in the following lines!

I will begin—but how should I begin?—
with hair, your hair,
remembered hair,
touched, smelt, lying silent there
upon your head, beneath your arms,...
wonder
of hair, secret
In light and is darkness

bare, suffering with joy
Kisses light as air ^[17].

The second last line of the above quotation reminds us of Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" in which the poet's "heart aches...being too happy in thine (Nightingale's) happiness ^[18]" (Brackets mine) in the same way Ezekiel's heart suffers from the overdose of the joy of sex. He is equally candid about the themes of love and sex in the poem "Love Song", where he wrote this naked fact:

Beneath your dress I find you young,
Rewarding to my explorations, certain,
Soft and flowing
And tender to the touch of love ^[19].

Sex is once again the predominant theme in *The Third*. In many poems about sex, he is as naively honest as Yeats and Donne, as from Yeats:

"All things can tempt me from this craft of verse:
One time it was a woman's face ^[20]".

In the same strain the love memories haunt the lover's mind all day long. The nightmare of gorgeous body proves that his love is built on the body and survives till the body is there:

At night the body gives itself, by day
It pretends...pausing before mirrors
Or in the street, awkwardly ignoring
Its constant agitation, until a smile
Or shaken breasts restore its memory ^[21].

Moving between imagination and reality the poem suddenly goes on to assume a spiritual tone in the last stanza. Sex is now treated as a source of blessedness:

Always the body knows its nakedness.
The first baptism is not in water
But in fire. The limbs are shaped to lock
And love, the eyes— they say— show a strange light,
And lives are welded which exist apart ^[22].

Here sex seems to be a pleasing thing. The protagonist wears "sexual eyes/whose hunger makes him wise ^[23]". It is the limbs that attract his mind to love and love provides "a strange light" for eyes to understand love per se. Woman is a "beast of sex ^[24]" for him. His motives are sexual, aesthetic and friendly. He likes the body in its nakedness. To understand the sexual passions, it would be fairly well to quote the poem "Motives", as a whole:

It's easy to remember
your body in its nakedness.
I dwell on it
as on a landscape
or a beloved painting.
Not the total form only
but the details interest me.
My motives are sexual,
aesthetic and friendly
In that order, adding up
to bed with you.
Your skin is white
but black or grey
would do just as well.
The eyes are large,

so are the breasts—
does size matter?
I don't think so.
Your thighs are full and round,
thin and flat I'd love them too.
There go my aesthetics.
In making love,
certain things
for which I have a taste
you do not quite accept;
you dress again
rather hurriedly,
you do not speak,
you look away,
you are somewhat quickly over.
Never mind. I adjust myself.
So much for my sexual motives.
I stay with you, close to you,
so perhaps the friendly motive
absorbs the other two ^[25].

But the protagonist seems not to be satisfied here; he further more frankly speaks of the sexual process in the poem "Jewish Wedding in Bombay".

Still later,
we lay on a floor-mattress in the kitchen of my wife's
family apartment and though it was past midnight, she,
kept, saying let's do it darling let's do it darling
so we did it ^[26].

And still more frankly he speaks of sexual intercourse in the poem. "Nudes 1978":

'I love undressing', she has to say,
as she undresses. The verbal
and the visual join in her. ...
'Now', she claims,
You are within me. Aren't you
within me?' And she makes me say, 'I am ^[27]'.

Femme fatale

The woman appears in myriad forms as a mother, a wife, a seductress, a mistress, a whore and as a sex object in Ezekiel's various poems. In depiction of human relationships in a wider perspective Nissim Ezekiel has earned for himself a place of exceptional eminence as a poet who has probed into the intricacies of modern man's and woman's nature. The picture of woman that emerges from his poems is a bleak and negative one except in a couple of poems. He sees her again and again as an object of sex, an annoying truth and an invariably impending menace, an obstacle to a person's moral voyage. She appears as a femme fatale, an agent of corporeal corruption, sensuality, defilement and lusty passion so she is viewed as an inferior being to do immoral human activities of all sorts. Here it seems that the westernization has wrought havoc on woman to the full. She is viewed as a stereotypical image of sex: "naked Cuban dancer ^[28]", "harlot of dream ^[29]", "a flickering lamp ^[30]", "a leech ^[31]", "sexual eyes ^[32]", "fish of sex ^[33]", "threshing thighs and breasts ^[34]", "beast of sex ^[35]" etc. In "Something to Pursue", the woman is projected as one who "Haunts the bed in flesh or dream ^[36]". The seductress is presented as a murderer who killed her husband with indifference:

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 symbolized by stone, by stone ^[37].

In the poem "To a Certain Lady", the poet probes into the perplexing relationship between husband and wife and the wife is portrayed in a negative mould. The sensual atmosphere marked by wife's bashfulness is followed by the ensuing hate caused by fatal troubles. The persona's faith that the love between them would be able to overcome such adversities remains failure and the disenchantment is suggested by jerky, disconnected, choppy and interjectory sentences such as "lady, don't nag! ^[38]" And "O.K. I don't love you ^[39]" and so on. The strain of the negative image of woman which is painted in the preceding collection continues in the next collection, *Sixty Poems* also. The relationship which a man tries to establish with a woman is based on sex and she is presented as a whore as suggested by the word "trade" used in "Situation":

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 ^[40].

The next collection, *The Third*, offers a wider range of roles to woman as a wife, mistress, sex object etc but all in a negative mould. There does not seem much distinction between the wife and the mistress, for both of them behave almost identically when stimulated sexually, which can be witnessed in the poem "Night and Day". Frequently, the reader meets the blurred identities and reshuffling roles of women in many poems. The relationship between man and woman in the later poems is marked by inevitable despair. "Tonight", "For Love's Record", and "The Language of Lovers" portray woman as a seductress causing ruin. Owing to the seducible role, the persona speaks of the woman as one who "Loved until my world was waste ^[41]." The persona's awareness of the tempting and destructive properties of woman scares him off the woman. Thus, the relationship between the persona and his femme fatale never touches mutual trust but creates a kind of distrust and disbelief that keeps him at a distance. The poems such as "Conclusion", "Encounter", "Aside", "At the Hotel" and "In the Queue" present her in negative roles; the habits of the seductress as have often been viewed are coupled with inferior objects that is evident in the following lines:

That women, trees, tables, waves and birds,
 Buildings, stones, streamrollers,
 Cats and clocks
 Are here to be enjoyed ^[42].

Moreover, the female body is the only possible rendezvous for the persona and the woman. He tries to understand the language of female body and its movements. In "Event", the quest for the woman to establish an intellectual relationship with the persona is thwarted by the persona's prejudices against woman as an intellectually inferior being. The persona realizes that it is only through her body that she can realize any relationship. Contrarily, she deliberately assumes this role thinking that the persona expects her to do so, as the persona narrates:

She lay and waited, watching me,
 Like a child in her nakedness,

Uncertain if it ought to be,
 Awe-inspired and motionless ^[43].

The destructive influence of woman is re-described in "Case Study", a poem on matrimony. Marriage, "the worst mistake of all ^[44]", means the ruin of man who, if married to such a lady, is fated to be "damned in that domestic game ^[45]". The poems published between 1965 and 1974 reaffirm that however much the poet may try to change his perspective on woman, the woman as a sex object remains there:

Unasked, as the day
 declined, she brought out her small
 breasts, to be caressed ^[46].

The various facets of woman as a whore, seductress and quiescent woman reappear all over his poetry. Thus, it is, undoubtedly, established that Ezekiel's poetry is written on the border between the territories of Indian culture and those of the western.

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