

Chapter V

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Nissim Ezekiel: The Playwright

This research is an attempt to study Ezekiel's shift to drama and as a dramatist and not as a poet or poet-dramatist. Ezekiel's sensibility in his playwriting is definitely poetic. One cannot separate him as a poet and as a dramatist. Though Ezekiel's output in dramatic field is very little; one cannot deny him a place in the world of drama. Ezekiel has tried his hand mostly with One Act playwriting. Except for *Nalini* his other plays are 'One-actor'. These types of plays demand concentration on one theme as well as economy in style, setting and plot.

Nissim Ezekiel is primarily well known as a poet. In comparison with his corpus in verse; his dramatic output is very little. Yet he has influenced and nurtured not only budding generation of poets but also dramatists. Basically he was a poet but shifted to playwriting for a while. He answers about this shift in a very simple manner; 'he wrote plays because he felt like it'. But he didn't continue with his playwriting for long. Ezekiel stopped playwriting after producing very short six plays. Some of his plays are not available even in book form. The paucity of his dramatic output does make it difficult to study his development as a dramatist.

Ezekiel has furnished his plays only for stage performance. Though they are very short in length; Ezekiel has focused on the dialogues rather than the plot. His characters assume identities and perform actions invented by the author. His plays have universal themes. There is a presentation of stark realities of life. He has avoided using traditional framework of a play-within-play. In comparison with the larger and longer plays of Shakespeare; Ezekiel's plays are very short. Because of the short length of the plays Ezekiel was unable to introduce sub-plots in his plays. But the plots which he has selected show the contemporary social issues of the society in his plays, expressed even in his poems yet not read by a large public as they are expressed in verse.

Ezekiel has presented reality by the sustained debate among the characters. In *Nalini*, Nalini points out the hypocrisy of Bharat and Raj. She attacks them for their attitude towards women. Though Ezekiel has a very short list of plays to his credit; he has tried his hand in almost all subtypes of drama. Ezekiel's *Nalini* is a comedy in three acts. He calls it a comedy but the characters suffer from inner conflicts. They make fruitless attempts to hide their loss of identity. Ezekiel has juxtaposed this seriousness with trifle humour. It shows signs of a conventional comic playwright. Ezekiel mocks at the commercial world where everything has monetary purpose.

Ezekiel tries to explore the human nature. He shows how everybody tries to justify one's self to the outer world. He also shows everybody's awareness of one's own weaknesses. Ezekiel has presented these weaknesses through his characters with the help of dialogues,

confessions through split personalities. We encounter the real as well as fantasized Nalini. Ezekiel has dramatized it by using dream technique; as the repressed desires can be fulfilled through it. Ezekiel has shown how women are visualized only as a commodity.

Marriage Poem is subtitled as a tragi-comedy. We actually find the combined elements of both tragedy and comedy. The play is full of tragic and comic events. Tragic comedy is a term which is usually applied to the plays in which events apparently lead to catastrophe, but in which happy endings are brought about by changes in circumstances. *Marriage Poem* can also be called a domestic tragedy. It deals with the serious theme of extramarital affairs. It also involves middle class characters, settings and conflicts. It is concerned with the everyday events in the lives of contemporary people. Ezekiel's depiction of domestic tragic elements is in the light of Henrik Ibsen, Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams.

Marriage Poem centers on the theme of unhappy marriage. Ezekiel shows that the men have more opportunities than women who are culturally and socially bound. In spite of Mala's real affection, Naresh keeps flirting with other women. Ezekiel has presented the theme of extramarital affairs with a different treatment. He focuses on the seriousness of the problem in the modern context. The play is nothing but the display of common events of everyday life to which Ezekiel has given a dramatic form.

The Sleepwalkers: An Indo-American Farce is the third among the series of *Three Plays*. Ezekiel's shift from Comedy to Tragi-Comedy and to Farce is very rapid. The play represents an Indian's obsession for everything that is American. The play is a foolish show, a ridiculous sham of the Indians. It is a light humorous play in which the plot depends upon a carefully exploited situation rather than upon character development. There are some boisterous comic situations with ludicrous actions and dialogues.

Ezekiel has used mask technique in *The Sleepwalkers*. The Indian characters wear masks in the play as seen in the works of other Indian playwrights too. But Ezekiel's masks are more revelatory than concealing. The purpose behind the use of masks is to present characters as types and not as individuals. Ezekiel presents an insensible dependence of the Indians on the foreigners. Ezekiel tries to point out the slavish mentality of the Indians. Ezekiel satirizes the Indian's attitude and foreigner's superstitious behaviour. The Indian characters in the play are shown in different positions but they lack identity. They only crave for the publicity. This publicity mania is also portrayed through *Nalini*.

Ezekiel portrays his characters as thoughtless persons. He has dramatized the binary opposition between intellect and thoughtlessness. Ezekiel has presented this paradigm very successfully. Ezekiel's characters conceal their sufferings. They are the individuals alienated from the society. Ezekiel has also used the device of music very successfully in his plays. The music adds to the intensity of the situations. Whatever Ezekiel has presented is conventional but he has created his

own convention. So far as the modern Indian drama is concerned Ezekiel's delineation of the characters, settings are really unconventional.

Song of Deprivation: A Comic Morality in One Act represents the deprivation of values. Though it is a very humorous play; Ezekiel has tried to give moral lessons through it. He attacks the lovers who are more interested in sensuous love. He also satirizes the hypocrisy of the contemporary society. He and She are the only characters in the play that not named even. The dialogue between them is very erotic. The conversation between the characters shows their unnatural approach towards sex. They just want to fulfill their suppressed desires. As compared to other plays the dramatic rapidness is very slow in this play. The dialogues are repetitive, dull and not structured well.

As a poet the natural medium of expression for Ezekiel should be poetry itself. But Ezekiel shifted to drama for a while; this shift can be seen in comparison with Eliot and Yeats. Perhaps Ezekiel chose this different medium because there was real paucity of Indian English drama. In comparison with novel and poetry; the production of plays was less in quantity as well as in quality. Ezekiel felt drama was a suitable genre for the expression of his sensibility and the desire to belong to a wider humanity historically. Ezekiel perhaps also found the dramatic genre an easier medium of expression for his universal themes common to both his poetry and drama. Poetry is no doubt imaginative reconstruction of life, but the real presentation of life requires a stage for its dramatic representation to the ordinary people. Thus, Ezekiel's literary effort towards this shift is a commendable effort.

Ezekiel's shift from poetry to playwriting can also be seen as a need of change which is basic human tendency. But the shift was never casual as it resulted in production of good plays. As compared to other traditional or contemporary dramatist's Ezekiel has given a very small corpus of plays. The plays which he has written may not be outstanding but they make their own impact even though they have been relegated a backseat. As stated earlier Ezekiel himself never thought much of his plays but as he put it: "Everything that I've written, I feel I had to write. It was all an extension of myself..." Thus his dramatic corpus is not only the fulfillment of 'this urge' but a worthy contribution to art that cannot be side tracked. And definitely this corpus portrays him as an astute dramatist and his place and influence in Indian drama cannot be overlooked.