# Chapter III

## An Analysis of *Nalini: A Comedy in Three Acts* and *Marriage Poem: A One Act Tragi-Comedy*

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***Nalini: A Comedy in Three Acts***

*Nalini: A Comedy in Three Acts* (1969) is the only full length play among the six plays of Nissim Ezekiel. It is based on the playwright's personal experience and observations. Ezekiel has worked as an art critic of Times of India and also as a manager in Shipli advertising. He was familiar with art exhibitions of painters like Nalini and the fake world of business executives. He has subtitled *Nalini* as a comedy which reveals hollow life of business executives. But it is more a tragedy of human life which is successfully portrayed through the characters Bharat and Raj.

The play opens humorously and ironically. Bharat is listening to music, gets disturbed by the entrance of Raj. Bharat's sitting still shows the idleness in his life. It is seen through his dialogue when he quotes Pascal:

> "the sum of evil in the world would be much diminished if men could only learn to sit quietly in their rooms... I am busy diminishing the sum of evil in the world." (Ezekiel.1969.9)

A very trivial situation is interpreted seriously. We find the juxtaposition of opposites: action and inaction which creates the humour.

Nalini, a young woman painter, wants an exhibition of her paintings. Bharat and Raj are advertising executives. Nalini approaches Raj for his help. Raj wants to win favour of Nalini, so he approaches Bharat to ask for his help to organize publicity for Nalini's paintings. Bharat too agrees to help as he has more contacts with the journalists and especially "contacts in the right places." (Ibid.11). But Bharat is totally ignorant of art. He cheats people by manipulating words. The hollowness and insincerity of his life is revealed in his encounter with Nalini, who rejects his help.

Ezekiel portrays the two worlds: the hollow world of young executives and the contrast between the two Nalini's – one of Bharat's dream and the other real. The life of Bharat and Raj is full of insincerity. These business executives are portrayed as skilled players of the game of deceit. Raj, who has no idea about the art of painting, is interested in the exhibition of Nalini's paintings. When Bharat asks him whether the paintings are worth exhibiting, he replies:

"Does it matter? They are paintings, canvases with colour on them, plenty of colours in various forms." (Ibid)

*Nalini* is a social satire on the executives like Bharat and Raj. They are modern but hollow inside and full of vanity. Ezekiel shows that the

glitter and show is modernity for the middle class urban people. There is nothing as such creative and serious in their life. It is shown through Bharat's dialogue:

> "I can't build anything; I can mix only with people like myself, who dress like me. I can't stand people who don't dress well." (Ibid.12)

The cause of Bharat's suffering is the false notion of superiority. Nalini exposes him by pulling his mask. She does not fall prey to the magical words of Bharat. Nalini exposes Bharat's two lives – the outward and the inward.

The pretentiousness and snobbery in the world of middle class is exposed. Bharat is a person suffering with alienation. The Nalini which he expects to fulfill his sensual desires lets herself to be seduced by him. It is only the illusion of Nalini. But the dream gets shattered when he encounters the real Nalini. The real Nalini is an intelligent woman but not as attractive as in the dream of Bharat.

Raj is also struggling with alienation. It is seen through his dialogue:

> "I have eyes and I can see, I have ears and I can hear. Though I do nothing about it, I feel everything." (Ibid.21)

Raj's helplessness is not fixed. He feels that he could get rid of his passivity. He narrates his first love affair when he was just thirteen years old. He describes his early experiences in a school hostel where he used to go to meet Sally. He climbed over a glass-covered wall and fell. His bleeding knees were being licked by her. But they never met in future. The sadness is abiding on him and he continues to live in isolation. His failure to communicate continues right from his childhood.

Raj and Bharat are alienated at the same level. But Raj's alienation is more tragic because it is related to his personal experiences. On the other hand, Bharat's alienation is related to brain. It is related with business of living and in this way it is static and isolated. The way in which he visualizes his other self in his meetings with Raj and the two Nalini's is the evidence of his alienation.

Raj and Bharat both encounter the first Nalini which is visualized by them. She is just a female for them; a dreamt woman. They praise her unnaturally. When Bharat compliments Nalini as, "you are not a virgin." (Ibid.37), she slaps him. Now the first Nalini disappears and the bell rings for second Nalini. But she does not appear. The bell continues to ring loudly like a roar.

Nalini cannot be considered a character, as there are two Nalini's. Nalini is a dream as well as a reality. The reality is Bharat and Raj's development of alienation, the different states of isolation. The symbol of ringing bell is skillfully handled by the playwright. Each scene starts with a ringing of the bell. At the end of the play the noise of bell goes beyond

control. Raj and Bharat, pretending to be sophisticated gentlemen are tormented with confusion. They are helpless before the external force in the form of a bell which over-powers them. This force is used to show the reality of their isolation.

Being a poet foremost, Ezekiel was very keen in his selection of verse, but as a dramatist too, he deals with situations very seriously. He controlled the significant experience by using stylized expression of ideas. When the situation went out of control, he transferred it into a symbolic metaphor like the bell. We find the conversation between Raj and Bharat in this vein; especially when Raj replies to Bharat's accusation:

> "That everybody does, except the saints. The important thing is to keep both lives in some sort of control and not let them drift apart too much." (Ibid.18)

This leads to the two lives-the inner and the outward. And perhaps this is true of Ezekiel as a poet and as a dramatist too.

This is the point at which Ezekiel's plays and verse come close together. As a poet, he reveals "the ordinariness of most events." Ezekiel tries to show recurrently, the ability to keep ordinary events from dissolving into insignificance. But he also uses the ordinary events as a measure to control his verse for preciseness. Thus his drama portrays reality of life.

Ezekiel's success in keeping the same values in his plays as of verse is in question. His verse is significantly marked by silence, his experiences are precise. His sensibility is totally lyric but with his plays it is not fully harmonious. This can be seen in the lack of action in *Nalini.* But the selection of a theme and the impact of the dialogues on the reader make the play dramatic, highlighting the dramatist in Ezekiel.

*Nalini* is both amusing and a disappointing commentary on the contemporary art scene in India. Raj and Bharat are ready to help Nalini towards the publicity of the exhibition of her paintings only because they can come closer to her and exploit her. The play is an attack on the artists who have become commercial and art critics who have no knowledge about art. The play is realistic and mirrors the vulgarity of the intellectuals. Ezekiel's characters have double personalities. They have inner as well as outward pretentious personalities.

Raj refers to himself as "I am not an intellectual." (Ibid.17). Bharat's reply is also very satiric, "That's what all my friends say, and everybody in my circle says it. I am not an intellectual." (Ibid). Bharat and Raj live in an illusion. They ignore the voice of conscience. This ignorance crushes their soul. Bharat thinks that action should precede thought. When he comes out of the fantasy of dreamt Nalini; the real Nalini fires him:

> "You're incapable of being truthful... but you just can't help shooting a line at me, hoping for the best... You've essentially a gambler." (Ibid.37)

Bharat and Raj's thoughts about Nalini show the prejudices of men against women artists. They generalize all women in a category. Nalini's severe commentary reveals this:

"You have a formula; you can't imagine an individual woman. You can't believe that a woman may want to create a world of her own just as a creative man does, a woman with a will to explore herself and the world around her." (Ibid.38)

Nalini explains the creative process to Bharat. According to her every piece of art involves creativity.

Ezekiel shows the immaturity of whole middle class through Bharat and Raj. They are the types and can be found anywhere. Ezekiel presents the shallow world of business executives. The play presents the conflict of two selves which go in parallel with two Nalini's – one which he dreams as a woman fulfilling his sensuous desires and the other the real Nalini. Bharat is an exploiter of innocent artists. Ezekiel shows through Nalini, the struggle which a pure artist has to do for establishing herself. Perhaps somewhere in the Nalini's search lies the reflection of Ezekiel the poet's search for the dramatist – a search for a new creative man hidden behind the known poet. Maybe he too struggled with this new genre to establish himself and break the well known type into which he had fit as a poet. New avenues always offer challenges end to an established poet like him, the genre of drama has maybe a new spice to life.

Ezekiel has structured the play very successfully. There is conversation between two persons in three scenes. Bharat and Raj discuss their hopes and wishes in the first act. Nalini enters in the second act; both in the dream of Bharat and in reality. It shows that Bharat is a day dreamer and not a person who runs with facts. And in the third act, Raj and Bharat discuss the aftermath of the situation. Bharat's reference to himself as an intellectual is only a satire on his false notions about himself. Ezekiel shows pseudo – intellectualism of Bharat.

The play ends as a burlesque. Bharat and Raj try to come out of the schizophrenia of Nalini. They conclude that creation comes out of suffering only. Ezekiel dismisses the hollowness of both Bharat and Raj. The ringing of the bell at the end announces a revolution for the consumption of these men. Ezekiel has mirrored the vulgarity of the middle class in India. The disappointment of Bharat and Raj is portrayed as follows:

Raj: She's gone.

Bharat: What next?

Raj: Call the second Nalini.

Bharat: Wait a minute. Let's drink and recover form the first Nalini, we shouldn't have upset her. She can't help being what she is, just as we can't help being what we are.

Raj: All the same, call the second Nalini.

Bharat: Are you sure you want her? She'll be even more difficult. She may upset us.

Raj: Do you think so?

Bharat: Certainly, certainly. But you're right. Let's call her. We have no alternative. We have no alternative. We can't stop now. (Ibid.51)

Ezekiel's plays escaped from the critical scrutiny because of irregular occurrence of his dramatic output. He stopped writing plays after just six plays. Some of them were not published in book form even. That makes it difficult to study his development as a dramatist. Ezekiel raises the gender issues and depicts the women characters as the object of 'male gaze.' (Mulvey, Laura. *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*). It deals with how men look at women. It shows the power which men exhibit over women.

Bharat and Raj look at Nalini as a stereotyped image. Ezekiel demolishes these stereotypes by presenting the real Nalini as a woman of greater intelligence. The male attitude towards a female is clearly seen when Raj calls Nalini as, "You are 35-24-35." (Ibid. 49). Ezekiel tries to liberate women from the male gaze. The exhibition of Nalini's paintings is a mere vehicle for Raj and Bharat to come closer to her only physically. The real Nalini is shown as less attractive. She stands in contrast with Bharat's fantasized Nalini. The real Nalini is a modern woman who does not want to be dependent on anyone. She rejects Bharat's advances. Ezekiel explores the inability of the male to accept rejection from a woman. Bharat and Raj think of Nalini as a readily available commodity but she turns them down.

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Being rejected, Bharat and Raj try to reconcile the real Nalini. But it is not possible for them. Bharat's reaction "Damn her." (Ibid.45) shows their hollowness. Ezekiel ridicules all men who cannot visualize a woman as a human being. Ezekiel satirizes the superficial lifestyle of male characters and exposes traditional attitude towards women.

As a dramatist Ezekiel performs his socio-cultural function well, even though as a pure dramatist perhaps does not attain the heights of the poet he is. Yet one cannot deny him a place in the world of drama.

***Marriage Poem: A One Act Tragi-Comedy***

*Marriage Poem: A One Act Tragi-Comedy* (1969) is the second play among the *Three Plays* of Ezekiel which were published uniquely by Writers Workshop, Calcutta (Kolkata). The theme of *Marriage Poem* is domestic. Ezekiel's poetry is marked by his favourite theme: marriage. The play deals with marital relations and extramarital affairs. Though Ezekiel has subtitled this play as a one act tragi-comedy, it is more a comedy than tragedy. "The play tries to depict the light and shade that comprise the social institution called marriage." (Karnani.1974.118)

Ezekiel has introduced six characters in this play. Mala is a housewife and Naresh, her husband. Mrs. Lall is a neighbour. Leela is a friend of Naresh. Another couple in the play is Malati, a socialite with her husband, Ramesh. The play represents the monotonous life of a couple Mala and Naresh. It is a 'drab' life, as Ezekiel has portrayed "A drab, middle-class drawing-dining room..." (Ezekiel.1969.59). Ezekiel like an

astute dramatist has made clever use of lights and sound effects which play a very significant role in the play.

Ezekiel has given this play the title, *Marriage Poem.* Though it is a play, he calls it as a poem. Ezekiel's poetic sensibility is dominant over the playwright in him. Ezekiel wants to connote that the married life is like a poem; it is a song. If it is sung well; it gives all the heavenly pleasures and happiness in our life. If there is no rhythm then there will be sorrows and pains and thus married life will be melancholic.

Ezekiel has shown how the extra-marital affairs can wreck a family. Naresh only pretends to love his wife Mala who loves him honestly. Naresh always flirts with his friend Leela. So the married life of the couple is full of conflicts and quarrels which is the source of humuor in the play:

> Mala: Is Mrs. Guha one of your friends? I didn't know it.
> Naresh: Mr. Guha is one of my friends. Mrs. Guha is Mr. Guha's wife. (Ibid.61)

The married life of Naresh and Mala is unhappy. Mala is confused and anxious because she is unable to understand Naersh's behaviour with her. Naresh's advances towards Leela create an ocean of doubts in Mala's mind. Mrs. Lall tries to console Mala but gets shattered at the thought of the possibility of her husband's unfaithfulness, as of Mala's. Mala starts justifying herself as a best partner and how her husband is going wrong, "He doesn't know what's good for him. He wouldn't be happy with

another woman. I look after him well." (Ibid.66). Mala wants to reconcile happy marital life. In comparison to Mala's reaction; Mrs. Lall's looks farcical:

"I would make a terrible fuss. I would harass my husband night and day till he gave up her . . . I'll complain to the home minister..." (Ibid.65)

Mrs. Lall's reaction increases the sufferings of Mala. Mals's affection towards Naresh is real, she cannot give up him. But Naresh continues to flirt with Leela. He also flirts with Malati; Ramesh's wife and speaks poetically with her. Naresh is aptly criticized by Hardy as, "for Naresh, marriage is a permanent contract based upon a temporary feeling." Naresh doesn't have real love for his wife Mala. This leads to constant quarrels between them:

Mala: ... Shall I pour out some tea for you?
Naresh: Yes. (Satirically) And dip a slice of bread in it for me. (She freezes) Put the slice of bread dipped in tea into my mouth ...
Mala: I will, I will . . .
Naresh: (Chewing) Thank you. That was delicious.
Mala: I love it too.
Naresh: (Raising his voice) I hate it. (Ibid.61)

Mala is the typical suffering woman who keeps complaining about her husbands extra-marital affairs. Naresh keeps meeting Leela for some time in a week. He even flirts with other women who come across him.

Naresh is responsible for the unhappiness in the married life. He ignores his duties as a husband. He doesn't remember minor tasks like posting a letter. He also forgets the most important events in the life such as the birthday and anniversary. Mala is portrayed as a poor creature who is confused about what to do to reform Naresh's behaviour.

Naresh can be compared with Bharat, an advertising executive from *Nalini*. Both live in a dream as well as a real life. They are unable to separate their fantasy from the reality. Ezekiel has skillfully combined realism with the fantasized minds of Naresh and Bharat. In spite of reality they keep on flirting with their dream girls. Ezekiel throws light on the typical married life and the problems which occur consistently. The base of married life is trust, belief in each other. The two wheels should go hand in hand; otherwise it'll wreck a family.

Naresh's persisting meetings with Leela lead to bitterness and tension between him and Mala. But Naresh never suffers; it is Mala, who is the sole sufferer. When Mala tries to reconcile Naresh's flirting with Leela, she finds him flirting with Malati who is Ramesh's wife. It shows that Naresh is fond of other women. He always talks about the freedom of an individual but he considers an individual as a man only. Ezekiel shows that the cultural bindings on women and men are always exceptions.

Here's Naresh's poetical speech in the presence of Malati:

"...All art, poetry, music, everything that is true and beautiful is for the single man. Even nature exists only when a man sees her alone. Only when he is alone, does she undress him..." (Ibid.74)

Mala is unable to understand Naresh's language of poetry. She doesn't like him to be poetical for another woman and Naresh finds it farcical to lose his freedom and follow a traditional track. Ezekiel portrays his characters with split personalities. They live two lives simultaneously.

Naresh and Mala who quarrel and compromise, finally come to a helpless reconciliation. They lack action; the conversation between the characters is the only source of interest in the play. Like *Nalini*, Ezekiel has used music in this play which adds to emotional shades of the characters. Ezekiel shows the compactness in the life of middle class people. The room in which the scene takes place is full of books, writing desks, toys all disarranged, shows the untidiness in the life of middle class people.

The characteristic conflicts of married couples are portrayed by the playwright. Ezekiel only makes pun on words. Mala always complains about Naresh but she wants to be loved by him. Ezekiel shows the ambiguity between relationships of couple. There are quarrels and fights between the couples but finally they never break apart. Mala's doubts get removed as the play leads to its desired end. But Ezekiel wants the interplay of dream and reality to go on. The end should be Naresh making love to Mala and she sleeps in peace. Ezekiel planned the play in a way that is not natural. We see that Naresh "raises his arms slowly in the

crucification pose against the door. Leela enters slowly, dream-walks towards him, wipes his face lightly with a handkerchief." (Ibid.80)

Naresh: (Opening his eyes) You! I thought you would never come back.

Leela: I'll always come back whenever you need me. (Ibid)

Naresh's dream is interrupted by the arrival of children. Ezekiel has used the appearance of children with a symbolic significance. The children are symbol of Naresh and Mala's love. They unite them with an emotional bond.

In this way, *Marriage-Poem* is a representation of complex husband-wife relationship. The monotony and disharmony in married life is portrayed by the playwright. Ezekiel explores the inherent psychological tensions in married life. He wants us to perceive the reasons behind failed marriages. Naresh is shown as a philanderer in spite of his wife's real affection.

There are four women characters in the play but except Mala, others are flat characters. Mala is portrayed as a middle aged woman of thirty-five and less attractive. Ezekiel has stereotyped Mala as a traditional, suffering Indian housewife. The other women characters are even more stereotyped. Mrs. Lall advices Mala to accept Naresh with his follies but when it rebounds on herself, she gets frustrated. Leela is portrayed as the 'other woman', interrupting the life of Naresh and Mala. Malati, a socialite is also depicted as readily falling prey to Naresh's

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advances. The colourless representation of women characters in comparison to male shows Ezekiel's hopeless attitude towards women.

Naresh's involvement with other woman gives him the pleasure which he thinks that he does not find in his wife. The situation is represented only through Naresh's eyes. The women remain subsidiary to him. The stereotyped images of women make them as just poor creatures in the hands of men. Though there are comic situations in the play, there is an underlying tragic reality. The married life is a responsive relationship and can only be enriched by mutual understanding.

The play is written for the stage performance. As Ezekiel has suggested visual effects with the fluctuation in music, the play is rather meant to be seen than read. When the characters speak, the music plays smoothly and increases where there's a pause. The audio-visual devices play a major role in the play because the characters in this play look less real. Naresh is the only character with some flesh and blood. As H.H. Anniah Gowda has said that Naresh reminds "Henry Harcourt Reilly of *The Cocktail Party*" (The Literary Half–Yearly.1973.14). The other characters are mere caricatures. The dialogue and the continuous rise and fall of music make the play stageable.

Ezekiel has successfully maintained the illusion of reality throughout the play. The main concern of Ezekiel's writing is to show the hollowness of human life. In *Marriage Poem*, the hollowness in the institution of marriage is developed. The thinking of husband and wife is different and this is the main reason of the problem. Ezekiel's characters

are mere types. They can be found anywhere. He portrays the urban middle class. He doesn't give much importance to the development of plot; rather he concentrates on effective and convincing dialogues. For Ezekiel, marriage and the man-woman interaction is really the main concern. Ezekiel's cynical view of marriage may be his own shattered marriage. At the end of his life neither his wife nor his children bothered to take care of him. He passed away due to Alzheimer's disease.

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