

## Love as the Subject Matter in the Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel

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Nissim Ezekiel (1924-2004)

### Abstract

The present paper seeks to examine the various dimensions of love as subject matter in Nissim Ezekiel's poetry. Ezekiel's poetry manifests love in its various forms ranging from ideal to physical to spiritual. Ezekiel's passion for flesh is so strong that despite his best effort to subdue his tone, he fails as is evident in his various love poems. This basic feature gave the readers profound, evocative and meaningful love poetry. In his love poems, we find him changing his tone quite often but the subject remains more or less the same—the flesh which at times distils in pure form of spiritual love.

### Three Strands of Love Theme in Nissim Ezekiel

Love has been the subject matter of a great amount of poetry in its various forms---ideal, sexual, matrimonial, etc. In the postcolonial period, Nissim Ezekiel has been acclaimed to be first and foremost a poet of love and many of his poems, specially his love lyrics, “deal with private experiences” (Introduction xxi).

Love in Nissim's poetry can be divided into three broad strands, namely, ideal or pure love, sexual and matrimonial. The first category of love is of pure love or love in its spiritual aspect. It is maintained that ideal love consists in adoration of woman without paying

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attention to the physical aspect of the relationship. Ezekiel asserts the need for love and considers it to be of prime importance. In the poem “In Emptiness” he says:

But this, I am sure, can never be:  
That I should shut the door on gods.  
.....  
And make no rendezvous with love  
I would rather suffer when I must. (*Collected Poems* 50)

Ezekiel affirms this view in the very first poetic collection, *A Time to Change*. In “Tribute,” the poet shows the innocence and gaiety of his love relationship. The following lines reflect these feelings:

I followed her, we joined the crowds,  
We drove the tandem cars, we cast  
A penny in the slot and won,  
Hung about and left the Fun-Fair last. (*Collected Poems* 62)

### **Nissim’s Concept of Love**

The poet’s concept of love can be understood when he juxtaposes songs, stars, winds and violins with love in the poem “A Song, A violin” in sixty poems. The lines run:

Salvation  
is in that song,  
that violin  
across the road;  
song and stars,  
violin and winds  
can be drawn  
closer to the great within  
where love is trapped,  
if it cannot speak  
to a Song, a violin. (*Collected Poems* 65)

### **Love Trapped inside the Heart**

Ezekiel speaks of love trapped inside the heart seeking release and expression. He projects love as a force. In his view, love is almost a divine urge. Ezekiel’s portrays his depth of emotion and need poignantly in the poem “For Her” in *Sixty Poems*.

How much of me you leave untouched,  
And yet you touch me well. (*Collected Poems* 67)

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### **Touching and Being Touched**

The emphasis is on touching or being touched or emotionally affected. Ezekiel expresses his deep love with utmost sincerity and frankness:

With friends to meet and strangers too,  
You help me to encompass all. (*Collected Poems 67*)

### **Transcending the Bonds of Matrimony**

Ezekiel's concept of love transcends the bonds of matrimony. The following lines of "I told the Thames" reveal this concept:

I told the Thames  
I was afraid,  
Attracted to  
Another maid.  
Beside the Thames  
I watched the waves,  
And I was one  
Of passions's slaves. (*Collected Poems* )

### **Love Can Inspire Poetry**

According to Ezekiel, love can even inspire poetry. He says in "Creation".

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. (*Collected Poems 79*)

The fact of drawing inspiration for poetry from love is also found in "Townlore" in *Sixty Poems*.

Natural to this timely change  
Are kisses, and the clear light of words. (*Collected Poems 81*)

### **Both Spiritual and Physical**

It is a feature of Ezekiel's poetry that his love encompasses both the spiritual and physical aspects. The fact is abundantly clear in "Question" in *Sixty Poems*:

Is this the way to happiness?  
Prolonging kisses till the world

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Of thought and deed is dim?  
.....  
This laughing love of ours alone  
Is wise, and will remain,  
When all endeavour has been cooled  
By Time and mated to defeat. (*Collected Poems* 82)

### **Eternal and Sublime**

Nissim, thus, projects his love as eternal and sublime. It has depth and intensity of feeling and at the same time it is emotional, physical and spiritual.

Ezekiel considers love to be more important than any thing else. In “For Her” in *Sixty Poems* he says:

Love breaks the incendiary laws,  
Blazing in a high wind  
But staying good. The more you love  
The less you burn away. (*Collected Poems* 88)

Here, he emphasizes the intensity of true love and compares it to a bogging fire. In “Aside” Ezekiel further says:

No, one cannot imagine it,  
Except as a song  
In which we the lovers  
Are sung and saved  
From too much separation  
Love is the ultimate reparation. (*Collected Poems* 93)

### **Life Worth Living**

Nissim affirms that love ultimately makes life worth living. The poet makes an idyll like image in “Episode” in *The Third*.

We sat in silence, till she said:  
‘I like this tracery of leaves  
With moonlight coming through  
And of course the moonlight on the water.’ (*Collected Poems* 98)

A wonderful picture of two lovers having an intimate moment is made here by Ezekiel. A sense of warmth and closeness is felt. In “Encounter” in *The Third* Ezekiel contends that love is always right:

And after, sporting brown and green  
With her in white,  
I knew that love is always right. (*Collected Poems* 100)

Here, after a sexual escapade, the poet feels that love conquers all and that it transcends social and moral barriers. Ezekiel negates a life without love and passion. In “Insight” in *The Third*, he says:

Then bitterly of safe disuse  
To die with solemn dreams unshared,  
No fury sparked the fuse,  
The Passion never dared. (*Collected Poems* 102)

### **Personal Emotion and Conviction**

Ezekiel’s poetry is charged with the spark of personal emotion and conviction. His life and poetry have been interlocked with each other.

The plight of lovers is depicted most poignantly in “*Situation*” in *The Third* “The upshot of their meeting was a quiet despair. She never spoke her mind. He looked beyond her eyes” (*Collected Poems* 109). Further in the same poem, he says:

They did not say a thing to counteract despair.  
No planned to satisfy the hunger in their eyes. (*Collected Poems* 102)

### **Extra-marital Love**

We come to a pertinent point that Ezekiel engages in Extra-marital love yet his conviction is very deep. The intensity of his emotion makes the physical aspect less important and the relationship stands out in purity. In Ezekiel’s concept of love, physical gratification is part of real love and it cannot be ignored. The strength and passion of love is captured in the lines of “*The Language of Lovers*” in *The Third*:

Prodigious music of our silences,  
Dry-throated suffering and helplessness,  
This is the natural language of love. (*Collected Poems* 111)

“*Love Sonnet*” in *The Unfinished Man* captures the romantic mood and sincerity of love most realistically:

Our love has formed like dew on summer nights  
The wind has ruffled up your hair. (*Collected Poems* 120)

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## Idea of Love

One of the most beautiful poems of Ezekiel is “*Love Poem.*” In *The Exact Name*, his idea of love comes through:

Your sad and thoughtful love I heard  
Above the tumult of despair.  
.....  
And storms of love I wish for you. (*Collected Poems* 142)

Nissim captures the romantic pensive mood of lovers deeply in love. He successfully portrays the deep longing of lovers for each other. In the same poem, he says:

Within and outside every trance  
I lived with you, you spoke my name  
Repeatedly you spoke my name,  
To celebrate the ritual dance. (*Collected Poems* 142)

In this poem, Nissim incorporates both the spiritual as well as the physical aspects of love.

## Sexual Relationship and Love

The second aspect of the love poetry of Ezekiel is bodily relationship or sexual relationship. Sensualism is an aspect of modern poetry. Ezekiel aptly fits into the category of a modern poet as he deals most frankly with sex in his poetry. He has a liberal attitude towards sex and extra-marital sex. He has a penchant for sex and considers it to be essential for his poetry. He uses words with sexual connotations quite freely in some poems like breasts, thighs, buttocks etc. The first poem in which sex is implied is “*And God Revealed*” in *A Time to Change*. He says:

As Lover Love you know that I am lost  
In continents of thought and every urge  
To see, know, hear, touch and praise the earth. (*Collected Poems* 25)

Thus, we see that he considers sexual desire as absolutely natural and essential for him and feels it related to his thoughts and creative power. It cannot be disputed that Ezekiel is a man with a strong sexuality and that this has provided sustenance to the poet in him. As W.H. Auden observes, “Love may stimulate an artist indirectly and intensify his general vision of life; it does not often make him write love poems: their source is more commonly

egoism or frustrated lust” (295). In “*Lines*” in *Sixty Poems* Ezekiel projects the urgency of physical love:

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.  
.....  
Accept the long tormented breath  
And tremble in the thick of love. (*Collected Poems* 43)

### Passion

The above lines speak volumes of the poet’s strength of passion and his belief in it. A graphic description of the poet’s desire is found in “*Two Nights of Love*” in *Sixty Poems*:

After a night of love I turned to love  
The threshing thighs, the singing breasts,  
Exhausted by the act, desiring it again. (*Collected Poems* 47)

Nissim affirms the need for sex and indulgence in it. He adds:

With in a freedom old as earth  
And fresh as God’s name, through all  
The centuries of darkened loveliness. (*Collected Poems* 47)

We, here, see that he considers his desire for sex natural and pure even as God’s name.

### Sensual Description of Female Body

Ezekiel describes the female anatomy with special reference to hair in “*Description*” in *Sixty Poems*. The description is sensual. Although, Ezekiel does not shrink from sexual affairs yet in some poems, he decries this propensity. He says in “*I Wore a Mask*” in *Sixty Poems*:

Love again  
Is on the wing.  
But at the end  
The babe unborn  
Is weeping at  
The false dawn. (*Collected Poems* 72)

Ezekiel bewails the lack of freshness and innocence in the woman, he is making love to in “*Love Song*” in *Sixty Poems*. He says:

Beneath your dress I find you young  
.....  
soft and flowing .  
But you are old  
With the shop soiled wisdom. (*Collected Poems 74*)

In “*Nocturne*” in *Sixty Poems*, Ezekiel explores the complicity of love affairs. He bewails the futility of casual sex affairs which leave a sour taste of sin:

Desire  
Labyrinthine,  
The sweet smell of false desire.  
.....  
And is this all the Truth  
Of desire  
.....  
And all to win  
The sour taste of sin? (*Collected Poems 75*)

The same feelings are found in “*Situation*” in *Sixty Poems*:

And then the chips are down— recognize  
The haze of self-deception in our eyes. (*Collected Poems 43*)

### **Image of Lonely Woman**

Ezekiel draws the image of lonely woman in “*The Female Image*” in *Sixty Poems* who is the subject of fantasizing by young men:

This harlot of a dream  
Shall her belly know the lust of man? (*Collected Poems 68*)

In “*Delighted by Love*” Ezekiel makes an image of consummation in a temple:

By rituals holy in the temple  
Where life creates and is created,  
All kinships here are consummulated,  
By thrust of lust  
When all that burns in breasts or lips is sated. (*Collected Poems 82*)

### **Sensuality – Necessary and Unavoidable**



The poet has sensual thoughts which he feels are necessary and unavoidable and to be enjoyed. In “*Conclusion*” we find that Ezekiel maintains that all thin trees tables, waves, birds and women too are there to be enjoyed. “*At the Party*” in *The Third* tells of a man who goes to a party for making sexual exploits. The poem has erotic imagery:

Ethereal beauties, may you always be  
Dedicate to love and reckless shopping,  
Your midribs moist and your thighs unruly,  
Breasts beneath the fabric slyly plopping. (*Collected Poems* 98)

“*Gallantry*” contains a monologue addressed to a woman. It has a mocking love with sexual suggestively:

Your bosom likes me well.  
Or let me be humble,  
Taking in the thighs. (*Collected Poems* 105)

### **Sense of Guilt and Remorse over Indulgence in Carnality**

A sense of guilt and remorse is found in “*What Frightens Me*” in *The Third*. He feels guilty over his indulgence in carnality. He realizes that he has put a mask over the reality. Realization of his own weakness frightens him. “*For Lover’s Record*” in *The Third* tells of a woman gives to sex with different men. Yet, Ezekiel forgives her and does not consider her evil.

I found no evil in her searching eyes  
Such love as hers could bear no common code  
Vibrating woman in her nights of joy,  
Who gathered men as shells and put them by. (*Collected Poems* 110)

Ezekiel finds no fault in gratifying physical love. “*At the Hotel*” also in *The Third* is a poem where the poet is accompanied by a woman to a strip tease: “To say that Ezekiel sees in woman nothing more than her physical fabric is untrue. She is a butterfly of light who elevates and illumines earthly existence” (Raghu 35). The poet details with care the events:

On the dot she came and shook her breasts  
all over us and dropped  
the thin transparent skirt she wore. (*Collected Poems* 112)

### **Spousal Love**

An autobiographical note is found in “*A Jewish wedding in Bombay*” in the volume *Latter-Day Psalms*. There is a touch of humour when the poet says during the first serious quarrel between him and his wife she blamed him for taking her virginity. In “*Minority Poem*” in *Latter-Day Psalms* Ezekiel maintains that in marriage the husband loses his identity. He says:

It is not the mythology  
or the marriage customs  
that you need to know,  
it's the will to pass  
through the eye of a needle  
to self-forgetfulness. (*Collected Poems* 236)

In “*Song to be Shouted Out*” from *Songs for Nandu Bhende* in *Latter-Day Psalms*, we come across a wife who is always nagging her husband. The husband says:

Shout at me, woman!  
Pull me up for this and that.  
You're right and I'm wrong. (*Collected Poems* 242)

In this poem, we find the husband belittled and cowed down.

In “*The Way It Went*” in *Latter Day Psalms* the poet humorously relates how time passed by without her keen aware of it. He gets married at twenty seven years of age, then has children and before he even realizes it, becomes a grandfather. He ends in a light vein:

O well, I'll be damned,  
Is all that I can say. (*Collected Poems* 271)

*The Second Candle* is the last poem written by Ezekiel. It contains domestic accord and Harmony. Two candles are lit by the poet's wife, one to thank God and the other to ask for Grace. A beautiful picture of domesticity comes through the lines. Bliss and contentment are reflected.

The three broad categories in which the love poetry of Ezekiel can be divided have been discussed. It is also necessary to discuss a sense of failure which the poet encountered in respect to love.

### **Sense of Failure**

The first poem in which Ezekiel feels a sense of failure is “*Planning*” in *A Time to Charge*. He says:

We could not figure out what it is went wrong;  
Harmonised the impulse with the general tone,  
allowed for everything, except a long,  
Arresting arm, the unseen, the unknown. (*Collected Poems* 32)

This failure is in relation to his marriage.

The second instance of failure is found in “*A short Story*” in *Sixty Poems* when the poet was innocent and naive. He wanted to win the affection of a girl but she repeatedly rejected him. He started writing to a Spanish girl. She also understood his intensions and rejected his advances with some advice. He says:

He learnt the lesson, kept his own counsel,  
No longer wanted to be loved or understood  
But rightly broke with the Spanish girl. (*Collected Poems* 67)

We see how his innocence was not appreciated and he had to suffer humiliation. Another poem with a sense of failure is “*Sonnet*” in *The Third*:

At first the beloved merely finds fault,  
Later comes the slow unresponsive kiss. (*Collected Poems* 107)

Nissim, here, points out the fact that staleness and boredom comes into relationships after the passion wears off. We also find a sense of failure and a feeling of being cheated in his poems. A poem with an Autobiographical note is “*Poem of Separation*” in *Hymns in Darkness* which deals with the love for a woman who finally walks away from him. He says:

I ask you to pause  
And to hear it again  
But you sweep ahead to hear  
Another music.  
It’s true we cannot live on echoes. (*Collected Poems* 195)

### **Poetry and Love**

An important aspect of Ezekiel’s poetry is that he relates it to love. In “*Something to Pursue*” in *A Time to Change*, he says:

Out of doors, where the winds of God  
Make our minds sweet with love. (*Collected Poems* 18)

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Nissim relates poetry and love again in the poem “*Failure*” in *A Time to Change*, we get a hint of the close relationship Ezekiel feels between love and poetry:

All my waiting turned to this :  
Unrenewed eyes and rhymes repeated. (*Collected Poems* 31)

It is felt that he draws on inspiration from love. Staleness in love is repeated in verse. Ezekiel also accepts the needs of the body as Linda Hess calls Ezekiel “a poet of the Body” (qtd. in Raghu 34). In “*Creation*,” he is very clear. This is also in sixty poems:

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. (*Collected Poems* 79)

### **A Personal Quest for Identity**

Ezekiel’s poetry is a personal quest for identity, commitment and harmony in life. We can also affirm the relationship of Ezekiel’s poetry with love by the fact that he has written the maximum number of poems on this theme i.e., love be it marital or extra marital physical or spiritual and short lasting or long lived. Thus in the poetry of Ezekiel, the concept of love is not narrow rather it is complete, comprehensive and wholesome.

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