

# Ezekiel's Poems: A Collection of Modern Themes

Dr. Chandni Rani

Guest Faculty in English,

Department of Extension Education,

Bihar Agricultural University, Sabour (813210), Bihar, India

Email address: [anuchandni90@gmail.com](mailto:anuchandni90@gmail.com)

## Abstract

The present paper deals with the thematic aspects of Ezekiel's poetry. His poetic career counts a period of over half a century during which he proved himself to be a modern poet with creative sensibility. Being a contemporary Indian English poet, Ezekiel portrays the kinship between man and woman in concrete manner. His mind is occupied with the theme of love and sex and dominates his poetry. Ezekiel's realistic and human attitude of love and sex is reflected in diverse moods and situation. He has a strong poetic talent for representing the woman's features in a number of ways. So, the paper also discusses the theme of women's physical appearance, which, to Ezekiel, is a wonder of creation. Ezekiel's interpretation of Biblical psalms in his own way has also been pointed out in the paper.

Keywords: Man and woman, Love, Sex, Poetry, Sensibility

A dominant theme that runs through Ezekiel's poetry is woman in her various roles in society. This theme has been the subject of Indian poetry since antiquity. The ancient Indian poetry in Sanskrit and Prakrit has focused on the multiple roles that women have been stereotyped into as beloveds, court dancers, temple nuns, etc. This paper analyzes this tradition that continues in modern Indian poetry from the post-colonial perspective. Here it has been explored that the kind of poetry Ezekiel wrote on this subject and shows whether the features of acculturation can be located in his poetry and challenge the concept of the East as place of exoticism. It also states-that the poetic mode used in these poems by Ezekiel may be defined as 'Naturalism'.

'Naturalism' is a literary mode developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, characterized by detailed description of human sexual relations, sexual instincts. Its method is almost scientific, objective and documentary in quality. In 'Naturalism' human beings are propelled by determinism that draws its strength from Darwinian thought. Though Naturalism has been associated with the genres of prose fiction but the detailed starkly naked imagery is also found in poetry. Ezekiel's poetry can be placed in the tradition of 'Naturalism'.

The woman has been a focal subject in world literature from the earliest fumbling literary efforts of man, and is equally true of India where the ancient religions, spiritual Vedic treatises and the Upnishadas abound in references extolling her role and status in the society. The famous Sanskrit excerpt from *The Manusmriti* that, "The Gods live there where women are worshipped" (*Manusmriti*, 53) may be claimed to be the ultimate pronouncement of admiration written anywhere in the world.

The poems revolving around woman's image in all its dimensions occupy a considerable bulk of Ezekiel's poetry and this has led some critics to regard him as a great poet of love. His love poetry is the poetry of 'here and now' in all its pitfalls and aversions. He makes no judgements towards the characters, but rather leaves us to decide how we feel about them. He states the facts and the readers decide. He tried to depict the harsh reality of life and depict the situation as it really is. Moreover, his characters do not question what they are doing.

Women keep on appearing again and again in various possible forms, but only a true understanding of sex can validate this metaphor and confer meaning to it. Woman is identified as mother, wife, whore, sex object, unattached woman, passive woman and seductress, with woman as an object of sex being the dominant image. But in some later poems Ezekiel's persona views women differently. K.D. Verma in *JSAL* refers to this as Ezekiel's positive view of woman (239). With his poems, he has attempted to provide a new perspective to man-woman relationship. He tries to identify himself with the expression of women in Indian tradition and man's attitude towards woman as depreciatory and devotional. The woman in the poem 'Conclusion' has been placed together with lifeless and derogatory objects like trees, tables, stones, waves, buildings, clocks, cats and birds. Women here are equated to animate and inanimate creatures of the macrocosm, thereby reducing them to non-entity. Like his predecessors, Ezekiel associates woman with sin and depicts a number of sinful women, but their sins are the by-product of the horrors of the metropolitan city. The city is lifeless, indifferent and inhuman. His 'Love Song' (Collected Poems 74) presents this defilement, "You are city-cramped, my love/ Only flesh remains what it was meant to be" (CP 74).

Ezekiel in his poems describes the pressures on the lives of the women and reduces them to symbols of sexual depravity. He has tried to focus on the physical aspect of the human relationship rather than emotional.

The Sonnet 'The Old Woman' traces the various shifts that take place in the woman's personality in her relation with man. The theme of husband-wife relationship has been explored in the poem. The portrait of the woman who once had a specific role-expectation has been summed up in the poem:

She lives 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 lives alone,  
Her ethic symbolised by stone, by stone. (*Collected Poems* 25, Lines 9-14)

Ezekiel's concern is a serious one and it finds expression in a number of poems in various ways. In 'To a Certain Lady 1' (Collected Poems 27), Ezekiel depicts the emotions of a couple. It is written in conversational tone and centres in the realization of marital love as a blessing. The poem has a five-part structure and each of the sections represents a different mood and tone. The first section recollects and describes the wife's virginal coyness as well as the persona's definition of life within this new relationship. The poem starts on a serious note:

At first you hesitated, in your white blouse  
And skirt of velvet, soft as hair,  
But finally arrived in nakedness.  
So, now, to meet the future,  
Drop your fear and come with me,

The best defence in love is just defencelessness. (*Collected Poems 27, Lines 1-6*)

He invites his beloved to join him in celebrating the feast of life with the firm conviction that all these hurdles simply test their attachment to the physical world. In the same poem he further says:

Life can be kept alive  
By contact with the unknown and strange,  
A feeling for the mystery  
Of man and woman joined, exhaustion  
At the act, desire for it again. (*Collected Poems 28, Lines 17-21*)

Similarly, the “Viperish desires of woman” (CP 32) and woman as seductress who torments the man is portrayed in the poem ‘Preferences’. There are two more poems that speak of woman as “seductress” and “as a beautiful object”. In ‘The Old Abyss’ (CP 48) persona comments about a girl and her alleged licentious conduct:

This girl, once married, with a child,  
But now alone torments  
The man she knows  
With such magnificence in movement  
(I have died beholding it)... (*Collected Poems 48, Lines 1-5*)

Ezekiel’s realistic and human attitude of love and sex is reflected in diverse moods and situations. He has a penchant and a strong poetic talent for representing the woman’s features in a number of ways. The poem ‘Description’ (Collected Poems 48) is written in free verse and the image of hair, a single element in the woman’s total composition has been rendered both poetically and with a touch of wonder, excitement and novelty. This poem reminds us of ‘Portrait of a Lady’, where the poet is aware of the wonders of the female body. He wants that the hollow men of the modern world, lacking in vitality and resonance, suffer miserably while the genuine survive with their real commitments.

In the next collection *The Third* (1959) woman plays diverse roles. In ‘Night and Day’ (CP 107) the poet observes that there is not much distinction between the wife and mistress, for both of them behave identically when sexually aroused:

Wives or mistresses  
Put up their hair, restore  
The silk or rayon swiftly shed  
When kisses called the blood  
To act again the ritual of mortality. (*Collected Poems 107, Lines 3-7*)

In the same manner, the poem ‘Episode’ (CP 98) blurs the image of wife with that of mistress in its discussion of a clandestine affair between a couple whose love was ruined by beggars:

Thus ended what was ill begun.  
She lied to be with me.  
I lied to myself.  
We sought romantic restfulness.  
God sent three beggars  
We went back to our separate bonds. (*Collected Poems 99, Lines 20-25*)

The woman lied to be with her lover and the image of a deceitful woman is dormant in the poem. In this poem the clash of personal preferences creates fissure in nuptial harmony. In 'For Love's Record' (*Collected Poems 110*), the image of non-attached woman making love is like a machine appears and the powers that the woman enjoys over men who are associated with her is frightening:

I watched the woman walk away with him  
And now I think of her as bold and kind,  
Who gathered men as shells and put them by  
No matter how they loved she put them by. (*Collected Poems 110*, Lines 1-4)

In this poem the poet articulates his animus against the female kind and maintains his distance from her in fear of her destructive power, because according to him she is a "sorceress". The use of the word "sorceress" in the following lines shows the poet's contemptible attitude towards woman:

With her I kept my distance (not too far)  
But heard the music of her quickened breath.  
Laughing sorceress to harlequins,  
Who gathered men as shells and put them by. (*CP 110*, Lines 9-12)

*The Unfinished Man* (1960) enjoys an important position in Ezekiel's poetry as "it testifies to his creative stamina and to his continued concern with the theme of man-woman relationship" (Verma 229). All the ten poems in this collection are exactly regular in form. All are fully rhymed, are written in regular stanzas and in iambic meter. All the poems are a musical delight and the musical metrical line used in all the poems abounds in rhythmical accuracy. In every poem a different rhyme scheme is used in order to create a fine fusion of subject matter and poetic form. In another poem 'Marriage' (*Collected Poems 123*) the image of the restrictive nature of marriage is effectively conveyed by Ezekiel:

Our love denied the Primal Fall  
Wordless, we walked among the trees,  
And felt immortal as the breeze.  
However many times we came  
Again, we came together. The same  
Thing over and over again.  
Then suddenly the mark of cain  
Began to show on her and me  
Why should I ruin the mystery  
By harping on the suffering rest,  
Myself a frequent wedding guest? (*Collected Poems 124*, Lines 10-20)

The poem traces the couple's diagrammatic journey from the world of innocence into the world of experience, symbolized in this context by "primal fall", "mark of cain" and "wedding guest". Here the poet delves deep into the traditional view of marriage and raises serious issues of sin and guilt. The married fellow is considered fortunate and privileged as a creature: "The joy of flesh and blood" (*CP 124*) is engulfing the newly married couple. Prof. Verma suggests that Woman is associated with sin (Verma, 239) and, thus, "mark of cain" is a symbol to remind man and woman that they need divine mercy to maintain their

relationship, which is understood by man as he refers to himself as a the “wedding guest”. (May and Metzger, 6) In this poem although both man and woman wear the “mark of cain” only the man understands its significance, whereas the woman seems oblivious to it.

Ezekiel’s fifth collection of poems *The Exact Name* (1965) also includes some poems on this theme, but with this collection there is a shift in the perspective on woman which can be seen in ‘Night of the Scorpion’ (*Collected Poems* 130). It points to the positive image of woman in Ezekiel’s later poems. Woman plays the role of a mother in ‘Night of the Scorpion’. The casual tone in the poem serves as a mask to the drama that unfolds for twenty hours as the masses and septic work on a cure through prayer, science and incantation. The poem has an ironic structure where the force of superstition and age old belief is pitied against the scientific temperament. The problem of evil and its proliferating effects are deeply imprinted in the Indian psyche and even in a simple incident of scorpion-bite peasants look for too much – sin, redemption, rebirth. Ezekiel beautifully depicts Indian mentality in the following lines:

May he sit still they said  
 May the sins of your previous birth  
 be burned away tonight, they said  
 May your suffering decrease  
 the misfortunes of your next birth, they said  
 May the sum of evil  
 balanced in this unreal world  
 against the sum of good  
 become diminished by your pain. (*CP* 130, Lines 18-26)

Here, the mother is portrayed in a self-denying role. Dr. Shakambari Jayal’s study of ‘Woman as Mother’ in the Indian Epics points to the fact – “that such women were willing to die for their children, thus functioning as protectors to them” (149).

In another poem ‘Poet, Lover, Bird Watcher’ (*Collected Poems* 135), the persona views woman with understanding, “To force the pace and never be still / Is not the way of those who study birds / or women. The best poets wait for words” (*Ibid.*, 1-3). Likewise in ‘Virginal’ the persona views the woman with sympathy because she is a spinster who is “Remote from the prospect of a wedding kiss” (*CP* 138). So the persona concludes his address to the woman with the statement, “The universe is much too small to hold/your longing for a lover and a child” (*CP* 138).

An anthology edited by Pritish Nandy entitled *Indian Poetry in English* (1947-1972) includes two of Ezekiel’s poems, ‘Cows’ and ‘Servant’ that focus on women.

The poem ‘Cows’ is meant to celebrate his mother who is a devoted educationist. When she goes out to collect subscriptions for her school, she is hindered by the presence of cows on the pavement. This is the cause of her complaint:

She knows that cows are holy  
 worshipped by the parents of the children in her school.  
 Even god ought not to clutter up  
 the pavements – that’s her view.  
 She is not against beliefs: believe  
 what you like, she says,  
 but get out of my way. (Nandy 16)

Another personal poem 'Servant' where Ezekiel's mother tells him about the ill treatment that their servant receives as they get married in an age they should not:

My mother  
sees the Neals on back and thighs,  
provides the ointment,  
Over tea and sighs  
describes to me what she saw  
and how these people are.  
I am absorbed in news of brutal stories brought  
to my breakfast table  
from every corner  
of the Godless world. (Nandy 15)

In 'Nudes-5', the poet describes a woman- who visits him only to avenge the infidelity of her husband:

It's inconceivable  
that he's not sleeping with  
someone these days, have my  
fling? (CP 247)

She feels that her husband who has a sense of humour almost like the poet's will be amused to know of her affair:

I'm sure he would be quite  
amused to know that I  
am here with a stranger,  
free, frank, and in his words,  
another beautiful. (CP 248)

In a series of nine lyrics grouped under 'Passion Poems' the poet persona continues to probe the relationship between man and woman. In writing about this theme, he adopts both subjective and objective points of view and discusses the secular and religious aspects of love within this man-woman relationship. In these poems Ezekiel holds the ancient Sanskrit poets as his ideal and describes love and sex freely. Sex and sexuality are a part of life. He believes that in order to accept a work of art one has to affirm sensuality. Ezekiel says in 'The Loss' (CP 216), which is a part of his 'Passion poems':

I have lost my reason –  
let it go.  
Did I create this woman  
untamable and yet  
willing to be tamed?  
Only Shiva, meditating  
could be immovable  
in her moving presence. (I-8)

In 'On Giving Reasons' (Collected Poems 215), Ezekiel describes a woman who gives six reasons to the poet not to lie down with him:

She gave me  
 six good reasons  
 for saying No,  
 and then  
 for no reason at all  
 dropped all her reasons  
 with her clothes. (CP 215, Passion Poems IV)

Ezekiel's Miss Pushpa in 'Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.' symbolizes the unattached woman who has an ambiguous existence in traditional India, and her decision to travel abroad is a symbolic gesture on her part to move out of such an ambiguous existence

Thus, the perusal of Ezekiel's poems reveals his sincere commitment to the theme of love, passion and human relationship. In most of the poems, his persona is the protagonist but there are some in which he is an observer/commentator. Yet in his relationship with women, he finds them filling biological and societal roles of mother, wife, mistress, seductress, whore and sex object. Even though on the basis of the analysis of the poems one can conclude that women have been viewed as sex object, one cannot ignore the wide frame for this image, broad enough to accommodate such descriptions as "your loveliness makes all things hard / To bear that are not beautiful" (CP 42); "Great Woman beast of sex" (142) and "I want you back / with the rough happiness you lightly wear / supported by your shoulders, breasts and things" (217).

This wide frame of reference alerts us not to lose focus on the image of woman in the man-woman relationship in 'A Woman Admired', 'Night of the Scorpion', 'Minority Poem' and 'Cow' because in these poems "woman" is portrayed as creator, protector and integrator. Hence we find that the theme of love, passion and human relationships recurs throughout Ezekiel's poetic cosmos. The poet also draws our respect for women by delineating them in multiple roles.

. Ezekiel, through his 'Latter-Day Psalms' rejected the supremacy of the European culture and interpreted Biblical psalms in his own manner. He has transformed his favourite passages from Jonah and Job into modern poems. They aptly combine religious strain in an unorthodox way and with modern consciousness. He tried to reshape certain psalms of *The Book of Psalms* – a constituent of the *Old Testament*, in humanistic and modern terms. He does not sing the songs of God's perfection. His attitude towards God is unorthodox and unadoring. Without challenging God's glowing powers and providence, Ezekiel has his say – sly, sure, sensible – in accordance with the spirit within him, moved by his experience of life as it is in his day. (Khullar, 221)

The modifier "Latter-Day" in the title underlines the irrelevance of the Biblical Psalms to contemporary consciousness which is concerned with the immediate and the real and as such these old Psalms need to be retouched and appropriated so that a compromise formula could be evolved to seek God (Mishra, *Poetic Art* 137). Ezekiel as a Latter-day psalmist is more rational and pragmatic. Ezekiel himself said in a *Journal of Indian Writing in English* that these psalms are "Only Post Judiac-Christian" (qtd. in Narayan, *JIVE*: 36).

In 'Latter Day Psalms – I', Ezekiel speaks against "the counsel of the conventional" (CP 252) rather than against the counsel of the wicked. (*Old Testament*, 1060)

There is no meaning in meditating day and night "in the law of the LORD" (*Old Testament* 1060, 1.5) whereas for Ezekiel, simple meditation and no work means negation of life and therefore he says, "He does not meditate day and night on anything / His delight is in action" (CP 252).

Ezekiel is not against meditation in some psalms but he wants that faith should not be taken as a substitute for action and hence action and meditation should go together. He does not believe that:

He is like a tree  
 planted by streams of water,  
 that yields its fruit in its season  
 and its leaf does not wither.  
 In all that he does, he prospers. (*Old Testament*, 1060)

Ezekiel believes that God belongs to all and salvation is not reserved for few chosen ones and God does not discriminate between his own people. In the Holy book, David ends the 'Psalm 3' by saying, "Deliverance belongs to the LORD / thy blessing be upon thy people (*Old Testament* 1062, 11.17-18). Ezekiel explicates:

Salvation belongeth unto the  
 Lord. It is not through  
 one or other Church  
 Thy blessing is upon  
 all the people of the earth. (*Collected Poems* 254)

'Latter-Day Psalm-3' parodies 'Eight Psalm' of *The Book of Psalms* and declares, "Thou maddest him to have dominion over the work of thy hands" (*Old Testament* 1067, 11.11-17). Ezekiel's appropriation betrays a criticism of modern life which has brought disaster on natural habitat and environment.

'Latter-Day Psalm-4' is poet's own version of 'Psalm-23' of *The Book of Psalms* and questions the faith of David regarding God as the protector of all creatures:

The Lord is my shepherd;  
 I shall not want.  
 He makes me to lie down in green pastures;  
 He leads me beside the still waters. (*Old Testament* 1067)

Ezekiel on the other hand is not willing to be under the care of God and is not ready to surrender human identity and responsibility. He wants to be led from idleness to work and must perform his duties in life, "When my soul is restored / I walk the path of self-righteousness" (*CP* 255).

To sum up, indubitably Nissim Ezekiel deserves appreciation for the choice of themes for his poems. As a modern poet of modern world he maintained his position so well that his collection of modern themes fascinates the readers in every way. With frankness and subtle openness, he has beautifully and logically portrayed the theme of Love, Sex, Man-woman relationship, Women in various roles, Life in the city and Understanding of Biblical psalms with contemporary consciousness in his poetry.

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