CHAPTER V

EZEKIEL'S HUMANISTIC PLAYS
The plays selected for examining based on Nissim Ezekiel’s humanism in chronological order are *Nalini* (1969), *Marriage Poem* (1969) and *Don't Call it Suicide* (1993). The three plays are subjected to a critical assessment to see how and to what extent Nissim Ezekiel succeeded in writing a humanistic play. All the three plays reveal Nissim Ezekiel’s humanism. The plays show Ezekiel’s awareness of life and problems of the people around him and his appraisal and criticism of those problems in the context of the wide humanity and mankind.

**Nalini**

The most ambitious full-length play of Nissim Ezekiel, *Nalini* consists of three acts. The play is on a social comment with its interesting witty dialogues. Ezekiel’s *Nalini* is a comedy in three acts. Mallikarjun Patil declares the play, *Nalini* as a social satire. The play begins with the presentation of two young friends – Bharat and Raj. Patil says “Ezekiel tries to show the immaturity of a whole class through the portraiture of two young men as a burlesque – not with a
bang but with a whimper." He makes human feelings the main material of his play. Because of the lingering of humanism in him, he asserts the importance of man and human values in the foremost front.

When the play opens, Bharat is disturbed by Raj who is listening to music. He is sitting still and "busy diminishing the sum of evil in the world." Raj comes to seek the help of his friend for the publicity of Nalini’s exhibition. For the earnest request Raj made, Bharat agrees certainly to help Nalini for the publicity of her exhibition. Ezekiel portrays Raj as a selfless character begging for the sake of his friend’s benefit. From Bharat is drawn out the willingness and readiness to help others in need. Barat enthusiastically says what he feels.

Bharat: I like to help people. The kind of help I can give people is limited by the kind of person I am. I can’t increase India’s production of eggs. I can’t work for a Family Planning unit. I’m not qualified to be a teacher in a school or a college. I have no business sense. [Act I]

Honesty and frankness is revealed from the expressions of Bharat. He does not show any reluctance for the help seek from him. However, he also admits his limitation of domain in rendering help. And we have the typical foreigner’s view that reigns supreme above all that Indians opine. The American man who works in the Peace Corps and helps to increase India’s production of eggs is impressed with Nalini’s painting. And funnily enough, his wife is working in a family planning unit. One is trying to increase, the other is trying to decrease. Unlike these foreign experts, Bharat takes stock of himself. He can’t create anything.

Bharat: 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. [Act I]
The play takes place in an attractive small room neatly furnished with books, modern paintings, excellent furniture, and beautiful lighting arrangement. A soft classical music too is played. Bharat, the advertising executive owns the room. He talks in a serious note by quoting Pascal, who says, “the sum of evil in the world would be much diminished if men could only learn to sit quietly in their rooms.” This utterance of Bharat, the scene and setting leave us in no doubt that he is an intellectual but as the sequence follows his real identity gradually appears. It is worthwhile to mention here that Nissim Ezekiel’s essential attitude towards the unreal and the fake had been stated long back in poetic terms in his poem “On Meeting a Pedant”, Nissim Ezekiel writes:

Words, looks, gestures, everything betrays
The unquiet mind, the emptiness within.

While Raj and Bharat talks about how they should help Nalini in the presentation of her exhibition, Bharat brings Angela. She is neither a painter nor a writer. Bharat goes out with her just because she does not talk nonsense. But he finds himself unable to explain his discontentment. He says, “The less women talk, the less nonsense they talk.” Though he goes out with her, Bharat seems to disapprove of this woman for her lack of commitment. It appears that such an incompatible company remains a nagging preoccupation with Nissim Ezekiel. This is an ideal desire that Bharat cherishes although he does not at all understands its significance. Nissim Ezekiel depicts the two self of a man from the utterances of Bharat. He brings out the double standard of life the people of his contemporary lives.

Bharat: We are modern only as it suits us, but we don’t fight for the modern against the dying and the dead. We are liberal only as it suits us, but we don’t fight for the liberal against the orthodox and the tyrannical. We are advanced only as it suits us, but we don’t
fight for the advanced against the backward and the primitive. [Act I]

Nissim investigates and presents the social realities of his period through his characters. The play is both ironical and ambiguous. But the characters have vividly expressed the existing societal conflict. Every now and then, Bharat and Raj discusses different topics in Act-I, exposing the surface layer and inner layer of human life. Ezekiel's *Nalini* at once exposes the exploitation in the field of advertising and depicts the sad plight of some sections of educated Indians who find themselves alienated from others. Each new topic of Bharat and Raj is linked up to that of Nalini's art exhibition. Again, Raj considers himself not intellectual because he does not understand the big questions and the big answers of Bharat. The "big questions" with the "big answers" are merely a series of admissions that exemplify Bharat's hollowness. Fritz Blackwell calls this hollowness a type. In regards to this Bharat tells Raj:

Bharat: That's what all my friend say, everybody in my circle says it. "I am not an intellectual". They read the best books, they see the best films, they are in the theatre whenever a play is produced, but try to discuss any important questions with them in a serious way and they are embarrassed. They say, "I am not an intellectual." [Act I]

The play is punctuated with typical Nissim Ezekiel's humour and his concern with the irony of opposites – the question of action and inaction. If there is no action, there is no trouble. The humour at this point is about being a saint or a non-saint with women. Again, Bharat accuses Raj for living two lives – that of the public life and the inner life. Raj does not deny the allegations but states:

Raj: I live only one life. It may be dull from your point of view, but it's safer.
Bharat: I don't think you live only one life. I think you live at least two lives, the public life and the inner life.

Raj: That everybody does, except the saints. The important thing is to keep both lives in some sort of control, nor let them drift apart too much. [Act I]

According to Raj, everybody except the saints live two kinds of life - the public life and the inner life. What is important is keeping them under control in equal balance without letting them drift apart from each other. On his saying of this, Bharat comments that Raj actually talks a sense. Ezekiel though unearths man's hypocrisy but keep intact with his sense of humanism, which is remarkable from what Raj says, "If I work honestly, the smell and taste of life are good."\(^8\) Bharat and Raj, though quite unlike each other, rehearse the role of hollow, modern man of city. Ironically enough, they consider Nalini wholly ignorant of the art of painting but the sequences further show that this again is a futile supposition. She turns out to be serious, conscious and well versed in her art. Bharat imposes and re-imposes himself upon her even after he is fully exposed. Raj is revealed only towards the end of the first Act as a romantic, lonely, agonised, shaky and non-conformist person. Though he lives too much in the present, the hangover of his adolescent experience with Sally makes him fully nostalgic and unassuming. The focus of the dramatist is, however, on Nalini and Bharat. They are put in contrast to each other to reveal the difference between the genuine and the fake. The tools of irony and contrast are generally brought into use. Bharat exposes the advertising world as well as himself.\(^9\)

Bharat: In my profession, we rely heavily on confidence. Confidence, bravado, poise, the power of positive thinking. [Act: I]

Between them, Bharat makes long speeches most of the time while Nalini observes and makes sly remarks. It is the dramatist's intentions to reveal the
character of Bharat and by doing so expose the fake and pseudo intellectual world on the stage. In fact, the intellectual pretensions of the central character have been the focus of the drama.

In Act II, Bharat and Nalini discuss how and why they should hold the exhibition of Nalini’s paintings.

Nalini: I’ve done quite a lot of work this year. I’d like to sell some of it.

Bharat: Is that important to sell?

Nalini: It is, to me. I don’t want to be dependent on my parents very much longer. [Act: II]

Nalini’s statement clearly shows the sincerity in her work and her desire for a financial independence. Nissim professes in the play that Nalini is a responsible daughter who will not suck and waste her parents’ money. A self proclaimed art-expert, Bharat tries hard to outwit Nalini, who is the real artist. Though he tries hard to persuade Nalini on his understanding of art, it only reveals his dim knowledge on the subject.

Bharat: Shall I be honest with you? If you were some other painter, good or bad, man or woman, I would say what I said to you (Glancing down at the pictures in his hand and imitating himself). They look interesting, every interesting. You’re trying to express some very personal feeling here.

Nalini: (Startled) You mean you’re not sincere?

Bharat: I’m sincere enough to tell you now that I don’t understand painting, least of all modern painting. [Act II]

Bharat no longer boasts but rather surrenders now to Nalini for his ignorance of art after his boastful claim of his efficiency and his mastery in this
field. Nalini asks him why he spent his time and energy promoting art and helping artists. He enjoys doing it and likes helping people, which gives him satisfaction. From his professional imposture Bharat has now acknowledge his emptiness and incapability. He simply and frankly confesses why he chooses art in the following:

Bharat: What else can I choose? I can't do this kind of work in any other field. I'm not that sort of man. I can't help to uplift the masses, you know. And the politicians can ask me to go to the villages till they're blue in the face. I can't go and you can't either, if it comes to that. I have to do something in addition to my job. If you'll allow me to be still more honest, there's prestige in art, intellectual respectability and all that. [Act II]

Bharat’s pseudo-intellectualism and lack of genuineness offends Nalini. This is an important issue in the play. Anisur Rahman goes to the extent of saying:

The Art-Scene and intellectual pretensions of the central character are, in fact, the main focus of the drama while all other things are merely clichés designed to build an atmosphere of the play.¹⁰

The fact is that Bharat promotes art and artists not because he understands them, but because it brings social prestige. Between art and artists, it is the latter that he understands better, but again not with real psychological insight. Nalini on hearing Bharat’s speech tells him that the admission of his weakness is only his sheer hypocrisy and does not signify his honesty. She further states that the trouble with Bharat is that he is incapable of being truthful while he is essentially a gambler. Bharat seems to utterly fail in convincing Nalini of his simplicity.

Bharat: Very well, then I'm unreal. I am nobody. I am nothing. I don't matter to anybody or anything. I
can’t be sincere. I can’t be truthful. I can’t build anything I can’t create anything. I have no future. I have no past. I am not a revolutionary. I’m not a reactionary. I’m not an Indian, I’m not an English man, I’m not a businessman. I’m not an intellectual. I’m not an artist. I have no caste, no community, no nationality, no culture, no morality. But I’m a man I’m a human being. I’ve got feelings. I’ve got needs. I love music. I love women. I love good food. I love a strong drink. I’m alive. I live. I enjoy myself. I laugh. I even suffer sometimes. Yes, I’m capable of suffering. I think and I am, Yes I am. I don’t know what I am but I am. You can’t wipe me out. You can’t cancel me out. [Act II]

In the play, Bharat is projected as multi-dimensional character. First, he is an imposture, then he is a confessor. When Nalini could not accept the openness of his heart, he at last declares himself, unreal, nobody and nothing. Nevertheless, Nissim Ezekiel has very beautifully presented him as a man who realised himself a human being with all the feelings of a man. He is the man who enjoys and suffers. The complexity of human mind, human feelings and the human value is the main material and the core concern of this play, *Nalini*. The play may be viewed in the humanist perspective with humanism as the theme.

Bharat narrates his incomprehensibility of art to Nalini but is able to comprehend an artist, because an artist is a human. He therefore, understands women. Nalini clarifies to Bharat that she is not women but a woman and Bharat can’t imagine an individual woman. Their arguments and Nalini revealing her mind is a sure proof of Nissim’s humanism.

Nalini : 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 the will to explore herself and the world around her. [Act II]
The traditionally suppressed woman wants to create a new world to call her own. She desires to explore herself and the world that’s around her. Nalini wonders about the lives of the artist ever since she had started painting seriously. She gradually began to understand that every time she created a painting, she created herself. The change of her painting transforms her character too. She could not remain changeless. One afternoon she experienced some strange and frightening thing while she was painting. She was startled, as if a ghost entered the room. She trembled a bit but continued to paint with a steady hand. As she increased the speed of her brush strokes, the painting began to change before her eyes. The picture of her painting became very different from what she had in mind for it. Surrounded by chaos, she thought she was ruined. Somehow, the chaos was soon clarified; the forms of her painting emerged distinct and transparent. She now sees a peculiar painting, which her eyes had never seen in life or in art. The product of her painting gives both joy and terror. R.Raj Rao writes:

The painter, Nalini sees herself as being divided “into two persons”. One, obviously, is the everyday Nalini, unimaginative but surrounded by friends. The other is the creative Nalini who “suffered from some unimaginable upheaval within her. She is alone, separated from humanity.” The first Nalini describes the condition of the second as one “of madness.” Freud was right in this regard to pronounce, “the artist is insane.”

The first self of Nalini feels sorry for her other self. She pitied her, she was afraid for her. But she also envied her at the same time. The second person trembled, wept, laughed and shook with the tragedy and comedy of life, as she could never do. In this condition of her madness, she looks with the eyes of God. Her painting creates the future as God created the world out of nothing.
Nalini soon realises that this woman who seemed to be painting for her with the will of some force she knew nothing of, is coming closer to her, to be one with her. She did not allow herself to be overtaken. Thus, she keeps herself at a distance for she wanted to be saved. On the other hand, she can never become an artist by keeping a distance of herself from this mad woman. Rather she needs her experiences to be a great artist. At this juncture, Bharat, who previously was a self-styled connoisseur of art but ignorant of art places a very remarkable question to Nalini. The question is, "Does that put me outside the pale so far as you are concerned?"12

Nissim Ezekiel presents Nalini as a sensitive woman with a complex problem. But she at last tells Bharat "art is not the only subject of our discussion."13 The way Nalini expresses her concept of art and reality clearly presents Nissim's accommodating nature and his understanding of reality. Nalini who had earlier disliked Bharat has now shown a sympathetic attitude to him. This acceptance and sympathy is a mark of Nissim's humanism. Nalini further states:

It is freedom, which includes the freedom to create something new. Look, I'm not a scholar or a learned person, at home in the world of concepts. I'm only a painter. But I want to take up a position, generally speaking, which is related to my experience. It is this. Things change and things remain the same. Events can be predicted and events can be unpredictable. We can repeat or we can explore, discover, invent. Generally speaking, I want to be on the side of change, the unpredictable, exploration, discovery, invention, in short, the future, the evolution of the other woman within me, who must one day become me. [Act II]

Nissim Ezekiel portrays Nalini as a very decisive and emancipated woman at the end of the Second Act. She wants to be a new woman with
freedom to create something new. She prefers to be on the side of change with discovery and invention. The play, thus, represents Nissim’s humanism based on his awareness of life and problems of the people around him and his love for humanity.

Marriage Poem

*Marriage Poem* is a very simple one-act play, which centres round the failure of adjustment of a couple, Mala and Naresh. The development of the plot is related to Mala’s frustration and suffering for the cause of her husband’s extra-marital relationship with another woman. Nissim Ezekiel probes a subject already tackled in many of his poems. It is a cynic’s observation of the failure of a marriage. There are dreams in plenty but reality surfaces, a harsh and brutal truth.¹⁴

Nissim Ezekiel sub-titled his play *Marriage Poem* as “A Tragic Comedy.” It is definitely more a comedy than a tragedy, as both characters are hardened in their attitudes. The wife always tends to think negatively. Even when the door does not bang, the wife makes an issue out of it complaining that it banged. It is not late by Naresh’s standards when he returns home after a day’s work, as he finds Mala still having her tea, but she has waited twenty minutes and that’s pretty late for her. Mallikarjun Patil says:

Like Hardy, the hero of the play Naresh thinks that marriage done in haste cause regret and repentance. So, Naresh has no love for his wife Mala. As a result, their married relationship ends in skirmishes and inanities.¹⁵
The play is full of the elements of sarcasm and irony revealed from the dialogue of Naresh. Nissim depicts the lack of understanding creeping in between the working husband with that of a non-working wife. Mala is also the embodiment of Nissim’s humanism. Mala tirelessly is willing to serve her husband, though he only turns out to distort all that she thinks and says. In a way, she is so innocent to understand the complexities of her husband’s mind. Perhaps, the simplicity in her heart fails to catch the satirical tone of her husband.

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. [Act I]

According to Anisur Rahman,

*Marriage Poem* represents the dull and drab life of a couple, Naresh and Mala, who quarrel, and compromise, love and hate, and finally strike a helpless reconciliation with life itself.\(^6\)

The other characters Mrs. Lall, a neighbour, Leela a lover of Naresh and a couple Malati and Ranjit, kept appearing one after another on the scene but the focus on the play is on Mala and Naresh. Naresh loves his wife but also flirts a little with Leela.

The drama presents the drudgery of a middle class family in a typical Indian situation. There is hardly any action or event in the play. Apart from the
vivid details of the scene, musical crescendo plays an important role in intensifying the emotional shades and moods of the characters. The scene of action is a faded drawing dining room with thin lighting from overhead bulbs. The room is heavily packed with bookcases, dining table, ill-arranged books, and a large painting is overlaid with dust. There is also a writing desk with papers at the right centre on which files and books are strewn. Toys on a small mat thrown about indicate the presence of children in the house. 17

Mala even though nags her husband all the time wants to genuinely love and be loved. This throws light on the ambiguity of a relationship between husband and wife who love and hate, but never finally break. The unpleasant conversation goes on between the couples one disagreeing to what the other suggests. In Mala’s view, Naresh is always in a bad mood after a return from the office in the evening while he will act in a rush in the morning for the office. She asks her husband:

Mala: Are you in a bad mood all day in the office too? Or are the bad moods reserved for me?

Naresh: I’m always in a good mood in the office. [Act: I]

This answer naturally irritates her. Their quarrel does not end here. Mrs Guha’s dinner invitation is another bond of contention between the husband and the wife. Mala flatly denies going to Mrs Guha’s invitation for she does not like her.

Naresh: You don’t like any of my friends, do you?
Mala: Is Mrs Guha one of your friends? I didn’t know it.
Naresh: Mr Guha is one of my friends. (Satirically) Mrs Guha is Mr Guha’s wife. (Pause, music rises and subsides as he goes back to his desk).
Mala: Mr Guha’s wife is a friend of my husband.
Naresh: (Turning round on her sharply) I didn’t say that.
Mala: No, I'm saying it. [Act: I]

There is an interlude in this play. Mrs Lall comes to pacify Mala but is worked up and fanatical. She collapsed at the induced suggestion that her husband could be just as unfaithful as Mala's. The other aspect worth mentioning is the dramatist's insight into the behaviour of the typical Indian homemakers, their usual habit of backbiting and indulgence in too much of talk.

Otherwise, Mrs Lall was consoling Mala by giving lectures and advises. Mala complains to Mrs. Lall that her husband never remembers to do anything she tells him, Mrs. Lall consoles her saying he must have a bad memory. But Mala affirms her husband with possessing a very good memory. He never, thus, forgets to do anything he wishes. He is rather very efficient, except when he has to do something for her. He never remembers her birthday and their marriage anniversary. And he usually forgets to do what his wife ask him to do such as making a call to her sister and posting her letter. Above all that Mala won't accept Naresh running after other women. Nissim vividly depicts through their talks that woman somehow tolerate the negligence of their husbands concerning other duties and works. But, they cannot tolerate when their husbands are after another woman. Mrs. Lall makes a long fuss when asked by Mala as to what would she do in case her husband is attached to some other women. Nissim Ezekiel's direction regarding Mrs.Lall's gesture before she speaks the long dialogue is meaningful:

Mrs.Lall: I would make a terrible fuss. I would harass my husband night and day till he gave her up. I wouldn't eat and I wouldn't allow him to eat. I wouldn't sleep and I wouldn't allow him to sleep. I would behave like a mad woman. I would tear my hair and I would tear his hair. I would scratch my face and I would scratch his face. I'll shout. I'll
scream. I’ll raise hell. I’ll make all my relatives raise hell. I’ll make life difficult for his relatives unless they take my side and argue with him. I’ll write a letter to his boss. I’ll do everything in my power to embarrass him. [Act: I]

The hysteric utterance not only lends a comic touch to the play, but it also brings into focus the stock response of the typical Indian homemakers caught in such a predicament. She sinks down in the sofa completely exhausted. Mala and Mrs. Lall resolves not to give up their husbands, comes what may. The play represents Nissim Ezekiel’s humanism based on his awareness of life and problems of the people around him. It also clearly depicts the mal-adjustment of a married life.

In the play, Naresh also has the pleasure of an interlude, and this Santan Rodrigues calls a “real” pleasure. He has a love tucked away somewhere. Fritz Blackwell has aptly contributed his view on the relationship of Mala and Naresh. He says:

The wife has the ubiquitous next-door-neighbour to complain to, and the husband “the other woman” for sympathy. Whether either is real or merely imaginary is intentionally unclear, as each appears in dream-like sequences, fading in and out; of course, the actual physical reality of either is irrelevant. What is important is the existence of the children, who knock on the door at the end, the husband saying, “The children,” the wife, “Our children”.

Naresh flirts with Leela. They both seem very happy when they are together. However, Naresh’s awareness of Mala’s love for him is revealed to us through his imaginative conversation with Leela. He does not really hate Mala, even though he acts indifferent when he is near her. On the other hand, Leela does not mind to expose the illicit love scandal and the dangers associated with
Moreover Naresh’s wife Mala does not exist for Leela. If she is, she only exists as a ghost. But Naresh does not deny the existence and presence of his wife, though he can’t help being good to her when he is near her. Nissim Ezekiel as a humanist shows certain true nature of man from his characters. Naresh asks Leela whether it upsets her for him to say that his wife loves him. Leela admits that it’s natural for her to be upset. “I’m jealous of her; she has you all the time. I have you once a week, sometimes only for an hour.” Naresh tells Leela: I’m the cause of my wife’s suffering. I don’t want to be the cause of your suffering too.” Here we find the touch of real human qualities in Naresh who feels pity for the women he cannot love. This is the love of innocence and a kind of self-realisation. Thus, Ezekiel in the play depicts the feelings and emotions of human beings. Naresh once tells Mala that he feels sorry because he cannot be fair to her. It also makes him miserable. The hurt caused to Mala and his inability to be fair to her makes Naresh miserable.

The conversation between Leela and Naresh, perhaps is illusionary. Nevertheless, it is remarkable for it let the reader know what Naresh’s thought is. The feeling of this sense of guilt for having wronged his wife is the manifestation of Naresh’s humanism. The third interlude in this play concerns both Mala and Naresh. A couple Ranjit and Malati visit them. In their conversation one encounters Naresh’s philosophy of life.

Mala: What are you talking about?
Malati: Dark paradoxes.
Mala: What Paradoxes?
Malati: The paradox of vice and virtue resembling each other.
Ranjit: Nobody said that.
Mala: For me, vice is vice and virtue is virtue. There can't be confusion between the two.

Naresh: In the space between the two, there is always confusion.

R. Raj Rao here makes the comment:

In “Marriage Poem” the husbands and wives are estranged from each other not only due to diverse levels of learning, but also because of confused value systems.\textsuperscript{22}

The couples talk on Naresh’s dark paradoxes. Naresh states he lives by dark paradoxes that can be compressed into ten minutes of talk. Ranjit asks what does one do, after compressing all the dark paradoxes into ten minutes of talk?

Naresh: (Looking at Malati) One lives. One enacts the paradoxes. One experiences them in new dimensions. One makes drama out of life, drama, poetry, music, dance. \textsuperscript{[Act: I]}

In their discussions on dark paradoxes, Malati and Naresh seem on the same side while Ranjit and Mala are on one side. With their discussions developing, Mala and Malati start arguing each claiming to acquire a better knowledge on Naresh. Naresh has an ironical attitude when Mala asserts “only his wife know a man.”

Naresh: (ironically) Alas, she does. No more mystery in him, no more prospect of the unpredictable. Every weakness clearly seen, every strength seen through for the fraud it is. \textsuperscript{[Act: I]}

From their discussions and argument, Mala develops some distrust and dislike for Malati. Mala feels relieve when Malati and her husband Ranjit left. Mala does not trust Malati for the way she looks at her husband. When Naresh
tells her she does not trust any woman, Mala replies that had she trust him, she would trust every woman.

Mala: Thank God they’re gone
Naresh: Why do you say that?
Mala: I don’t trust Malati, the way she looks at you.
Naresh: Why don’t you trust Malati?
Mala: For obvious reasons. [Act: I]

Mala accuses her husband for not saying anything to her. But when visitors come he would make long speeches. She summarises what he had said, dismisses it as “rubbish,” and ask what it all means. Naresh tells her she wouldn’t understand. She sneers no, but that Malati – the other woman – “understood it, of course.”

Mala: You never want to say anything to your wife. But when visitors come, you know how to talk, what long speeches!
Naresh: You wouldn’t understand.
Mala: No, I wouldn’t understand. (Sneeringly) Malati understood it, of course.
Naresh: I’m sure she did.
Mala: Why are you so sure?
Naresh: She’s an understanding woman, that’s why.
Mala: Every woman is an understanding woman, except your wife.
Naresh: That’s right. [Act: I]

It is true that the couple has a very different temperament as Naresh say it so. What Mala believes is that she knows him better than he does himself.
Naresh warns her that men run away from women who know them too well. However, for Mala, Naresh cannot run away from her because he is her husband. Their argument proves the lack of understanding between the couple. While Naresh emphatically states that Mala quarrels with him all the time, Mala is equally firm in stating that she does not quarrel with him.

Naresh: Why do you quarrel with me, then, all the time?
Mala: I don’t quarrel with you. You quarrel with me.
Naresh: What’s the difference? We quarrel.
Mala: You stop quarrelling with me and there’ll be no quarrel.
Naresh: Let’s stop this quarrel, any way.
Mala: Well, stop it then.
Naresh: I’ve stopped it.
Mala: I’ve stopped it too. [Act: I]

Throughout the play, time and again, they agree to quit quarrelling, only to resume in the next few lines. There are grievances and disagreements and of course reconciliation occurring repeatedly. But all these doubts and distractions are removed as the play moves towards its destined end. Though Mala and Naresh have been shown making love earlier in the course of the play, their love is tainted to some extend. Their lovemaking in the last scene is a sign of a unique sense of fulfilment and regained confidence.

Naresh: (Opening his eyes) You! I thought you would never come back.
Leela: I’ll always come back, whenever you need me. (Music rises softly and fades away. Leela disappears. Naresh lowers his arms. His face becomes calm. Mala awakes, sees Naresh and
stretches out her arms to him. He hesitates a moment, then goes up to her and submits to her embrace. At this point the music stops completely. There is utter silence.)

Mala: I’m so happy, my darling. (Pause. Then there is a loud, childish persistent knocking at the door.)

Naresh: The children. (The curtains begin to close.)

Mala: Our children (She goes towards the door and Naresh watches her unlatching it as the curtains close and the music begins again loudly.) [Act: I]

Fritz Blackwell says "But it is not with any such rational solution that the play ends, but with the arrival of the children, who seem to be all that cements their marriage." Anisur Rahman says:

The appearance of the children at this stage is fraught with symbolic significance. The children, who are truly the fruits of their love, unite them into deeper emotional bond. Nissim elevates love. It does miracle in man’s life, what other powerful forces fail love, the bone of humanism brings it to pass.

M.N. Sundararaman in his article “Tradition and Modernity in Indian English Drama” states that the tendency to introduce the element of contemporaneity in drama becomes more evident in the post-Independence period, particularly in the last two or three decades. Mostly the writer’s personal background and philosophy of life colours the theme in its presentation whether the theme may be social, political, or economic. We bring to our notice three plays written on the same theme by three different playwrights. The three playwrights present three different solutions to the same problem. M.V. Rama Sarma’s play Towards Marriage, Nissim Ezekiel’s Marriage Poem and Shivkumar’s The Last Wedding Anniversary are the three plays that deal with
domestic discord. The main reasons for the conflict between the husband and the wife in all the three plays are the temperamental incompatibility between the couple and the extra-marital relationships of the husbands. However, the solutions given by the three dramatists to this problem are significantly different from one another.

Rama Sarma in his play attempts to convey the message that the solutions to the problem of the break down of the marriage system lies not in dissolving the 'inviolable bond.' But a husband and a wife who makes 'an effort to understand each other sympathetically and not critically'\(^25\) will solve the problem of marriage. Further, he states that a husband and a wife are bound to get on well in life if they realise that no man or woman can be a god or a goddess and are "intelligent and willing enough to accept marriage with certain limitations."\(^26\) So in his play the estranged husband and the wife are reunited while the ladylove of the husband goes out of his life, recognising the right of the wedded wife. In Shiv Kumar’s play, on the other hand, Lalit, the husband, unable to carry on with his wife, Rupa, decides to leave her and begin a new life with his lover, Neela. A reading of Nissim Ezekiel’s play *Marriage Poem* suggests that children play a very important part in bringing solution to cement the crack relationship.

**Don’t Call It Suicide**

Macmillan in Madras first published the latest play of Nissim Ezekiel, *Don’t Call It Suicide* in 1993. However, the British Council, Bombay in 1989, first staged it. The play is a tragedy in two Acts, centring round one family and is confined to a particular place. It revolves around the recollection of the suicide of the eldest son of Mr and Mrs Nanda. The play is based on a real life incident. Ezekiel narrates about the background of the play in the following words:
I was told about the event by an acquaintance of mine in an Indian city (not Bombay). It was about his son and family... but I did not confine myself to his experience, relatives, etc. 27

The play *Don't Call It Suicide* opens with a discussion on some business matter between Mr Nanda and Mr. Sathe, his business acquaintance, but takes an inward turn when Mr. Nanda chooses to tell Sathe the tragedy befalling upon his family. They meet after a lapse of ten years. Mr. Nanda narrates to Mr. Sathe the suicide story of his eldest son fourteen years ago. The tragic incident took place after two years of his son’s marriage. On that fateful day, Mrs. and Mr. Nanda along with their second son and daughter were out having an appointment with some friends while Meeta, the wife of the deceased son went to bazaar. Taking advantage of his solitude at home, the eldest son hanged himself from the rafter of the bedroom. Mr. Nanda unable to reconcile to the unnatural death of his eldest son broods over though the death had occurred fourteen years ago. He breaks down whenever he recalls the sad incident to his mind. In the first scene in course of his discussion with Sathe, Nanda says:

My eldest son ... at the age of 25 ... committed suicide. 
[Act: I, Scene I]

It is heart rending for Mr. Nanda to forget the tragic incident. Emotions taking hold of him, he recalls the sad demise of his son with nostalgia.

Mr.Nanda: It was about 14 years ago. My eldest son never did well in his exams. He never failed but he did not do well either. He was intelligent and very sensitive, yet somehow, did not care at all about his school and college, we did not know why. He just wasn’t happy there. He complained bitterly all the time. He did not like most of the teachers and he didn’t like most of the students, though he had two or three good friends. [Act: I, Scene I]
The expressions of Mr. Nanda show how sad his son is about the ways of the world. He was married for two years to Meeta but he remains indifferent to her. Nobody in the family knew what he was thinking. On one solitude day at home, he hanged himself to death. Not only the death of a twenty-five years old young man is horrible but also the life of his wife Meeta is pathetic after his death. She went to her parent’s house but they disagreed to support her for the rest of her life. Her parents sent her back to her in-laws saying, “How can we support her for the rest of our lives?” This is a strange sign of showing that girls, after their marriages have no share in the family to which they are born. But her in-laws sympathetically wrote, “Send her here, we’ll look after her, we are not rich either but will look after her.” Nissim Ezekiel has shown the calculative mentality of many parents who have rendered no pity to their own daughters when ill luck strike them after their marriage. All is not well for Meeta at her in-law’s place.

But Nissim Ezekiel, the playwright pours out a lavish humanistic care to Meeta through her father-in-law Mr. Nanda. He stands all odds to protect her from every family members, who keeps their eyes on her to ill treat and use her like a slave. Mrs. Nanda would not permit Meeta to meet her sister-in-law and brother-in-law. She is ordered to confine and dine in the kitchen. Mr. Nanda suggests Meeta to meet other members of the family and dine with them. Mrs. Nanda’s adamant heart would not listen to her husband but frowned upon him saying there would be no time for her to do so. When Mr Nanda insists that Meeta should join the family while eating Mrs Nanda retorts:

All right baba, have your way. I will do the cooking, I will do the serving, and I will do the washing up. Let Meeta eat with you and talk with you.
A great difference of attitude is noticed between Mr. Nanda and Mrs. Nanda in their attitude towards Meeta. Nissim brings out in a subtle way the intricate relationship between the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law through the characters of Mrs Nanda and Meeta. The sarcastic tone of Mrs Nanda shows how unkind and inconsiderate Mrs Nanda is to Meeta. She further says in a little later in the play:

I allowed my eldest son’s widow, Meeta to live with us, but that is only because she is helpful to me in the house.31

Had Meeta been not helpful, her mother-in-law might never allow her to live in the house. Not only Mrs. Nanda is unkind but the rest of the family members Hari and his wife, Malati, Shiela and her husband, Gopal is rude to Meeta. Like Mrs. Nanda, all other members of the family are self-centered and pragmatic in their approach to life. Mr. Nanda is the only exception through whom Nissim Ezekiel conveys his humanistic approach to life. Hari takes his brother to be sentimental fool thereby having no sympathy with his sister-in-law. He describes his opinion on his deceased elder brother:

Why should any student be miserable because some teachers are bad or some students don’t care about education? So what? Let them be what they are. Why should we be so sad about it that we actually want to die? Yes, you won’t believe it, but my elder brother was like that, ‘I feel like killing myself’, he would say, as if some one had personally done him great wrong. That’s foolish, isn’t it? I mean, after all, we have got to survive, haven’t we? .... I guess he just wasn’t emotionally equipped to cope with life. He was a sensitive idealist. He wasn’t- whats the word? - Pragmatic. [Act: I, Scene III]
Act I scene III opens with a soliloquy of Hari, narrating a story about his elder brother. Hari's brother was very peculiar with strange kind of sensitiveness. He suffered a lot in normal situations. He is sentimental at the sight of a blind beggar child. He found himself a stranger in his own natural environment, in his own home and society. He, thus, becomes a misfit and withdraws himself from this life.

Hari is cruel not only to his elder brother and to his sister-in-law but his dominating and inconsiderate attitude is seen even towards his wife, Malati. He beats up his innocent wife. Dominating and beating up the wife was prevalent in certain sections of the society. Nissim Ezekiel makes a dig at certain conventions of the contemporary society through Hari. This is how Malati states the condition of millions of women:

> The choice for all of, those millions of women in our country, whom you mentioned, is between being a happy slave or an unhappy slave. There is no other choice.  

[Act: I, Scene IV]

The inhumanity of higher ups in the society comes in for criticism through a conversation between Mr. Nanda and Gopal. When Mr. Nanda asks Gopal to explain what the latter means by “the inhumanity we see in ordinary, everyday life,” Gopal answers:

> Like humiliating people, bossing over them, treating them badly because we are in a position to.  

[Act: I, Scene III]

The play as it moves to its end explains the doubts raised by Mr. Nanda in regards to the cause of his son’s suicide in the beginning of the play. Sathe in his authorial voice says:
It seems to me that some people are entirely different from the rest of us. I’m not thinking of exceptional people, like philosophers, poets, and artists. I mean ordinary people. That sounds odd, I know. We treat them in the same way. We take it for granted that they accept all those unpleasant and puzzling things in life which others accept, whether they are ordinary or extra-ordinary. The particular type I’m talking about is in a class by itself. They have the same good qualities and bad qualities as others have, but there is something else at the source, some essential power that causes non-adjustment to things as they are. It makes many persons in this group feel hopeless, and also sensitive to their own helplessness. Now, surprisingly, I’ve come to the conclusion that we, the rest of us, have something to learn from them. [Act: II, Scene II]

Nissim Ezekiel through the authorial voice of Sathe communicates the varied types of ordinary people who think differently. The particular type of people Sathe talks about have the same good qualities and bad qualities as others have. But the one thing different of them is the essential power that causes non-adjustment to things as they are. This makes them feel hopeless and sensitive to their own helplessness. Above all there is indifferent attitude of the society towards them. Thus, people belonging to this category feel diffident. A touchy and sentimental, Mr. Nanda’s eldest son thinks, himself to be odd men leading to his suicide. Ezekiel points out certain cases that led to suicide. Lack of sympathy on the part of the people on one hand and inability on the part of the suicidal to come to terms with life can cause one to commit suicide.

Mr. Nanda is convinced of Mr. Sathe’s explanation on a note of suicide. He cannot absolutely put the blame to his son for his suicide. Mrs. Nanda and Hari are insensitive autocrats who put down ruthlessly those who oppose them. Mrs. Nanda is a very strong lady who has the power to change her husband and
children. They all dance to her tune. Hari too believes that only a strong man can win in this world. So he keeps everyone under his command but never allow anyone to boss over him. K. Balachandran making a comment on Mrs. Nanda and her son Hari says:

Thus both their modern ways of life deviate from the path of humanism to the catastrophe of mental disturbance of others.32

Mr. Nanda is the chief victim, who unable to tolerate the humiliations and rudeness from his wife and son ends his life by consuming a whole set of pills leaving the family once for all. Now Mrs. Nanda becomes a victim of her husband’s suicide. She becomes a widow like Meeta. But Meeta unlike Mrs. Nanda does not take advantage of other’s misfortune. Rather she comforts her mother-in-law and come to her rescue from immense suffering.

But a remarkable incident of the play is a realization and humanistic change of thought in Mrs. Nanda. She exclaims,

I lost a son. Now I’ve lost my husband. What have I done to deserve this? [Act: II, Scene III]

Meeta comes to stand by her and she exclaims ‘Oh! My daughter! Mrs. Nanda’s heart melts at this where she turns to Meeta for support. Through this very impressive, evocative tragedy, Nissim Ezekiel with the social awareness, especially for the middle class, emphasize the need for freedom, tolerance, and understanding, for a happy, peaceful, and domestic life, which has to be lived fully. They are the core elements of a humanist thought.
Nissim Ezekiel from the two important characters of the play Mr. Nanda and Meeta teach us to show the humanistic attitude towards the ignored and dishearten people in the world. Mr. Nanda stood all alone for his daughter-in-law against the rest of his family members. Again, Meeta, willingly without any grudge salvaged her mother-in-law from mental agony, though she had been badly ill treated earlier. At the end, Mrs. Nanda learns that totalitarian and autocrat is not the end. There is tolerance and understanding beyond it. Meeta teaches her a priceless lesson in her life.

The three plays of Nissim Ezekiel, *Nalini, Marriage Poem* and *Don’t Call It Suicide* show the playwright as a sharp observer of the local scene. He has an eye for the oddities in human behaviour, word and thought. He is an excellent craftsman. Nissim the playwright laughs at the characters and through them at the world around him. His characters seldom grow beyond caricatures. They are neither redeemed nor destroyed by a tragic flow. He represents human being as they are. For the fact of his representation of the relationship of man in real situation, Nissim Ezekiel will be better remembered as a humanist. In his plays, he shows a great insight in giving a real picture of the Indian life style and psyche.
Notes


8 Anisur Rahman, “Technique and Motif in Nissim Ezekiel’s Three Plays”, Indian Writing in English p.53


Nalini soon realises that this woman who seemed to be painting for her with the will of some force she knew nothing of, is coming closer to her, to be one with her. She did not allow herself to be overtaken. Thus, she keeps herself at a distance for she wanted to be saved. On the other hand, she can never become an artist by keeping a distance of herself from this mad woman. Rather she needs her experiences to be a great artist. At this juncture, Bharat, who previously was a self-styled connoisseur of art but ignorant of art places a very remarkable question to Nalini. The question is, “Does that put me outside the pale so far as you are concerned?”

Nissim Ezekiel presents Nalini as a sensitive woman with a complex problem. But she at last tells Bharat “art is not the only subject of our discussion.” The way Nalini expresses her concept of art and reality clearly presents Nissim’s accommodating nature and his understanding of reality. Nalini who had earlier disliked Bharat has now shown a sympathetic attitude to him. This acceptance and sympathy is a mark of Nissim’s humanism. Nalini further states:

It is freedom, which includes the freedom to create something new. Look, I’m not a scholar or a learned person, at home in the world of concepts. I’m only a painter. But I want to take up a position, generally speaking, which is related to my experience. It is this. Things change and things remain the same. Events can be predicted and events can be unpredictable. We can repeat or we can explore, discover, invent. Generally speaking, I want to be on the side of change, the unpredictable, exploration, discovery, invention, in short, the future, the evolution of the other woman within me, who must one day become me. [Act II]

Nissim Ezekiel portrays Nalini as a very decisive and emancipated woman at the end of the Second Act. She wants to be a new woman with