CHAPTER - 2
NISSIM EZEKIEL

One of the most important names in modern Indian poetry in English, Nissim Ezekiel is perhaps the most widely known among our poets whose work reveals a consistent commitment to the craft, authenticity of articulation and sincerity of purpose.

To Ezekiel goes the credit of having ushered in a new trend in the post-independence period, which changed the course of Indian poetry in English in theme and technique. He is also responsible for giving an urban turn to it, which was earlier, by and large, bucolic. These changes have proved so crucial that he has come to be considered not merely a major poet but a major influence on other practicing poets. (qtd. in Shukla 235)

The incisive quote by Krishna Sastri on Nissim Ezekiel is a tribute to his poetic vision, worth and contribution. So much so that from 1960 onwards, it has been the age of Ezekiel in Indian English poetry. A doyen of Indian English Literature, Ezekiel is credited with imparting modernist sensibility to Indian poetry in English as also deftly using English language as a means to explore the Indian mind and sensibility. He steered Indian poetry clear of the idealism and romanticism of the earlier Indian writers in English and strived to look at any typical Indian situation with an Indian attitude. His poetry marks the dawn of a new era. P. Lal writes in this context, “After the death of Sri Aurobindo, Nissim Ezekiel is the first major voice that represents, more or less, the change of an era” (qtd. in Reddy 67). Inspired by the likes of Yeats and Eliot, Ezekiel tried and succeeded in setting a new platform for Indian poetry in English. He strode the Indo-English poetic landscape like a colossus during the second half of the twentieth century and became a legend in his lifetime. In recognition of his literary achievement, he received the Sahitya Akademi award in 1983 and was conferred with the Padma Shri by the Government of India in 1988. At present, Ezekiel is canonized as an Indian English poet.

Ezekiel’s poetic career spans over four decades with the publication of A Time of Change in 1952 and five other anthologies of poems which include Sixty Poems (1953),
The Third (1959), The Unfinished Man (1960), The Exact Name (1965), Hymns in 
Darkness and Poster Poems (1976) and Collected Poems (1988). The very title of his 
maiden collection, A Time to Change is very significant. It is indicative of his poetic 
intent as well as talent. If masculinity in poetic context is to be identified with the spirit of 
assertion, independence, leadership and intellectual strength, Ezekiel, a young poet, then, 
manifested these attributes in ample measure from the very beginning of his poetic 
odyssey. With his intellectual robustness and poetic acumen, Ezekiel charted out a new 
path for Indian poets and poetry, both in style and subject matter. Prior to his advent on 
the Indian poetic scene, his predecessors like Aurobindo, Sarojini Naidu and Tagore had 
been using the idiom for too long that had served its purpose in the Romantic and 
Victorian period. The poetry of Ezekiel constitutes a revolt against the incipient 
romanticism and rapid narcissism which had long made it impossible for Indian poetry in 
English to be a criticism of life. However, ever a cursory reading of Ezekiel’s poetry 
shows that his idiom and verse are strikingly modern and contemporary. It is in this 
context that the title of his first volume, A Time to Change, assumes added significance. It 
is a harbinger of his poetic creed and craft. With this, he brought Indian English Poetry in 
terms of diction and theme in tune with the international poetry being written in England, 
America and in the whole of Europe. It is a proof of his poetic masculinity in terms of 
intellectual strength, ability to lead and an assertion of independent spirit to break free 
from the limitations imposed by the prevailing poetic idiom and thereby imparting new 
strength and provide new direction to postcolonial Indian poetry in English.

Masculinity and femininity are cultural constructs as old as human history. 
Traditionally characteristics peculiar to males – strength, boldness, courage, aggression, 
leadership etc. and the latter typifies attributes ascribed to and expected of the fair sex – 
grace, beauty, charm, patience, love, kindness and compassion. Conventionally, the 
gender roles too have been assigned on the basis of these attributes. However, absolute 
masculinity and femininity are only myths as both men and women inhere and share traits 
ascribed to males and females. Otherwise also, a deeper analysis shows that masculinity 
and femininity are neither contraries nor in conflict with each other. Both are 
complementary and supplementary and needed in real life to live it fully and fruitfully. In 
effect, masculinity and femininity, in their true sense, are positive manifestations of the
spirit of humanism and altruism which is so vital for peace, progress and prosperity of human civilization. Hence, the need of the hour is to put these concepts in proper perspective for the betterment of humankind.

Any discourse on masculinity or femininity at an intellectual level will invariably involve ideas and perceptions on culture, history, gender relations and roles, love, marriage etc. At the poetic level, the concept of masculinity includes poet’s views on culture, attitude towards women, his conception of poetry, its theme, content, form and style. It is in this context that an attempt is made here to analyse Nissim Ezekiel’s poetry vis-a-vis the notion of masculinity, imbibed consciously or unconsciously by the poet, as it emerges in his postcolonial poetic oeuvre.

In the very conception of poetry, Ezekiel’s poetical masculinity, if one can say so, is evident. It has been rightly said that while other poets wrote poems, Ezekiel wrote poetry. Poetry for Ezekiel is a continuous flow like life. It is the path to the discovery of truths of life. For him poetry is not merely concerned with the pains and pleasures of the poet’s personal life but with profound concerns of life. His definition of poetry as obtained in the poem, “Poetry,” is trenchant and telling:

A poem is an episode, completed
In an hour or two, but poetry
Is something more. It is the why
The how, the what, the flow,
From which a poem comes,
In which the savage and the singular,
The gentle, familiar,
Are all dissolved; the residue
Is what you read, as a poem, the rest
Flows and is poetry. (13)

Likewise, in his forward to his second anthology, Sixty Poems, Ezekiel observes that “Poetry is elusive, to write or poem / is comparatively easy”. Ezekiel here seems to be seriously preoccupied with the vocation of poetry rather than creation of a single poem. The individual poem is only a preliminary step towards poetry which is a complex web a flux that embodies the wholeness of life. Play of emotions and exercise of intellect in the poetic process are desiderata in the creation of a good poem. In Ezekiel’s view, a
poet is not a dreamer, nor does he create a world of fantasy. A poet paints the real picture of humanity. He strikes a balance between inspiration and thought as he dwells on the problems of existence and the scheme of things in the cosmos. The poet in Ezekiel is quite conscious of artistic excellence whereas the man in him strives to explore the real meaning of existence through art. So in Ezekiel's case, writing poetry is not a matter of illogicality like the confessional poets nor is it only a matter of deep contemplation but a process of effecting a "human balance humanly / acquired, fruitful in the common hour" a statement of his poetic manifesto as expressed in the opening poem, "A Poem of Dedication" of his second volume sixty poems:

Not to seek release but resolution,
Not to hanker for a wide, god-like range
Of thought, nor the matador's dexterity.
I do not want the yogi's concentration,
I do not want the perfect charity,
Of saints nor the tyrants endless power.
I want a human balance humanly

Acquired, fruitful in the common hour. (40)

The first six lines of the above extract characterized by the abundance of negatives, one each in every line, show that Ezekiel has deliberated exhaustively and leisurely on the possibilities and avenues open to him. The prescriptive tone betrays a transparent mind, free from doubts and determined to go his own ways, howsoever eccentric or whimsical they might appear to others. The impelling urge to resolve the conflict cannot compel him to withdraw from his surroundings because he wants to grapple with all odds on his own terms. The poet announces that he is going to be very modest and humble in approach, unlike "god like range of thought" and "the matador's dexterity". Ezekiel further explains that his loneliness has nothing to do with the similar activities practised by a saint or a dictator. "Yogi" and "tyrant" symbolize the extremity of concerns and values. Both reject the society but while the former knows his isolation, the latter is not aware of it. The poet knows that the perfection is not a human quality and he does not want to be a human like the yogi or inhuman like the tyrant. Ezekiel stresses the need for a poetic culture of sympathetic bond with humanity around. His poetry
overflows with the spirit of neo-humanism which is different from the traditional, idealistic humanism found in the Renaissance literature.

However, that which flows has got to be simple and so it is not surprising that simplicity – a rare attribute in postcolonial modern poetry in English is the trademark of Ezekiel’s poetry (read masculinity). Language for him is the medium which expresses the poet and not a tool that moves him. His attitude towards simplicity of language can be better appreciated in the light of his views on the language of Sri Aurobindo. Rejecting the mythical reputation of Sri Aurobindo in plain terms, Ezekiel asserts that anyone who thinks high of Sri Aurobindo as a poet has no feeling for the English language. He also finds Savitri “embarrassingly bad”, being emotionally inflated, conceptually confused and dated in language. Here, Ezekiel voices the typical modernist’s view on poetry. Further, his poetical strength is also seen in his ability to celebrate the “ordinariness of most events” in a simple colloquial language. He had once observed that “you cannot write good poetry in a language which is not alive” (qtd in Nair and Patel 249). Therefore, we have a poem like “Entertainment” where he describes a monkey show and talks about how some people in the audience disperse without paying anything:

Anticipating time for payment
the crowd dissolves.
Some, in shame, part
with the smallest coin they have.
The show moves on. (194)

The use of colloquial language enables Ezekiel to convey his message clearly and powerfully. His language may be simple but he is a dexterous craftsman, always in search of a correct place in which to place a word. He knew that words are most powerful when placed in their specific context. He believed that poets, like women, “Must labour to be beautiful”. In his poem, “Poet, Lover and Birdwatcher,” he writes, “The best poets wait for words” like an ornithologist sitting in silence by the river or like a lover waiting for his beloved till she “No longer waits but risks surrendering” (135). He is convinced that the “exact name” can be found through simplicity. M.K. Naik observes:

Ezekiel’s poetry reveals technical skill of a very high order. Except in his latter work where his choice, of an open form sometimes makes for
looseness, he has always written verse which is extremely tightly constructed. This mastery of the colloquial idiom is matched by a sure command of rhythm and rhyme. A happy use of understatement and lapidary quality have made him one of the most quotable poets of his generation. (204-05)

After Wordsworth, Ezekiel brought the idiom of poetry closer to the spoken language. Therein lies his originality and poetic strength. Having decided clearly and unambiguously on his poetic creed and craft, Ezekiel, next, sets out to overcome his acute sense alienation caused by quirk of circumstances. Nissim Ezekiel was born not merely as a Jew, but as a Jew in an overwhelmingly Hindu India. Unhomliness seems to be inscribed into the Jew psyche owing to the community having gone through conquest and captivity, defeat and dispersal, marginalization and ghettoisation, victimization and extermination, in its long journey spanning thousands of years. A Jew anywhere in the world suffers from intense home fixation and consequent alienation. Ezekiel also found himself like a fish out of water in India, a person who constantly carried out a negative interpellation with his surroundings. Ezekiel suffered from double jeopardy – as a Jew in India he was an outsider in the Hindu mainstream, as a lapsed Jew he was an outsider in his own community. Fully conscious of his position as a Jew in non-Jewish India, he attempts at relating himself to India and affirm his loyalty to the country of his birth as also his predicament in his well-known review essay on V.S. Naipaul, “Naipaul’s India and Mine”:

I am not a Hindu and my background makes me a natural outsider. Circumstances and decisions relate me to India.... India is simply my environment. A man can do something for and in his environment by being fully what he is, by not withdrawing from it. I have not withdrawn from India... Not being Hindu I cannot identify myself with India’s past as a comprehensive heritage and reject it as if it were mine to reject... I can identify myself only with modern India. (99-100)

The sense of alienation was generated too early in Ezekiel’s life as he recounts in his verse autobiography “Background, Casually”. Tortured and tormented by his fellow mates as a student at a Roman Catholic school he writes:
I went to a Roman Catholic School
A mugging Jew among the wolves.
They told me I had killed the Christ,
That year I won the scripture prize.
A Muslim Sportsman boxed my ears. (179)

Ezekiel felt alienated not only from the Indian ethos but, strangely enough from his own Jewish ethos and this, alienation too began early in his life. His Bene-Israel origin made him a permanent expatriate in India. Furthermore, his alienation was accentuated by the fact that he lived in Bombay with Marathi as his lost mother tongue and English as his second mother tongue. Ezekiel’s quest for restlessness is reflected in his career of quick changes with a brief stay abroad. This sense of alienation beginning in school clung to Ezekiel throughout his life despite his efforts to overcome.

The alienation theme is central to Ezekiel’s work and colours his entire universe. The whole corpus of Ezekiel’s writing’s, critical as well as creative, hinges on his attempts at relating himself to India. Ezekiel’s poetry, thus, has strong cultural overtones and intellectual strength which enable him to forge a link between his individual self and his surroundings. However this process of forging ties or bonding has not been easy.

Again, Ezekiel confesses, “I am not a Hindu and my background makes me a natural outsider” (qtd. in Singh 84). He insists that he doesn’t want to remain negative. The candid admission of being an “outsider” on the part of Ezekiel and yet “turning the situation to the positive” and finally declaring “I cannot leave the Island / I was born here and belong” (182) and identifying himself completely with the city of Bombay with all its dark sports and the city becomes a part of his consciousness. Ezekiel’s approach to life, in the true spirit of humanism, is one of acceptance and reconciliation. He accepts Bombay with all its squalor, poverty, disease and deprivation. He makes Bombay the metaphor of his existence and sustenance in spite of all its ugliness slums, poverty, and corruption:

    Barbaric city sick with slums,
    Deprived of seasons, blessed with rains,
    Its hawkers, beggars, iron-lunged,
    Processions, led by frantic drums,
A million purgatorial lanes,
And child-like masses, many tongued,
Whose wages are in words and crumbs. (119)

Ezekiel is aware of the stark realities of city life, he belongs to Bombay but he
doesn’t glorify it. He is aware of the stark realities of urban existence yet he does not try
to escape from it. The poet, at a deeper level, is pitted against his environment. The
sordidness, squalor and miseries of city life evoke passionate sympathies in him:
The Indian landscape sears my eyes.
I have become a part of it
To be observed by foreigners.
They say that I am singular,
Their letters overstate the case.

I have made my commitments now.
This is one to stay where I am,
As others choose to give themselves
In some remote and backward place
My backward place is where I am. (181)

The poet's identification with the “backward place” is now final and total. The
adversities of time “now” recalls all those moments of ambivalence and indecisiveness –
“No longer unresolved / But definite as morning ...” (14), “I must define myself, the place
/ And time ...” (112), “All I want now / is the recognition / of dilemma / and the quickest
means / of resolving it / within my limits” (150) which had been upsetting him
terrifically. The well thought out and thoroughly debated upon decision – “This is one to
stay where I am” has been arrived at after years of anguish and affliction and now rules
out the possibility of dilly-dallying any more. The poet is free from all of its illusions and
now knows that “Home is where we have to earn our grace” (18) and “It is home / which
of recognize at last / as a kind of hell / to be made tolerable” (115). The sense of urgency
to adjust himself to a “remote and backward place” stood the test of time and in “Island”
written after seven years, the poet reiterates: “I cannot leave the Island, / I was born here
and belong” (182).
Thus, Ezekiel’s alienation passes through a series of adjustments and adaptations before he fully identifies and reconciles himself fully to the city of Bombay (Mumbai), which, in effect, is a miniature India. From the very beginning, Ezekiel has been in quest for “home” because “Home is where we have to earn our grace” (118) – notwithstanding the fact it brings one “To kindred clamour close at hand” (117). Yet he accepts Bombay, the city of his birth, with its squalor and disenchantments: “This is the place / where I was born. I / know it / well. It is home, / which I recognize at last / as a kind of hell / to be made tolerable (155). Even as the poet finds that his place of birth, i.e. Bombay is not better than hell, yet he is not ready to exchange it even with some heaven because it is unquestionably his. He further reconciles himself to the place and his surroundings which prompts him to make a more vocal declaration: “I have made my commitments now/ This is one: to stay where I am,/. My backward place is where I am” (181). One finds that there is a marked change in the perception of his situation once the commitments have been affirmed unequivocally. “A kind of hell “has lost its earlier horrid and sickening tinge in as much as it has changed into an almost acceptable proposition – “some remote and backward place”. Hence the obvious assertion of belongingness and becoming a good native: “I cannot leave the Island, / I was born here and belong” (182).

However, the sense of alienation continued to nag Ezekiel till the last. Even in his latter poems Ezekiel continued to hark back to his early dilemmas – “I have become / part of the scene / which I can neither love nor hate” (289). But in a true spirit of manliness the poet gives all credit to the city of his birth for his accomplishments:

... but Bombay as the fruit
on which I’ve lived,
winning and losing
my little life. (293)

The involvement and identification of Ezekiel with Bombay is total and unflinching. However, the sense of alienation did not prove to be an unmitigated bane. It did create seemingly insurmountable problems but by his alienation enabled him to view the native reality with a dispassionate perspective both his strength and weakness as an artist in his long literary odyssey. In effect, the poet turned his hereditary alienation to best advantage and restrained himself from parochial flamboyant as well as from the
sophistication of the rootless. The poet himself considers the sense of rootlessness as creatively vital for reinforcing the need for roots. However, in spite of all alienation, the Bombayite in Ezekiel finally developed into a humanist in his latest poetry – “to heal / myself and others” (274) transcending all bounds of colour, caste and creed.

As already stated, masculinity and femininity are cultural constructs. The traits ascribed to men or women are determined by the cultural values prized and propagated by a society. The idea of culture, its values and ideals as imbibed, understood and expressed by a writer are central to the study of concepts like masculinity and femininity. In the context of India, the idea of culture becomes synonymous with Indianness which is reflected in the habits, ceremonies, dogmas of the people. In Ezekiel’s poetry, concern with culture has been most pronounced owing to his intractable roots in Jewish ancestry. Hence it is imperative to study Ezekiel’s view of culture or Indianness as represented in his poetry, being a male poet in a patriarchal society.

A close perusal of Ezekiel’s poetry shows that it has strong cultural overtones which enable him to forge a link between his individual self and his surroundings. Ezekiel made significant observations on culture and its various aspects which facilitate an analysis and appreciation of his poetry. Unlike Eliot, Pound and Auden who came from a cultural ethos with Eurocentric ideology Ezekiel inherited a pluralistic heritage with decentered structure defying any common denominators, even serious attempts at defining Indianness and Indian identity have ended up with platitudes which have perpetuated the orientalist image of India with the age-old stereotypes of spirituality and idealism. One is prone to conceive of the idea of Indianness as a monolithic notion radiating from the core of Vedic antiquity. This Indo-centric bias creates a glorified construct of an imaginary India which glosses over all the cultural specificities and heterogeneities. In fact, the multi-centrality has lent the Indian culture its predominantly syncretic character, its pluralistic tradition, its absorptive nature of internalizing alien influences. Cultural manifestations of these multi-centred peculiarities characterize what Indianness would mean in contrast with monolingual, totalitarian and fundamentalist cultures existing elsewhere.

Ezekiel believes that “a writer needs a national or cultural identity, without that you become a series of limitations, echoes, responses but you do not develop because
there is nothing at the core developed." (3) As such, Ezekiel advocates broadening of the scope of culture: Culture doesn't consist only of literature and philosophy and art and it is certainly not acquired by adhering to the beliefs of the past and conforming to its institutional demands. For him, its living presence is indicated in behaviour, by rich and poor alike and there are universal human standards by which it may be judged.

Ezekiel's concept of culture is critical and dynamic. While elaborating on Indianness, he challenges the view that the Indo-English poets who, by accident of circumstance, imbibed English with their mother's milk lost their prospect of producing that excellent flavour which is called 'Native'.

Again, Ezekiel strives to put into proper perspective the cultural tradition of India when he says that Indianness is not to be confused with conservatism. The vastness of India in respect of cultural, linguistic, ethnic and religious diversity kinds it a mini-global proportion and Ezekiel's confrontation with the culture of the country is the meeting of "the marginal with the mighty". A poet's perception is shaped not only by his upbringing, the social and environmental factors but also by the tradition and culture of the society. It is for this reason that 'Indianness' of Indian poetry in English is of crucial significance. A truly Indian work is one which is about India and Indians, presents an Indian point of view and is written in a language and style which fits well into the matrix of the Indian cultural ethos and way of life. The secret of a poet's greatness lies in his being wedded to the physical and cultural ethos. Nissim Ezekiel observes, "there is no single Indian flavour which alone can claim the designation—Indianness. Its value depends on a host of generative factors which should never be simplified for purpose of praise or blame" (80).

Unlike Jayant Mahapatra, Ramanujan or Kamala Das who did not make an effort to acclimatize an indigenous tradition to English language, Ezekiel strives to relate himself to contemporary India. His major themes are the Indian scene, modern urban life and spiritual values. But basically his poetry is something that grows out of his own life and experience. He is a poet of the city – Bombay, a poet of the body, and an explorer of the labyrinths of the mind, the devious delvings and twistings of the ego.

Typical Indian beliefs, situations and contemporary society attract him the most and he creates a new kind of poetry in Indian English idiom. His well-known poem,
“Night of the Scorpion”, for instance, is typically Indian in its theme and its execution is befitting to the theme. The language of the poem is appropriate to the situation and evokes the actual scene in the minds of the readers. The arrival of the scorpion, the act of stringing, and the subsequent escape have been described with great skill and economy of language:

Ten hours
of steady rain had driven him
to crawl beneath sack of rice.
Parting with his poison—flash of diabolic tail in the dark room—
he risked the rain again. (130)

Then the chain reactions follow. Peasants who “came like swarm of flies” with candles and lanterns “buzzed the name of god hundred times to paralyse the Evil One” (130). The concept of sin, redemption and rebirth are all brought to bear. An important theme in the poem is the problem of evil and suffering which is a traditional Hindu and Buddhist belief. This point of view is appropriately enough represented by the peasants when they talk unconsciously about a fundamental metaphysical belief: “May the sum of evil/balanced in this unreal world/against the sum of good” (130).

The simpleton rustics raise the fundamental question regarding the very nature of reality. The lines, “May the sins of your previous birth/burned away tonight,” (130) refer to the doctrine of Karma and rebirth—typical Indian beliefs.

They express their faith as well as practical aspect. Thus “Night of the Scorpion” is one of the finest modern Indian English poems in its thematic richness and technical finesse, and it is a poem which only an Indian English poet could have written since the experience and the response to it recreated are rooted in the modern Indian situation. An art rooted in the soil has freshness and a vigor which no amount of clever pastiche dressed up in sheer technical virtuosity can hope to possess. It is a traditional poem with a thematic complexity as noted by Chetan Karnani. Thus the theme of the poet’s mother stung by a scorpion is given multiple treatments bringing in its sweep the world of magic, superstition, science, rationality and material affection. The poem gives a new direction to ordinary reality especially of Indian life unmediated by cold intellect. The poem ends on a positive note and finally presents an embodiment of motherhood who is ready to
sacrifice her life in order that her children may live. She is thankful that the scorpion chose her and spared her children: “My mother only said: / Thank God the scorpion picked on me / and spared my children” (131).

Ezekiel reveals typical Indian sensibility in “Entertainment,” while describing a monkey show. The poet brings out the poverty of the master of the show as well as the unwillingness of the onlookers. Beneath the ordinariness of the event is revealed the callousness of the people:

The monkey-show is on:

...............................
Anticipating time for payment,
the crowd dissolves.
Some, in shame, part
with the smallest coin they have.
The show moves on. (193-94)

English, the language of the coloniser and oppressor, has been instinctively imprinted in the Indian psyche with prowess, competence, status and elitism – all various manifestations of masculinity in some way in Indian context. Indians’ craze for speaking in English and their proclivity to grammatical incorrectness prompted Ezekiel to compose his “very Indian poems in Indian English” which exploit not only the Indianism in subject matter but the Indian way of thinking in English also. The language in three poems is based on India’s colloquial speech and the tone is conventional. Poems like “Healers,” “Hangover,” “The Professor,” “Irani Restaurant Instruction” are cases in point. Here, Ezekiel uses English the way most unlettered Indians write and speak:

No Indian whisky Sir all important this is Taj.
Yes Sir soda is Indian Sir.
Midnight.
Taxi-strike. George Fernandes.

............................... 
Half the day hazy with the previous night. (232)

In poems like “The Railway Clerk”, “The Patriot”, “Soap” and others, Ezekiel presented a delightful specimen of unselfconscious Indian English at its best. “The
"Patriot" is a portrait of a confused mind which has withdrawn into a parody of Gandhism, mistaking platitudes for thought and action. The patriot's aversion to "foreign thing" and goods is alive even in post-colonial India. One fully remembers that Indian freedom movement was incited by anti-colonial sentiments and an abominable disgust with all that was foreign and injurious to national interests. The protagonist in "The Patriot" is alert to admonish the modern generation of its potential hazards. The apprehension that imperialism might entrap the country again if lure for non-native goods is allowed to go unabated and unrestrained. The lure of the foreign things prompts the patriot to glorify whatever is swadeshi or indigenous.

The post-colonial situation enjoins upon the artist to devise a two pronged strategy to resist the temptation of imported goods in these global times and at the same time to serve as a watchdog of national imperatives threatened to subversion by colonising forces. If the artist is able to devise strategy to counter such subversive forces he redeems his duty towards his mother land and in a way prove his masculine credentials. In this sense Ezekiel stands out prominently. He exposes certain remnants of and habits of the colonial era which Indians cannot easily wish away. One such infatuation among Indians is to achieve proficiency and competence in English – the instrument through which the Empire transformed the thinking and tastes of the natives and exploited their resources. The urge to communicate in English is inherent in the colonized and at times it reaches ridiculous distortions in respect of faulty speech patterns and grammatical in-correctness. The protagonist in the piece, "Soap," unabashedly voices this colonial fancy even at the cost of the national language, Hindi: "So I'm saying very politely - / though in Hindi I'm saying it, / and my Hindi is not so good as my English..." (209).

Ezekiel's "very Indian Poems" are subtle comments on Indians' fancy for English and the way it is used in India. The imposed overconfidence about accomplishments in English has been creatively exploited by Ezekiel with utmost transparency. He seems to have a repertoire of inaccuracies in the use of English language, prominent among them being dropping of articles, wrong use of prepositions, using imperfect or continuous tense in place of simple or indefinite one and above all Indians' craze for employing idioms:

Whole world is changing. In India also
We are keeping up. Our progress is progressing.
Old values are going, new values are coming.
Everything is happening with leaps and bounds. (239)
The most recurrent feature, ‘ing’ form so common with Indian people, is seen in poems like “The Patriot,” “Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.,” and “The Railway Clerk.” In “Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.,” he writes:

Miss Pushpa is smiling and smiling
    even for no reason
    but simply because she is feeling.

Miss Pushpa is coming
    from very high family.

Whenever I asked her to do anything,
She was saying, ‘Just now only
    I will do it’. That is showing
good spirit. I am always
appreciating the good spirit.
Pushpa Miss is never saying no.
Whatever I or anybody is asking
She is always saying yes,
and today she is going
to improve her prospect,
and we are wishing her bon voyage. (190-191)

Have the poet has a dig at another colonial residue to visit abroad for career prospects. Ezekiel in this poem also disparages the distorted form of a colonial practice to deliver adulatory speech at farewell parties without really meaning them.

“The Railway Clerk” and “Irani Restaurant Instruction” are representative pieces of Indian English:

My wife is always asking for more money.
Money, money, where to get money?
My job is such, no one is giving bribe,  
while other clerks are in fortunate position. (184)

"The Irani Restaurant Instruction" is again an illustrative piece:

Do not write letter
Without order refreshment
Do not comb
Hair is spoiling floor
Do not make mischief in cabin
Our waiter is reporting

Come again
All are welcome whatever caste
If not satisfied tell us
Otherwise tell others
God is great. (240)

Thus, the fragments of clerical life with deep colonial imprints form the thematic content of the poem titled "The Railway Clerk." The protagonist complains against the apathy of the higher authorities who twice refused his leave application thus denying him the pleasure of sometime off the monotonous daily routine. Interestingly, he finds fault with his lot — "My job is such, no one is giving bribe, while other clerks are in fortunate position" (184). This longing for a corrupting gift has its origin in the colonial regime. By conferring honours on the native princes, landlords and influential people with decorative titles like Raibahadur and also by granting special privileges in terms of cash and kind to them which were nothing short of a refined bribery, the British enlisted their active support and thus the Empire sent down firm roots which took more than a couple of centuries to dislodge them. Given his pecuniary constraints, the ambition of the clerk to visit some foreign countries is a mirage.

Again, the colonial replica of the so-called steel frame— the Indian bureaucracy and its typical mindset— has been satirized in the poem, "The Truth About The Flood", a flood poem based on a report in The Indian Express, 25 September, 1967. Its focal thrust is on the anger and annoyance of people against government officials, including the
District Magistrates of Balasore and Cuttack. The poem delineates them pitiably lacking in their pre-independence predecessors’ efficiency and competence, yet these white-collar job men retain all aura of colonial hangovers, used to enjoying all prerogatives, these vestiges of British regime do not hesitate to move out in all paraphernalia even during the calamities like flood only to show off their positions. The refrain “until I convinced them I wasn’t a government official” underlines the villagers’ hatred against the officials who were simply interested in collecting statistics and doing paperwork. To pass the buck on others is the secret of success in governmental positions tenaciously handed down to post-colonial India. The district authorities at Balasore while admitting their failure to provide proper relief to the flood-affected people blamed nature for manipulating their fiasco:

Nature, they said,
had conspired against them.
‘Write the truth’, they said,
‘in your report.’

And so I did. (188)

Nissim Ezekiel deserves full credit for honestly reporting the truth which lies in the exposure of colonial mode of governance. The poet also exposes the method in the pretended politeness which again is an English vestige as expressed in “In India”. Nissim Ezekiel argues that the British try to endear themselves through superficial things like courtesy, though they render grave harms such as violating chastity. The English boss sexually assaults his Indian subordinate and offers her a safety pin to organize her disarrayed clothes by way of showing his civility and affability:

The struggle had been hard
And not altogether successful.
Certainly the blouse
Would not be used again.
But with the true British courtesy
He lent her a safety pin
Before she took the elevator down. (134)
The British acquired India not as much through violence and wars as through politeness and civility. The British courtesy was a powerful weapon in the hands of the colonisers and its effective use dates back to the Mughal emperor, Jahangir’s era when Thomas Roe presented himself as an English ambassador, all humble and courteous, asking for trade permission. British colonisation was a slow and steady but calculated design and India was taken over through quiet treachery, deceit and deception cloaked in suaveness, civility and courtesy.

The poet also dwells on another legacy of the colonial rule – inordinate delay in legal system. After independence, when India had to frame its constitution anew, ironically enough, it was modeled on British parliamentary system. There is certainly some logic when they say habits die hard and one would add colonial habits never die. In the piece, “Undertrial Prisoners,” in “Songs of Nandu Bhande,” Ezekiel disapproves of existing colonial jail laws with their complex and circuitous procedures to meet the ends of justice especially from the humanist point of view. The under trial prisoners have to rot in jails for years together before trial against them gets initiated:

We have our rules
made long ago
he’s got to wait,
the law says so.
it’s not our fault
he lives in jail. (CP 241)

The rules and regulations made long ago in pre-independence days need to be modified and recast in view of the changed situations when the ex-colonized themselves have to administer justice to the guilty from amongst them. The poem, however, does not plead for reducing the quantum of punishment. It lays all stress on the quick and speedy disposal of litigations to ensure that the victim gets relief at the earliest and the culprit brought to book with the barbarity of his heinous crime still fresh in his memory. The red-tapism best defined colonial strategies and this satire on officialdom demonstrate how persons involved in it forget to distinguish between their office duties and their personal lives. They conduct themselves mechanically so much so that even a solemn institution like marriage calling upon emotional impulses gets the typical official treatment in their
hands. Instructions to the prospective husband though living as a neighbour at the moment exhibit that human element has completely dried up and Macaulay’s design to “produce English knowing clerks” in 1833 has achieved something still in that the traces of Empire are too deep to be effortlessly bleached out:

When the female railway clerk
Received an offer of marriage
From her neighbour the customs clerk,
She told him to apply in triplicate,
And he did. (275)

It seems colonial imprints run too deep in the psyche of Indians which colour their general demeanor. Ezekiel emerges truly a postcolonial poet whose poetry portrays postcolonial attitudes of Indians as reflected in their typical use of a foreign language, mannerism and general demeanour. In his very Indian poems Ezekiel succeeds in creating the authentic impression of India, its people and places, and in giving the peculiar flavour of the language as used by English loving and status conscious Indian belonging to the middle class Indian society. His experiment in the levity and frivolity of Indian English has a more serious purpose than ridiculing these people’s inordinate craze for foreign things, manners and language. Joseph Furtado was the first to try his hands in 1920 in Pidgin or Bazar English. But it was Nissim Ezekiel who made serious efforts to exploit the resources of Indian English and its nuances and eminently succeeded. A substantial part of his success goes to his meaningful experimentation with his medium, his constant endeavour to find the right medium – the exact name for his self-expression. Nissim Ezekiel thus imparted the Indian English poetry a distinct character and gave it its own authentic voice and rightful place. Herein lies Ezekiel’s strength as an Indian poet in English.

A study of man-women relationship, attitude towards the fair-sex, treatment of love, sex and marriage, is integral to any meaningful discourse on masculinity and femininity in a poet. Both masculinity and femininity are relative terms and related concepts. The one cannot be studied without the other and vice-versa. It is in this context that an analysis of Ezekiel’s poetry is undertaken here. Pagan woman, putrid city and nature are obsessive and recurring symbols in Ezekiel’s poetry. The poems centering
around woman’s image in all its dimensions occupy a considerable bulk of his poetry and this has led some critics to regard him as a great poet of love. However, a careful study of his poetic art reveals that he is not a love-poet in the tradition of Shakespeare or Robert Browning. In his approach to this emotional aspect of human life, Ezekiel is not led by a romantic euphoria and he is all the time aware of his time-bound existence. His love poetry is the poetry of ‘here and now’ in all its pitfalls and aversions. Dwelling very meticulously on daily humdrum and boring routines, he attempted to provide a new perspective on man-woman relationship and marital blessings. Ezekiel views the married life from an entirely different angle and he seems to approve of this relationship, despite its occasional scars and bruises.

Ezekiel’s portrayal of man-woman relationship is ambiguous and ambivalent. His attitude towards love for woman shows a sense of regret and sadness and at the same time he finds it a source of emotional regeneration. More often than not his approach to man-woman relationship is within the ambiguous perspectives of the “insider-outsider”. In the first phase of his poetic voyage Ezekiel associated sin with woman, the image of woman as a sexual beast or seductress appears repeatedly in his poems like “The Couple”, “Poem of Separation”, “Passion Poems” “Nudes 1978”. His typical male mindset is reflected in “Passion Poems”:

She gave me
six good reasons
for saying No,
and then
for no reason at all
dropped all her reasons
With her clothes. (215)

In “Poverty Poem,” she comes out as a seductress:

She didn’t know beggars in India
smile only at white foreigner.

. . . . . . . . .
. . . . She stares at me
dubiously. (231)
The above lines contain an obvious truth as also an ironical dig at the seductive nature of woman. Again, the picture of woman in “Nudes 1978” betrays her nudity, nakedness and sensuality:

‘Yes, this is me as I am,’
naked seen, seeing nakedness,
named, flawed in detail,
womanly and vulnerable. (252)

The line “naked seen, seeing nakedness” is pertinent and revealing in the context of man-woman relationship and underline the truth that one needs an intuitive eye to understand the real nature of a woman. Similar idea of failure in love and desperate search for firm basis to man-woman relationship runs in poems like, “The Language of Lovers,” “For Love’s Record” etc.

In “The Language of Lovers,” he writes: “Poetry, some foolish critic said, / Is the natural language of lovers – / Looking at her destroyed even my prose” (111).

Through his experiences about the sexual love of a woman Ezekiel falls back over and again to the realization that he cannot define his self in the presence of a woman who either nags or lies, or deceives or drags him to self deception. And about man-woman relationship Ezekiel has this to say: “Even love is not so magical / Whatever the romantics say” (88).

In the poem “For Love’s Record” the poet observes:

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. (110)

Again, the poet shows man-woman relationship in negative light which ends in self-deception:

We took our coffee seated in the shade,
She had no axe to grind but knew her trade,
And turned the conversation when I sighed,
To what I loved in secret but denied.
And then the chips are down -- I recognise
The haze of self-deception in our eyes. (43)

Likewise, the poem “Question” also reveals the poet’s disappointment in love: “Is this the way to happiness? / Prolonging kisses till the world / Of thought and deed is dim?” (82).

The early poetry of Ezekiel is replete with the images of woman generally associated with animality and sexuality, corruption and defilement. Even a cursory reading of his poems shows that from the very beginning he has been treating his sexual partner not on equal footing as one who has not only flesh and blood but also a mind craving for fulfillment and consummation through sexual act. More often his attitude to women borders on male chauvinism and appears to be unhealthy and biased as reflected in many poems associated with sex and marriage. It is true that he does not idealize or eulogize the women or womanhood per se. For he is aware that females are also human with all human follies and infirmities. However, at times Ezekiel appears to be disparaging in his observations about them in a number of poems: The highly sexed Muslim girl is more interested in “pictures in a certain kind of book” than in her English lessons in “How the English Lesson Ended”; the prostitute on Bellasis Road on whom the poet’s final comment is: “I cannot even say I care or do not care, / perhaps it is a kind of despair” (189). The maid servant is depicted with suspect morals and deficient personal hygiene whose treatment at the hands of her employers underscores middle class sanctimoniousness; Flirtatious Indian husbands and their shy wives at an international party in “In India”; the intellectual Indian girl whose great expectations are suddenly frustrated when she finds her relationship with her English boss finally reduced to basic level of man-woman nexus in “In India”; the foreign visitor who does not know that “beggars in India / smile only at white foreigners” (231); and the Jewish wedding in describing which the poet not only views ironically the emptiness of religious rituals and the hypocrisy of orthodoxy but also underlines the disillusion associated with marriage and sex in “Jewish Wedding in Bombay”. In “Passion Poems,” we get to hear of Lord Krishna’s impishness and strangely enough of Radha’s “wiles”. Among the Indian masses, Lord Krishna’s pranks are a common knowledge but it is quite a revelation to find Radha to be a woman of “wiles.” In the same poem, Ezekiel regards the Sanskrit
poets his "poetic ancestors" and envies their freedom of expression vis-a-vis his self proclaimed inhibitions:

How freely they mention
breasts and buttocks.
They are my poetic ancestors.
Why am I so inhibited? (214)

However, in reality, even a cursory reading of his poems shows that not only the frequency and ease with which he mentions about "breasts", "buttocks", "thighs", "nakedness", "naked women", "nudity", "nudes" but also the vivid delineation of love details or man-woman relationships are enough to make debonairs like Khushwant Singh and Shobha De blush. The only caveat is that whereas the honest Sardarji and that woman amongst women are quite frank about their explicitness, Ezekiel can only hypocritically bemoan his self-discovered inhibition even as he can so write sans any restraint: In "Nudes 1978," he asserts:

At first the difference
did not interest me at all:
was she naked, was she nude?

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
. . . I touched

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
... her breasts in adoration,
told her she was beautiful
and led her there
from nakedness to nudity. (248)

or in "Poem of the Separation":
I want you back
with the rough happiness you lightly wear,
supported by your shoulders,
breasts and things. (196)
and yet complains of inhibitions while so often concentrating on the physical organs of the female. It is difficult to agree with Ezekiel that he is "so inhibited" in mentioning "breasts and buttocks" unlike his self-acknowledged poetic forefathers – the Sanskrit poet. Again, Ezekiel has eyes only for anatomical contours and none to appreciate the technical excellencies like the intensely realized imagery in Sanskrit poetry.

Ezekiel's treatment of India and its people, especially the women folk is satirical and negative. In his earlier poems, India is nothing if not poor, in the elitist picture it is nothing if not debaucherous. Non-participation in this debauchery, according to Ezekiel, constitutes backwardness as described.

Surprisingly, for Ezekiel, indulging in drinking and kissing constitute forwardness and culturedness. It is the height of snobbery and superficiality. His satirical presentation of the so-called backwardness, in fact, amounts to insulting Indian womanhood. Similarly, his treatment of love and attitude to marriage is typically male-oriented, biased, prejudiced, narrow and chauvinistic. For example in "To a Certain Lady," he writes:

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 defenselessness. (27)

His attitude to marriage also reflects his attitude toward women. In the name of wife, he disparages the women folk and obliquely the institution of marriage in "from Songs for Nandu Bhende":

I come home in the evening
and my wife shouts at me:
Did you post that letter?
Did you make that telephone call?
Did you pay the bill?
What do you do all day?
Shout at me, woman!
Pull me up for this and that.
You’re right and I’m wrong.

What else are wives for? (241-42)

However, a close reading of Ezekiel’s oeuvre shows that his portrayal of woman as seductress, sexual beast and symbol of defilement and the depiction of pagan woman as an embodiment of sensuousness, sensuality and beastiality is confined only to the initial phase of his poetic career. As his vision grew and sympathies enlarged he now feels at home in the company of woman and finds her a source of vigour, vitality and innocence as reflected in poems like “For Her”:

.... You are
A knowing creature in my void.
You find something to say and do
And when we have emerged again
Into the common world,
With friends to meet and strangers too,
You help me to encompass all. (67)

The positive and powerful impact the company of woman can give and poet’s perception of love is revealed when he writes in “Tribute”:

.... She knows the things
To see, the shortest way to reach
The place, the joy an outing brings.

I followed her, we joined the crowds,

Remembering what she had done
For me, ... Who made me feel at home in crowds. (62)
In his early poetry, woman is depicted as the beast of sex and man-woman relationship a futile exercise ending in self-deception. With the passage of time, the male self of the poet comprehends the dual aspects of the female form as in “Love Poem”:

Great woman-beast of sex you are.
I see you now as myth and dream
Completed, more than what you seem,
The friendly-foe, the near-and-far. (142)

Woman is now perceived as a “myth and dream” and she becomes an able partner to the voyager in quest of harmony in life. Unlike the couple in “Marriage,” whose sexual relations end up with “The darkened room / Roars out the joy of flesh and blood” (124), the lovers in “Perspective” through the movement of their bodies receive messages insisting upon them to find fulfillment:

And yet, the body’s movement in the dance
Is what the walker dreams of, on the hill
At dawn or nightfall, with an inward glance,
And hears a voice insisting: find, fulfil. (134)

Ezekiel from the very beginning of his creative voyage is aware of the fact that life can be redeemed and transcended only by fulfilling the claims of the body. So he celebrates the human body, particularly the female body in its erotic fragrance in a number of his poems. He longs for the nakedness of the body and soul without hesitation or shame for it is the recognition of the blissful innocence before our Fall. In “Nakedness II,” Ezekiel celebrates the significance of the body in controlling the acts of the mind:

He stripped and lay down on his bed
And watched his naked limbs, remote
As love and lonely as a dream.

Then wanting to be whole again he prayed:

And let him understand, that in the working
Of his mind the body takes a hand. (60-61)
In “Love Song,” the poet underlines the significance of the combination of the body of the city and body of a woman:

Beneath your dress I find you young,
Rewarding to my explorations, certain,
Soft and flowing,
And tender to the touch of love.
But you are old
With the shop-spoiled wisdom
Of drawing-rooms and dowagers.
You are not sky, nor river;
You are not river.
You are city-cramped, my love.
Only flesh remains what it was meant to be. (74)

In poem after poem, Ezekiel celebrates body, deifies the physical world, and immortalizes the flesh. He bears close resemblance with Whitman in elevating the common, the physical, the trite, the perishable by celebrating them. This is one of the multiple ways of intensifying one’s bondage and relationship with the place he lives in and in directly, with his own self. It is through the metaphor of city and the body, Ezekiel tries to come to terms with himself, both as a man and a poet. With the image of the pagan woman the portrayal of putrid city completes the picture of debased and defiled human life. Both the interrelated images symbolize corruption and banality. On the one hand, the image of city confirms the poet’s strong sense of commitment and belonging to it. On the other, it shows that he is not blind to its filth and squalor, its debasement and distractions. Most of the poems in the unfinished man have the city as the dominant metaphor. Ezekiel sees the city of Bombay burning “like a passion” (117) and also finds it “cold and dim”, “barbaric” and marshy and also a place “where fame is cheap” (119-20).

Apart from harping on the physicality of the city which burns “like a passion” Ezekiel celebrates sex as a means to attain true happiness:

This laughing love of ours alone
Is wise and will remain,
When all endeavour has been cooled
Ezekiel’s attitude towards sex is not merely physical or stereotypically masculine – as an act of showing off one’s virility to dominate as is the case in the West. It is typically Indian or Jewish which celebrates the physical union. He considers this union to be bold for it perpetuates life, implants continuity to the forces that govern life:

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

In Judaism life is viewed as a network of continuity and this continuity is possible, as Ezekiel seems to believe, through the ritual of flesh, through bodily enjoyment. In “Passion Poems” one can discern Ezekiel’s prime concern for the body, for he knows that “it is the hunger that counts” (281). The sheer delight of the body acquaints one to the holiness, purity and innocence:

   You arrived
   With sari clinging
to your breasts and hips
   I put a kiss upon you lips.
   No part of you
   Could hide
   as you dried. (214)

As the poet matures, love and sex no longer remain the means to show his domination, control or virility or an opportunity to overcome fear, hesitation shed inhibitions: “Drop your fear and some with me, / The best defence in love is just defencelessness” (27).

In such an atmosphere of intimacy the poet realizes that “change is permanent and real, / But the dancing moments of a kiss / Are real too” (27). Such a state of happiness and love touches and transforms common place, everyday objects: “The sight of picture on the wall, Books, carpets, curtains, glass, / The simple things that make a home” (27).
And then the bliss of married life is pictured and experienced as: “A quiet woman / stands by me / while the seasons / come and go” (28).

However, Ezekiel is no romantic in love. He does not idealize or romanticize married life for he is fully aware that married life is also marred by discord and dissensions. It is not entirely an unmixed bliss: “Then, absences and quarrels, indifference / sucking like a leech upon the flash” (29). But the poet is also aware that all these’ quarrels’ and ‘absences’ can be redeemed only “By a mode of love expanding to a way of life” (29). Hence the poet proclaims: “Always we must be lovers, / Man and wife at work upon the hard / Mass of material which is the world” (30).

And finally the poem ends with a prayer: “Teach us, love, above all things, fidelity...” (30) which shows that the poet has firm faith in the power of love and prayer and prays for the smooth resolution of all discords, disputes divides and dissensions in the world paving the way for peace and harmony in the strife torn world.

Masculinity as it obtains in the Western world view leads to strife, struggle, conflict, competition, control and domination. In love and marriage also masculine power and prowess are used to establish superiority, control and domination over “the other” which ultimately lead to discord, disharmony, divide and divorce. But in Ezekiel, as his masculinity matures, his perception of love, woman and marriage undergoes a perceptive and positive change and paves the way for domestic harmony and peace leading to marital bliss. Now he yearns for the company of wife and children and has firm faith in the institution of marriage and its indispensability and only wishes:

To own a singing voice and a talking voice,
A bit of land, a woman and a child or two
Accommodated to their needs and changing moods
And patiently to build a life with these. (4)

Hence “a singing voice” refers to one’s own personality whereas the “talking voice” refers to that of his partner in life. This is the minimum pre-requisite for happy life. The poet recognizes the significance of family life evident is “Marriage Poem” which can be read as a statement of his domestic creed:

Between the acts of wedded love
A quieter passion flows,
Which keeps the nuptial pattern firm
As passion comes and goes,
And in the soil of wedded love
Rears a white rose. (46)

Now the poet boldly declares in “Marriage”:
I went through this, believing all,
Our love denied the Primal Fall
Wordless, we walked among the trees,
And felt immortal as the breeze. (124)

Finally, Ezekiel’s perception of marriage acquires metaphysical connotation, in tandem with Indian philosophy:
However many times we came
Apart, 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? (124)

The poet develops full faith in the justness and goodness of God. He, therefore, proposes the real creed for man of God which is that he should implicitly put faith in the mystery of God.

A close study of Ezekiel’s poetry shows a gradual transformation in his attitude and approach to woman, man-woman relationship and the relation between art and life. His poetic vision grows which enables him to understand persons and objects beyond meaning, where the heart’s mysteries are explained through a profound and fruitful knowledge beyond meaning. Now his heart is filled with the sympathy in the perception of woman so much so that many poems dealing with woman register a development from the predominantly external world of “flesh and bone” to that “myths of light”. He has come a long way from his earlier approach to women which bordered on male-
chauvinism treating women as a sex object. Ultimately the poet finds that the woman becomes an able partner to the voyager in quest of harmony and fulfillment in life.

His earlier picture of woman as a great beast of sex, seductress, a cheat and a defiled being has invited adverse criticism from the critics and the advocates of feminism. It is indeed surprising that a poet of the stature of Ezekiel should look upon women purely as an object of sex given to attracting people as a sorceress just to defile them—a rabidly male-chauvinistic viewpoint. In quite a few poems he presents woman as an object of lust instinctively incapable of anything serious and significant. From maid servants and lowly women to those in high society, Ezekiel harps exclusively on the infirmities of the fair sex. He presents them as mean, selfish and unrepentant for their misdeeds. Their sexual activity and behavior has received an erotic and excessively pornographic treatment. In several poems, he delineates the sexual encounters with minutest details leading to penetration and post-coital experiences. His pornographic presentation is justified on the basis of artistic treatment and his having no faith in morality. But this is a weak justification. Art or no art, morality or no morality, the typical native Indian tradition has hardly any scope for such pornographic details as also for male-chauvinism.

However, a redeeming feature can be seen in a handful of poems where the poet shows a sense of reverence for woman as mother, a protector and creator of children and presents her in a more positive light in poems like "Night of the Scorpion", "Couple", "A Woman Admired". In the "Night of the Scorpion," he presents woman as an embodiment of motherhood, who is ready to sacrifice her life in order that her children may live. She is thankful to the Almighty that the scorpion bit her and not her children.

In the poem "For Kalpana," the poet recalls the careful and affectionate absence of her mother during the illness of his second daughter when the Ezekiel couple had devotedly to attend the ailing child. "Servant" and "After the Show" are other poems where the poet seems more considerate in his treatment of sex. However, except "Night of the Scorpion" all other poems were dropped by Ezekiel not only in the individual volumes but also in his collected poems published in 1989. One can easily infer that these poems have hardly much significance in Ezekiel's poetry except deserving a casual glance. It would not be out of place to mention that in the monotheistic religions like...
Judaism, Christianity, all blame for the Fall has been attributed to woman and she has been hold responsible for the miseries that befell Adam and the mankind. Looked at from this perspective, Ezekiel's prejudice against the fair sex can be appreciated without being apologetic. Yet, all said and done, one cannot miss sharp contrast in the treatment of woman between Ezekiel and Ramanujan. It is pertinent to point out here that there is no tinge of eroticism or sensuousness in A.K. Ramanujan's treatment of woman whereas Ezekiel's poetry overflows it. The inherited Brahminic values had a profound impact on Ramanujan's psyche and he could not get rid of them despite his long stay abroad. But the then outsider in Ezekiel could never send firm roots down in the Indian soil to appreciate the traditional images of woman invariably glorified as goddess in the scriptures.

From the ongoing analysis it is evident that Ezekiel's poems with their wide spectrum of themes more often than not show a centrifugal movement. That's why the concerns of the questing self shift from "seer" to the "seen" and vice-versa. Thus in "Sixty Poems" and "The Third" volumes he concerns himself with woman man-woman relationship but in his later volumes his major concern is urban life. And ultimately the concern with the "seen" is shifted to that of the "seer". The poems in these two volumes present the concern of the poetic self with the fountain of inner life and the landscape of outer world giving his poetics the sense of creative continuity in his own life. These poems are important from the point of Ezekiel's masculinity seen in evolving a poetics in which opposites are accommodated and the self which encounters these opposites seeks resolution out of the tension caused by the opposing forces. In this way, "A Time to Change" shows the poetic self's will to encompass the dichotomies during his proposed voyage, his later poetry shows his methodology of encompassing them and in between his "Sixty Poems" and "The Third" manifest the inevitable recognition and painful scrutiny of the dichotomies between sex and the unreached goal of all-inclusive love, between body and soul, and between a sense of sin and the prospect of redemption. It is these later volumes "The Unfinished Man" and "Exact Name" that transcend his fragmented self and divided soul and correlate ultimately to the laws of his being. Or to put it more simply, it is the quality of contemplation in these volumes which subsequently leads to action in later ones. And action is the hallmark of masculinity.
Ezekiel is a doyen of Indian English literature. He is the pioneer and the trendsetter in modern Indian English poetry. He freed it from the whirlwind of Romanticism and spiritualism and wrought about modernist revolution in its style and subject matter. With the inspiration from poets like W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot, Ezekiel tried and succeeded in setting a new platform for Indian poetry in English. Postcolonial poetry actually begins with him. As such Ezekiel is canonized as a postcolonial Indian English poet.

Nissim Ezekiel uses poetry as a means to explore the Indian mind and sensibility. An Indian Jew by birth Ezekiel transcended all borders and spoke in the voice of love, sanity and humanity. If masculinity is synonymous with strength, vigour, vitality and leadership, one can, then, safely assert that Indian poetry attained poetic masculinity, so to say, and maturity at the hands of Ezekiel who freed it from stale and stereotype of form and content and made it a vehicle of expression of the soul of India. Nissim Ezekiel made serious efforts and most successfully exploited the resources of Indian English and its nuances to reveal not only the oddities and peculiarities of a people but also the intensity of colonial hangover as reflected in their typical use of foreign language, mannerism and day-to-day life. In his very Indian poems Ezekiel succeeds in creating an authentic impression of India, its people and places and their peculiar flavour. He imparted Indianness to Indian English poetry by looking at any typical Indian situation with an Indian attitude. He initiated a new era by deftly manipulating English to bring out the Indian world view. While focusing on indigenous scenario, the poet endeavours to present reality in all its nakedness. Free from inhibition of any sort, Ezekiel is least hypocritical among contemporary poets and vehemently opposed to presenting reality in distortion. His sense of peculiar involvement manifests itself in an apparently detached and dispassionate approach to people, places and situations which engage his attention. Ezekiel’s poetic graph is marked by pursuit honesty, a prerequisite to achieve universality of experience. He can be anything, but cannot put on a mask and be dishonest to his experience. Ezekiel’s poetry is marked by serenity, sobriety and sincerity not frequently not found in Indian poetry. These traits of his postcolonial are a mark of his strength, originality, authority and leadership which are synonymous with masculinity.
An important feature of Ezekiel's poetry is his unusual celebration of failure or suffering in human life. His expanding poetic sensibility developing from existential to essential enables him to accept life in all its manifestations and the poet seems to accept this phenomenon in the true Biblical spirit – "Rejoice in the Abyss". The postcolonial post second World War poetry grew extraordinarily elegiac and pessimistic so much so that life was viewed as bordering on meaninglessness or nihilism. Ezekiel's attitude to life is one of involvement, though sometimes attempting to wear a mask the prologmist takes a plunge into the turmoil or crisis, be it married life or other activities. He never adopts an attitude of evasion and avoidance and sanguinely meets a situation on equal terms. Further, the typical Ezekiel persona is always conscious of his mortality and never takes upon himself the roles that require superhuman efforts. Without being hampered by the fact of being a sinner he goes ahead and enjoys life with all its limitations. He is acutely aware of the maladies of modern India. He comes down heavily on the corruption, moral decline and decadence in contemporary India. He is quite skeptical of the people around – the gullible masses and their unscrupulous leaders alike. He portrays the dismal and tortuous environment in poem after poem but he never tries to dissociate himself from this environment. His anger stems from his concern for his country, his complaint arises out of his compassion for his people and his identity is inextricably linked with that of his country. His poetry is a record of his earnest attempts to establish the supremacy of love and service over everything else. The instinctive love for life enables the poet to develop such an attitude of acceptance and accommodation reconciliation and rejoice amidst tortuous environment. Only a poet with poetic masculinity can do so.

A reading between the lines of Ezekiel's poetry shows that the unmistakable message conveyed by it is one of hope and courage leading to an acceptance of human situation upon this planet. In many representative pieces, he dwells at length on the efficacy of various religions to new life in totality. He neither suggests escapism from the hand realities staring the protagonists in the face, nor prompts them to surrender to those irresistible forces bent upon demolishing human dignity. His characters betray a rare ability to maintain their poise and calm in the face of seemingly insurmountable challenges. It is a mark of masculine strength in Indian context. This natural acceptance
of suffering has lent his poetry a poise and balance rare in modern poetry. This trait also explains the absence of the neurotic or abnormal protagonists in his work. His characters are almost types representing the common humanity imbued with an affirmative vision.

Another conspicuous feature of Ezekiel’s poetry is the spirit of humanism that informs it. And a common feature of contemporary Ezekiel’s criticism is that he is described as a humanist, which is only partly true. The employment of the epithet humanist in Ezekiel’s context has rather been loosely made. A humanist expects and sets high standards of morality norms to be observed. He is always on the lookout to overcome and plug human weaknesses lest they damage human potential. The idea of original sin obsesses and leaves a humanist battered, and he attempts to contribute his humble bit towards the betterment of human race. These attributes are well substantiated in the case neo-classical writers of the early eighteenth century who had their professed creeds. To execute their manifestos they grappled with the peculiar human duality or ambivalence to rise to heavenly heights as also to touch the bottomless depth. Ezekiel resembles these poets in as much as he believes in the essential human depravity. But unlike his illustrious models he is reluctant to whip them for correction and improvement. Dryden and Pope took upon themselves as perfect specimens of humanity under the impression that they were infallible, which they certainly were not. This led to alarming aberrations and degeneration in their ideals and they could not practise what they intended to preach.

Ezekiel is a humanist but of a different kind. He doesn’t set high standards of morality, nor does he preach idealism or humanism which is beyond human reach. Ezekiel himself is very liberal and compromising and he could never dream of assuming a reformist’s role. Unlike Pope, he is one amongst his protagonists sharing with them common human pettiness and never suffering from any complex whatsoever M.K. Naik’s assertion that the alienation experience has resulted in the protective assumption of easy superiority in Ezekiel’s “Very Indian Poems” in Indian English appears to be overstretched and beyond the point. In fact, the poet treats this typical Indian trait in a light-hearted manner free from any animosity or ridicule. To be fair to Ezekiel, it must be said that his poems never betray any sense of superiority; rather, he applies his ken evenly to entire society. Theirin lies his poetic masculinity-belief in the supremacy of
love and service as against western masculinity of conquest and servility, domination and control.

It is evident from the above discussion that Ezekiel’s masculinity is reflected in his spirit of humanism which is free from idealism or utopia. It is rooted in his sense of identification with the laity and urge to alleviate the sufferings of the poor, naked, and diseased and deprived. Western notion of masculinity is based on competition, individualism and self-aggrandizement. But Ezekiel’s poetry is a quest for identity, commitment and harmony in life. It overflows with milk of human compassion, kindness and sympathy. It is a synthesis or reconciliation of the opposites - an emotional involvement in life and a detachment from it, a passion for the present and a desire for beyond. Ezekiel believes that a poet is not merely a cultural imitator but a creator. So he stresses the need for a literature of cultural contact on a global scale so as to facilitate understanding of humanity and its future i.e. the development of human sensibility. To achieve this aim, Ezekiel juxtaposes poetry, art and life and brings about a harmony between the internal and external universe of mind. This is the central principle of his poetic musings and meditations. In sum, Nissim Ezekiel’s humanism can be best summed up in Miguel de Unamuno’s trenchant observation: “... I would choose neither” the human or humanity” neither the simple adjective nor the substantative adjective but the concrete substantive: man, the man of flesh and blood, the man who is born, suffers and dies – above all, the man who eats and plays and sleeps and thinks and loves....”(3).
Works Cited


