Chapter Four

Womanscape

The centre of consciousness in the art of both Walcott and Ezekiel is not only predominantly male, but something verging on the chauvinistic. The treatment of women in both the poets, throws up several cliches and negatively perceived patriarchal platitudes. In order to grasp what lies beneath the latent antagonism between the sexes, there is an imperative need to have a general idea of certain inherent imbalance in the Caribbean as well as the Indian societies:

Walcott’s Caribbean region is a place of tensions between the sexes. Single mothers, still very numerous, and often in economic difficulty, are still somehow perceived often by men as powerful, despite their social and economic powerlessness. Men talk about women in hostile ways .... The degree of female autonomy, leadership, and sexual independence which has been forced to develop in many Caribbean women as a result of male behaviour is not recognised as an advantage to the region, but as a reason for men to resist change being advocated by feminists. The good husbands and lovers of the Caribbean are also
too often silent and invisible: the creative literature at present available for young women to read abounds with portraits of difficult male-female relations and with stereotypical attitudes towards women, depicting them as victims of male violence or in other ways as losers or marginal figures. (Savory 247-48)

Perhaps it is against such a dismal backdrop that the vision that Walcott presents in his art has to be analyzed.

Writing on the status of women in the Western society, Mary Anne Ferguson states, "... in every age woman has been seen primarily ... as mother, wife, mistress, sex object — their roles in relationship to men" (4-5). This statement cannot be more accurate than in Ezekiel. Fritz Blackwell characterizes traditional India as essentially male-oriented, where individual rights are subordinated to group or social role-expectations:

The point is that personality must not dominate the role. And this insistence upon identity through type or role makes a man-woman social, platonic or intellectual
relationship nearly impossible, as contemporaries like Nirad Chaudhuri and Nissim Ezekiel have frequently noted. (37)

In several of his poems, Ezekiel looks upon man-woman relationship from an extreme male point of view, where the woman is identified as a type or role — a mother, a wife or some object of pure sexual pleasure.

It is interesting to note that to both these leading post-colonial poets of international renown, women appear eminently as creatures without well-defined identities or souls of their own. Often, by equating women to animate and inanimate creatures of the macrocosm in their art, the poets go to the extent of reducing them to non-entities, not to speak of issues like fundamental human rights, gender equality and social justice.

For Walcott, the moon, the sea and the landscape provide ready comparisons for women. In Chapter One of Another Life, the play of light and shade under moonlight is admirably employed as a simile for Anna's meeting with the dark protagonist: "The moon came to the window and stayed there. / He was her subject, changing when she changed .... / His dun flesh peeled white by her lightning strokes!" (100-01, 108).
Describing some other girl in the Eighteenth Chapter of the same poem, Walcott refers to the "dark moons moving under her glazed eyelids" (72).

Walcott's "Coral" jointly presents a unique merger of lovers on the one hand, and their union with the surrounding seascape on the other. Even as the lover complements his female partner, the beach becomes complete only in the presence of the lovers:

This coral's shape echoes the hand
It hollowed. Its

Immediate absence is heavy. As pumice,
As your breast in my cupped palm.

Sea-cold, its nipple rasps like sand,
Its pores, like yours, shone with salt sweat.

A similar image is used in "The Schooner Flight" connecting the land and the sea:

I knew when dark-haired evening put on
her bright silk at sunset, and, folding
the sea,
Sidled under the sheet with her starry laugh,
that there'd be no rest, there'd be no
forgetting. (49-52)
In Another Life Chapter Fifteen, Walcott invites a comparison for Anna's hair from Russia's wheat fields. Like the metaphysical poets, he finds in Anna another strange and distant, but extremely lovable land, thus inviting the metaphors of the microcosm and macrocosm:

In that hair I could walk through the wheatfields of Russia,
your arms were downed and ripening pears,
for you became, in fact, another country,
you are Anna of the wheatfield and the weir,
you are Anna of the solid winter rain,

Anna of the first green poems that startlingly hardened
of the mellowing breasts now,
Anna of the lurching, long flamingoes
of the harsh salt lingering in the thimble
of the bather's smile,

that I found life within some novel's leaves
more real than you, already chosen
as his doomed heroine. You knew, you knew.

(24-28, 34-38, 45-47)

Anna's downy arms and "ripening pears" of "mellowing breasts" instil in the protagonist, according
to the poet, the feel of "another country". The imagery drawn from agriculture and seasons of migrating birds in the poem underlines the infinite novelty, strangeness and wonder, and the limitless cycles of fertility he surmises in Anna. The poem, in short, seems to glance at the metaphor of the goddess Ceres who, despite all her apparent passiveness could lure Pluto from the dark underworld keeping him under her perennial spell for a good half of every year: "... enduring all goodbyes / within the cynical station of your body" (42-43), thus becoming in a sense "his doomed heroine" (47).

At any given moment, Walcott’s eye is riveted on a single object, even while a number of women are involved. Be it a macrocosm, a landscape, a fruit or bird, Walcott’s aesthetic eyes often tend to hold in a delicate balance the beautiful aspect of a single female individual for the most part. Ezekiel may be a great worshipper of female sensuality. Yet the yawning gulf that marks the difference between the poets under discussion, lies in the fact that the Indian poet deals with women in groups and ends up making statements with universalizations as the poem "Nudes 1978 IX" shows:

Hills, valleys, swelling river-banks,
all those landscape images;
praise of breasts and buttocks
seen as fruit, thighs as tree-trunks;
flower, moon, fire, bird
of desire, fish of sex
remotely tell a small
fragmented part of the story. (1-8)

Ezekiel says in "Motives", referring to "your body ...", "I dwell on it / as on a landscape / or a beloved painting" (2-5). In Walcott's poem, there is a total involvement on the part of the persona with the woman perceived, in striking contrast to Ezekiel's objective treatment of women. Often, Ezekiel emerges as a mere voyeur whose heart fails to warm up to the charm of the woman perceived, even in artistic terms.

Walcott, being an ardent lover of nature, has a unique skill of blending the glow of human skin with the rare glisten of the lemon-like lamp shine in "Sunday Lemons":

let a lemon glare
be all your armour

share your acid silence
with this woman's remembering
the form of this woman lying
a lemon, a flameless lamp. (4-5, 10-11, 32-33)

While Walcott compares a woman to "a lemon", Ezekiel compares women to "sour grapes" in "Fruit":

The sour grapes were just as firm
And round as those I loved, smooth skin
Reflecting light, flesh soft within.
But victims of the silent germ
They told the truth to heart and tongue.
I paused, astonished. There they stood
Delicate, downy, fair and young,
Cool vessels of deceptive good.
I took them as I took the good. (1-9)

Continuing to indulge himself in his habit of seeing women in groups, Ezekiel has also the temerity to divide them into two groups: the ones who are plainly sweet and open, and the other subtle and silent. As a connoisseur of women, Ezekiel pronounces his final, profound judgement that all of them are equally fascinating. The irony in the poem, however, is brought out by the fact that the women are posited almost as a rival group vis-a-vis the smug, self-complacent protagonist-persona, who considers himself superior by far, by virtue of his self-presumed omniscience.
Walcott does not compare women to inanimate things, but most of the time, women to Ezekiel are objects as in the poem, "Conclusion":

That women, trees, tables, waves and birds,
Buildings, stones, steamrollers,
Cats and clocks
Are here to be enjoyed.

........................................
The true business of living is seeing,
  touching, kissing,
The epic of walking in the street and
  loving on the bed. (4-7, 20-21)

At times, Ezekiel ironically assumes the pedestal of a prophet-like status, to make his categorical assertions on behalf of men, on what to do with women in generalized terms. Sanjit Mishra has already noted Ezekiel's innate cynicism, where women are concerned, in the light of the above poem, for he talks of Ezekiel's inherent antipathy towards women as a whole:

Though the poem argues for the acceptance of secular pleasure as a requisite for living and thereby integrating various human faculties, the bracketing of the fair sex with stones and buildings smacks of an inbuilt antipathy which can hardly be accounted for. (52)
Quite often, a woman, to Ezekiel, is a commodity and an object, perhaps a prized object at that, who, at the same time, is also highly vulnerable and fragile. It is little wonder then that he compares women to household items in "Declaration":

... certain vases
And women are too expensive, or else
Fragile, exacting, best enjoyed
From a distance, with delicate affection.

(2-5)

Both the West-Indian poet and the Indian poet are good at describing women in a style that is strikingly individualistic. However, Walcott, rooted essentially in Afro-European sensibility, perceives his women eminently as individuals. Perhaps, in the case of Ezekiel, his Indo-Jewish consciousness acts as an inhibiting influence and dissuades him from appreciating different women as individuals in their own rights. Thus, Ezekiel ends up treating women in collective terms.

While describing his women, Walcott presses into service an armoury of epithets drawn from the worlds of photography, painting, art and cinematography, capable of transmuting the dynamism and flux of the entire
situation in one breath. It is this salient phenomenon that contributes primarily to the striking realism of Walcott’s poetic art. In short, Walcott has the traveller's, poet’s and painter’s eye while recording an image in art. The following lines from Chapter Five of Another Life can be cited as a fine example for his skill in this regard:

The mother a yellow, formidable Martiniquaise, handsome, obliquely masculine, with a mole, "tres égyptienne," black sapodilla-seed eyes under the ziggurat of her pompadour.
We called the Captain's Wife. (45-49)

In Chapter Three of the same poem, the whore of Saint Lucia is imaginatively portrayed here in sensual terms against a literary tapestry serving as a backdrop, recalling a larger-than-life Hellenic myth, which indirectly justifies her promiscuity, vouching for her sex appeal:

Janie, the town's one clear-complexioned whore, with two tow-headed children in her tow, she sleeps with sailors only, her black hair electrical as all that trouble over Troy,
rolling broad-beamed she leaves
a plump and plumping vacancy .... (76-82)

Walcott's poetic apparatus needs no finer focussing. Recalling Anna, his love, in Chapter Thirteen of Another Life, he writes capturing vividly not only the tone of her skin and youth as in the days of her youth, but also the intimacy of her touch employing extremely compelling visual and tactile imagery:

The sixteen-year-old sun
plates her with light,
freckled, from now on
her colour only,

leaf-freckled forearm
brown of leafless April,
the russet hair, the freckled
big-boned wrist ....

..........................
the chill of water entered
the shell of her palm, ... (114-21, 133-34)

In "Tales of the Islands", he describes Miss Rossignol, a public woman in terms, recalling the earthly charm of biblical Magdalen, herself as heady as a bottle of wine. Visual and gustatory imagery stand out in the following lines:
The living Magdalen of Donatello;
And tipsy as a bottle when she stalked
On stilted legs to fetch the morning milk,
In a black shawl harnessed by rusty brooches.

(33-36)

In the case of Ezekiel's poems, the pleasure conveyed often stems from the visual stimulus. In "Conclusion", women offer the poet a perennial source of visual pleasure, thereby restoring his youth and virility: "To see things as they really are is a habit, / An acquisition in the blood / That will not let the eye grow old" (12-14). However, while dwelling on the charms of the feminine physique, Ezekiel's verse often reveals considerable traces of chauvinism. In "Motives", he tends to sum up his analysis of a particular specimen before him, in clinical and thoroughly unemotional terms maintaining a marked distance as indicated by his dictum: "Not the total form only / but the details interest me" (6-7).

The poem "Motives" highlights the extent of Ezekiel's chauvinism and arrogance, as it sets the protagonist on the seat of an analyzer, a researcher and a connoisseur all rolled into one, whose comments are apparently not simply highly valuable but absolutely irrefutable. Ironically, the protagonist remains
supremely unaware of the condescending smugness of stance he has unwittingly assumed in the context:

Your skin is white
but black or grey
would do just as well.
The eyes are large,
So are the breasts —
does size matter?
I don’t think so.
Your thighs are full and round,
thin and flat I’d love them too. (12-20)

To Ezekiel, any part of the woman’s body is an object of the wonder of creation. His "Description" goes on as follows:

... your hair,
remembered hair,
touched, smelt, lying silent there
upon your head, beneath your arms,
and then between your thighs a wonder
of hair, ... (2-7)

Ezekiel’s poems on individual women are rare, but "Nudes 1978 VI" celebrates an experience of a rare one-to-one encounter. The poem is insightful from a psychological perspective too, for it celebrates, in
euphoric terms, the liberation the protagonist brings about in the life of a passive woman, smarting under an excessive feeling of reserve and inhibition. To the protagonist, however, it turns out to be such an excitingly adventurous sexual experience that he feels like a humble devotee in the end:

I saw embarrassment and shame
as clearly on her face
a love, desire,
need to know it all.
The pathos moved me. I touched
her feet as if in worship,
held her breasts in adoration,
told her she was beautiful
and led her there
from nakedness to nudity. (5-14)

There is a metaphor of a sculpture or a painting at the close of the poem, when the protagonist admits how he "... led her there / from nakedness to nudity" (13-14). At last, the protagonist realizes the larger-than-life stature and nature of the woman whom he had just taken, whom he had presumed till then as someone backward or shy. Such a wilful assumption of a stance of humility and sensitivity to the play of feelings in the woman in Ezekiel, is a very rare occurrence indeed.
Referring to the pronounced streak of eroticism in Ezekiel, Linda Hess has called him "a poet of the body ..." (30). In "At the Party" for instance, the poet admits with singular candour, how he "curbed his abstract insights with a will" (1) and "scrutinized the women for the kill" (3). The following stanza is a fine example of Ezekiel's mode of viewing the dynamics involved in the gaits of women with the eyes of a voyeur and the mind of a cynic:

Ethereal beauties, you may always be
Dedicate to love and reckless shopping,
Your midriffs moist and your thighs unruly,
Breasts beneath the fabric slyly plopping.

(5-8)

Ezekiel remains poignantly aloof and voyeuristic in his recording of women's charms, too frequently disturbed by their "moist" midriffs, "plopping" breasts, "unruly" thighs as they go around shopping. However much the protagonist may get fascinated with their bodies and gaits, there already creeps in a critical distance between himself and the women observed, for his mind is already keenly watchful of their "reckless" shopping. Such a persistent strain of continuous criticism and consequent dichotomy at the level of the mind and body reveals an unmistakable, yawning gulf felt between
Ezekiel and his women. Even the love shown by women as tokens of dedication, namely their devotion to him, is almost viewed with mischievous suspicion.

Ezekiel's irony and distance from the women he writes about are stressed again by his deliberate use of 'plural' here. Even at the 'visual' level only those women who are distant and charming strike the protagonist as 'ethereal'. In contrast, Walcott finds often a woman 'angelic', yet she remains sufficiently 'human' enough for him, when she is close or intimate.

Ezekiel's "Love Song" reveals his preoccupation with the female physique, with a touch of feeling:

Beneath your dress I find you young,
Rewarding to my explorations, certain,
Soft and flowing,
And tender to the touch of love. (1-4)

Ezekiel's "Nudes 1978-IX" borders on the cynical as he views only the body of the woman stretched "unposed" before him. The dominant visual interest in the poem is amply thrown into relief by the metaphor in the very title "Nudes 1978-IX". The title, with its tag of a Roman number, also is indicative of the poet's tendency to categorize, thus, revealing an inveterate cynical strain. As usual, he does not make any attempt
to rush into any relationship with the woman but stays outside making a clinical observation from a distance. The woman observed for the present seems to be free from "pulls and tensions" (10). However, a strain of cynicism can be detected in the closing line of the poem, where the protagonist seems to proffer a generalization that to be genuinely human, a woman has to be "unresisting" too. The poem is a cynical pointer to the fact that Ezekiel refuses to recognize the woman's fundamental right to 'resist', be it in the name of culture, dignity, belief, taste or sheer perversity. Thus, the vision presented in Ezekiel can be called nakedly chauvinistic at times:

I see you here, stretched out,
not as complex pulls and tensions,
muscle, bone, skin, resilience
but as person, always
human in your naked
unposed poses, resisting form. (9-14)

The poems dwelling on the woman's image in all its varied dimensions occupy a considerable volume of Ezekiel's poetry and this has led some critics like Linda Hess to regard him as a great poet of love. However, a careful study of his poetic art reveals the fact that
... he is not a love-poet in the tradition of Shakespeare or Robert Browning. 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 pit-falls and aversion. (Pandey 109)

The persona in "A Woman Observed" is visibly conscious of the pregnant woman's sexuality and is shocked at her prudishness, regarding exhibition of nude statues and paintings in the art gallery. He cannot comprehend why the pregnant woman denies to art what she has known in real life, for even this pregnant woman does not escape the sensual survey of the persona:

... The life
in the woman's belly
swelling her erotic lines
depresses me, the seed
and source denied by this expression on her face.

I watch her sadly as
she leaves the place, my eyes
embracing all that sensual movement bursting through the dress. (9-18)
The persona watches two women walking: one walking in the rain and the other in pools of gutter water. He is quite taken up by the casual manner in which the woman carries herself. Dwelling on the drenched woman, he writes in "Episode":

Walking in deserted streets  
Heedless of the sky sobbing  
Rain upon her slender shoulders,  
She wears my admiration  
Like a truant ray of sun,  
And swings indifferently  
Into a pub. (1-7)

And the poem closes on a swirl of sensations: "... on my lips a hurricane / Of Helen’s kisses" (15-16).

The one who walks over the pool of gutter-water is equally appealing to the eyes of the persona of "Beauty and Poverty" from "Edinburgh Interlude", mainly on account of her irrepressible self-assurance:

From the squalor  
of a narrow lane  
leading to a slum,  
she walked out —  
like one of the Maharaja’s  
air-hostesses. (43-48)
The woman presented in "Monsoon" does not walk in any rain, but stands in front of the protagonist fully drenched. She arouses such a sexual ardour in the persona that the imaginary kiss dwelt on in "Episode", culminates in a real kiss in "Monsoon":

You arrived
with sari clinging
to your breasts and hips.
I put a kiss upon your lips.
No part of you
could hide
as you dried. (1-7)

The passages cited above from Ezekiel exhibit certain minute details of the bodyscape. It is highly ironical that after having frequently, and frankly, referred to his own sexual encounters in several poems, Ezekiel talks about his inhibition in the poem entitled "The Sanskrit Poets":

How freely they mention breasts and buttocks.
They are my poetic ancestors.
Why am I so inhibited? (1-4)

Perhaps, in this respect, Ezekiel too is very much 'an Indian' who follows the hypocrisy of his "poetic ancestors" so faithfully.
Often Walcott and Ezekiel are cynical and insensitive to the fact that women are as much flesh-and-blood individuals as men, as they utterly fail to attribute feelings to them. In "New World", Walcott versifies:

Adam had an idea.
He and the snake would share
the loss of Eden for a profit.
So both made the New World. (23-26)

Thus, in the New World, Eve is conveniently shared by both Adam and the snake. In "A Letter from Brooklyn", an old woman friend of his dead father, writes a kind and affectionate letter to the poet, only to invite the following comment from Walcott:

"I am Mable Rawlins", she writes, "and know both your parents";
He is dead, Miss Rawlins, but God bless your tense:
"Your father was a dutiful, honest, Faithful, and useful person."
For such plain praise what fame is recompense? (14-18)

The writer of the letter, in this case, is reduced through a clever synecdoche to a "veined hand" and a
face he cannot remember and her "spidery style" inscribes a text he finds extremely difficult to read. Nevertheless, in the closing line of the poem, she emerges in the eyes of Walcott as an ageing humble, Penelope: "... she spins the blessings of her years; / Not withered of beauty if she can bring such tears" (29-30).

In Midsummer XI, Walcott seems to point out that only women raise questions on moral issues, while men do not.

... certain sadnesses are not immense, but fatal, like the sense of sin while shaving. And empty cupboards where her dresses shone. But why flushing a faucet, its vortex swivelling with bits of hair, could make some men's hands quietly put aside their razors, and sense their veins as filth floating down river after the dolorous industries of sex, is a question swans may raise with their white necks, that the cockerel answers quickly, treading his hens. (11-20)
In spite of such self-conscious, generalized portraits, Walcott responds as towards a victim, in the case of a particular girl of exceptional nubile charm in Another Life, Chapter Eighteen:

... It is like that visit
to that trembling girl, at whose quivering side,
her skin like a plagued foal’s
my own compassion quivered,

who answers, "How was it?
It was all trembling."
It is fear and trembling. (68-71, 73-75)

This is an extraordinary poem on a delicate situation where Walcott shows exceptional sensitivity to the feeling of a girl with all her sense of shock, embarrassment and fear after her sexual encounter with a man considerably senior to her in age. The poem is uncommon in the sense that it shows no trace of cynicism or smug superiority on the part of the poet himself. Such a feeling and sensitivity towards any girl, placed under similar circumstances, is almost utterly missing in Ezekiel whose cynicism and chauvinism make him resort invariably to a collective treatment of women as a type or category of beings, born to be bullied and cowed down
by men. For Ezekiel, only the physical form of a woman or rather a female that counts. He does not attribute much of emotional feeling to the female physique. For example, in "Nudes 1978 I",

This body has a name,
or the name has a body.
It is not the subject of my love
but a form, an art
in which I am absorbed. (1-5)

In "In India", Ezekiel lays down, with his tongue in his cheek, a code of behaviour for Indian women who, in general, do not socialize:

The wives of India sit apart.
They do not drink,
they do not talk,
of course, they do not kiss. (34-37)

Reading these lines, Yorburg rushes to the extreme conclusion that in India, "Men and women (other than brothers and sisters) who were of the same generation did not sit "together and talk" (86). The image of women presented here is in sharp contrast to that given in Section Four where a girl intent on social climbing indulges herself in an affair with her English boss,
under the pretence of establishing an intellectual rapport with him:

At the second meeting
In the large apartment
After cold beer and the music on,
She sat in disarray. (58-61)

No feeling is attributed to the disarrayed girl on this occasion, as the protagonist seems to only mock at her plight, caused all by her own greed and undue haste in self-promotion.

On the other hand, if Ezekiel attributes any feeling to the woman, he goes to the other extreme of portraying her as an embodiment of animality and bestiality. Walcott is not so vehement as Ezekiel. In "Europa", images flow in quick succession, leading the readers ultimately, to an equation of the woman with the beast:

who ever saw her pale arms hook his horns,
her thighs clamped tight in their deep-plunging ride,
watched, in the hiss of the exhausted foam,
her white flesh constellate to phosphorus
as in salt darkness beast and woman come?

(23-27)
In Ezekiel’s poetry the woman gets often associated with bestiality. In "Beachscene", for instance,

Image of a female
Body nearly naked
On the beach, and bird-soft
But blazing animal
Unhinging speech and bone. (6-10)

As a critic has observed with insight, associating the woman with birds and beast connotes essentially a sadistic intent: "The explicit contrast between 'bird-soft' and 'blazing animal' is indicative of a schizophrenic personality that has a propensity for destruction" (Lall 79).

Again, the image of woman in Ezekiel’s "Love Poem" is that of "Great woman-beast of sex" (5). In "Preferences", Ezekiel talks of "the viperish desires of women" (10). In "Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher", the persona, through a compelling metaphor, compares women to birds which settle down after a long period of initial vacillation and self-doubt. In "The Fisherman" too, he compares the woman to a fish which "is shy of bait" (4).

I see the fish in the waters,
It sees me too,
It is wet and smooth and soft.
It comes to me at last
As the darkness falls upon the sleepy waters,
Fish in the darkness comes to me at last.

(9-14)

It is quite obvious that the persona here sees the woman only as a potential victim, to be savoured like a dish, utterly ignoring her humanity and dignity as an individual.

On another occasion, the poet uses adjectives associated with animals to describe women as in "The Loss", where he asks "Did I create this woman, / untameable and yet / willing to be tamed?" (3-5). In "Tone Poem", he talks of how

... I feel
I am
not in pursuit
of anything
except
animal faith. (25-30)

In the poem "Something to Pursue", Ezekiel associates even sin with the woman and feels that man can have redemption only "when the female animal no
longer / Haunts the bed in flesh or dream" (123-24). In the words of a critic,

The animality best defined by living on the sensual plane imputed to woman who is on the look out for her innocent victim the man, hypnotised and helpless, is unfair to womankind even from the neo-classical norms. No abuse can be more insulting than comparing a substantial section of humanity to animals and thereby ignoring their innate potentialities. (Mishra 52)

There are occasions when both Walcott and Ezekiel portray the woman as an embodiment of corruption, defilement and cruelty. In their view, women do play at times double-roles and entrap men. Significantly, Walcott's vision of the woman includes a feeling of fear/disgust on the part of the man. In "Goats and Monkeys", associations of sexuality and violence are not only explicit, but intricably interwoven with stark racial overtones:

And yet, whatever fury girded
on that saffron-sunset turban, moon-shaped sword
was not his racial, panther-black revenge
pulsing her chamber with raw musk, its sweat
but horror of the moon's change,
of the corruption of an absolute,
like a white fruit
pulped ripe by fondling but doubly sweet.

(24-31)

In the eyes of Walcott's persona, once sexual passion touches the spiritual innocence of Desdemona, "Only annihilation can resolve / the pure corruption in her dreaming face" (38-39).

On the surface, the poem seems to be simple. However, it goes on to pose certain serious issues, for it says that Desdemona is unaware that "like Pasiphae, poor girl" would "breed horned monsters" (15). Such an insinuation can only be the voice of an irresponsible racist bigot.

Dealing with the closing lines of the passage, Cameron King and Louis James find that the poem is double-edged and deliberately equivocal:

The last two lines bring together both the direct and the ironic readings of the poem in one tragic vision. For "this mythical, horned beast who's no more / monstrous for being black" can be interpreted taking 'mythical' as
'basic to the human psyche', or as 'non-existence'. It can be that it does not matter that Othello is black, because the conflicts are deeper even than race; or it can mean that this is so because the whole tragedy is ultimately comic, without any real basis. What is the truth? Walcott does not give us the answer. (295)

Regardless of Walcott's ultimate view of Shakespeare's Othello, one cannot but detect a profound note of cynicism in this poem. Most readers will find it difficult that Walcott could associate Desdemona, the fragile, innocent, tragic protagonist of Shakespeare with Pasiphe who ended up breeding "horned monsters".

In Another Life, Chapter Five, a beautiful woman who is unfaithful to her husband is portrayed. Walcott's choice of language in the poem reveals a strong resentment against this woman who is also sexually enterprising:

then when he ulysseed, she bloomed again,

....................................................
Dressed in black lace, like an impatient
widow,
I imagined that skin, pomegranate, under
silks
the sheen of water, and that
sweet-sour stink vixens give off. (63, 66-69)

This passage presents a tension between woman’s
delicacy and her sensual nature. Words like "skin,
pomegranate", "silks", and "the sheen" stress her
glamour on the one hand and "sweet-sour stink" and
"vixens" suggest her animal charm.

In Chapter Thirteen of Another Life, in the
portrait of Anna, a love of his youth, there is a self-
conscious assertion in the form of something menacing
about the woman’s basic nature: "I see her stride / as
ruthless as that flax-bright harvester / Judith, with
Holofernes’ lantern in her hand" (164-66).

Edward Baugh’s comment on Judith is interestingly
insightful, as according to him, the presentation of her
character is done in Walcott from the perspective of her
victim, Holofernes:

This too is a kind of idealisation, as Judith
by her murder of Holofernes proved herself a
partner and heroine, but the connotations
which adhere to her when she is seen from
Holofernes’ point of view are inescapable,
complicating Anna’s connotations of simplicity
and truth. (Awakened Conscience 230)
As the critic observes, Walcott deflates the picture of Judith here. The "deliveress" in the poem deliberately implies that Anna too has another side namely, that of a seductress.

Women who step out into the world at large have often been the "stuff" of the tragic fiction written by male writers, like Pasternak's Lara and Thomas Hardy's Tess and Bathsheba Everdene. Walcott's idea of these three women in his poem "Love in the Valley" is also expressive of some fear. The 'fear' in the poem seems to suggest the fear of love itself for their love appears, in Walcott's eyes, as something potentially tragic and unbelievably larger than life itself, verging on the impossible in life or art:

I feared the numbing kiss
of those women of winter,
Bathsheba, Lara, Tess,

whose tragedy made less
of life, whose love was more
than love of literature. (43-48)

In the poem, "A Lesson for This Sunday", the protagonist who keeps swinging in his hammock suddenly hears "... the cries / Of two small children hunting yellow wings" (9-10) and discovers that cruelty is a
basic trait of the humans: "Heredity of cruelty everywhere" (26). In the poem, however, it is the girl-child's cruelty that is singled out: "She shrieks to eviscerate its abdomen .... / The girl, in lemon frock, begins to scream / As the maimed, teetering thing attempts its flight" (16, 19-20).

Even little girls indulging themselves in play activities like catching an insect and experimenting with it are considered analogous to women who, in the eyes of the protagonist, appear thoughtless, shallow and insensitive. Conversely, there is an implicit suggestion that compared to them, men are capable of greater finesse and understanding of life.

An unmistakable trace of misogyny can be seen in Ezekiel also, though the mode of its presentation is not so subtle or delicate as in Walcott.

In Ezekiel's "The Old Woman", a woman is portrayed as a murderess because of her attitude towards her husband whom she has killed with indifference. "She let her husband die of too much dying" (5) and

She lived on cornflakes, hate and sweetened milk,
Came into the world to be a woman,
Reflect a poem in the hearts of men
And feed their delicate virilities.
But hardened at the core she lived alone,
Her ethic symbolised by stone, by stone.

(9-14)

Here again, the male persona refers to the "delicate virilities" of men callously consumed by women who are "hardened at the core", living essentially "alone" like a "stone". Ezekiel admits in his letter to Anisur Rahman, "There is a frequent focusing on and preoccupation with pagan women in my poetry" (43). According to Rahman:

Pagan woman is symbolic of fleshy existence, sexual vibrancy and emotional entanglement. Such a woman remains a nagging reality, a constant threat to the morality of men. She is symbolic of mean passion, earthly corruption and defilement. (44)

Though Ezekiel’s readers are not obliged to accept the poet’s interpretation of his poems, the above mentioned episode raises murky issues, like which type of women Ezekiel would regard as 'pagan'.

Ezekiel’s piece "The Old Abyss" makes certain disparaging comments on a girl and her alleged permissiveness. The poem glances at the abysmal depth to
which Man fell from Eden after his seduction at the hands of a woman. The following stanza also underlines the proximity between instinctual sensuality of mankind with the concept of perdition associated with sin:

This girl, once married, with a child,
But now alone, torments
The men she knows
With such magnificence in movement
(I have died beholding it)
They see the old abyss again —
Desire with object near and far. (1-7)

Ezekiel's protagonist in "For Love's Record" also conveys a similar attitude regarding the fair sex. The woman referred to is known for her deliberate permissiveness, gathering "men as shells and put them by" (3) and "such love as hers could bear no common code" (6) because "She grew in love abandoning her ties" (15).

Perhaps the poet's antipathy towards woman, stems from his quasi-religious consciousness. In Christianity as well as Judaism, Man's Fall is summarily attributed to Woman. Born in a Jewish family, Ezekiel entertains perhaps an inveterate bias against woman, who remains first and foremost a corruptor of flesh.
Consequently, being inhibited with a sense of corruptor of flesh, Ezekiel cannot find true love. Walcott, on the other hand, has a genuine love relationship with Anna. His love poems are autobiographical in nature, where love is experienced at all levels: physical, psychological and spiritual.

When Walcott's persona is in love, his joy knows no bounds. In Chapter Fourteen of Another Life, he is thrilled enough to exclaim: "Mother, I am in love. / Harbour, I am waking" (37-38). At the physical level he shows considerable empathy for his woman: "I know the pain in your budding, nippled limes, / I know why your limbs shake, windless, pliant trees" (39-40).

The persona's mind too is no less alert, as can be seen from the lines: "The first flush will pass" (42), but "... I shall have this fever waken me, / whoever I lie to, lying close to ..." (44-45). At a still more profound level, bordering on the spiritual, the persona affirms that "... their two bodies could be made / one body of immortal metaphor" (98-99), even going to the extent of asserting that he "preferred love to immortality" (98).

In Chapter Seventeen of Another Life, Walcott confesses the fact that he has three loves in life:
"art, love and death" (131), though he expatiates on them in a paradoxical language: "not one is real, they cannot live or die, / they all exist, they never have existed" (133-134), vouching for the fact that love is so complex that it cannot but be explicated in cliched terms.

In Walcott's poem entitled "Adam's Song", Adam sings a song appealing to Eve's emotions and feelings after his damnation, despite the fact he fears "the jealousy of God":

"Heart, you are in my heart as the bird rises, heart, you are in my heart while the sun sleeps, heart, you lie still in me as the dew is, you weep within me, as the rain weeps."

(22-25)

This poem is an outright celebration of romantic love, even as it "ascends to God, who wipes his eyes" (21). Human love is powerful enough, to cause tears to spring in the eyes of God.

In contrast, in Ezekiel, most of his affairs with women seem to be based on deception though he openly confesses his own fault. In "Situation" from The Third, he says: "She never spoke her mind. He looked beyond her
eyes" (2). She too is equally dissembling in her attitude: "She lied to be with him. He had his stock of lies" (4). In "Episode", he dwells again on a similar relationship founded on falsehood: "She lied to be with me. / I lied to myself" (21-22). The self-conscious use of pun implicit in "lie" is significant in both the extracts cited here.

In the ironic poem entitled "The Couple", the protagonist tries the good old trick of flattery to a deceiving female companion: "he knew he was lying" (22) and "Her false love became infused / With truest love / only in making love" (30-32).

Nevertheless, the habit of deceiving the other partner in heterosexual relationship, leads more often than not, to a state of self-deception, as the persona realizes in the following poem "Situation" from Sixty Poems:

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.

(12-16)
There is an air of superior knowledge about the woman-about-town. The woman figuring in Ezekiel's "Event" looks in private upon the protagonist with a mind of her own, and is quite unsure of her relationship with him:

She lay and waited, watching me,
Like a child in her nakedness,
Uncertain if it ought to be,
Awe-inspired and motionless.

Irrelevently, then, she said,
'I bought a book some years ago
Entitled greatly Wine and Bread,
It's time I never read it, though.' (9-16)

Commenting on the girl in the poem, K.D. Verma says:

Her interest in art and the superficial dialogue and wit explain her attitude and the ritualistic process. Ironically, this gross and empty ritual of our world stands in sharp contrast to the sacred and creative ritual of the pastoral-romance, in which love, bread, wine and sex are considered sacred. Thus the woman in an urban society plays the stereotyped roles: she, like her male
counterpart, exists purely as an instrument and does not have personal identity. (237)

In "Dualism", the protagonist underlines the yawning gulf that separates him from the woman at hand: "hide and seek between our kisses" (3), though their "separate landscapes spring to flowers" (6). In "Distance", the partners are physically close, but in reality they are far away from each other as the persona finds out: "You look into the distance, or down, in doubt / which you deny at my interpretation. / That's not what I mean, not that at all" (4-6).

In the "Love Sonnet", a convincing sense of harmony is conveyed through the line "We look in consort at the distant sea" (7). Earlier in the poem, the persona states: "Our love has formed like dew on summer nights" (5) and the subtle simile suggests that their closeness during the night before was the real cause of their present harmony. The poem closes with a line recalling a Keatsian sentiment: "A certain happiness would be — to die" (15). Commenting on this, Karnani states that Ezekiel's use of the infinitive "to die" should be taken to mean "make love" which it did in the seventeenth century, particularly, in the love poem of John Donne (61, 62). Lall's witty comment, however, suggests a more sophisticated conceit, but bordering on
the metaphysical again: "The couple want to prolong their state of happiness and think that through death they can eternalize their happiness, as death will mean the cessation of all activity" (76).

In the seventh poem of "Ten poems in the Greek Anthology Mode", Ezekiel's persona plainly does not even pretend to be true to his love. Nor does he cease to verbalize the ironic distance he wishes to maintain so self-consciously, with the woman. The poem talks about their making love at the end, though they are far from being in love with each other:

'Is this a sign?'
She asked when she
First held my hands.
'Does this mean acquiescence?'
She asked when she
Let me touch her breasts.
'No, this is not a sign.
This does not mean acquiescence,'
I said, as our naked bodies
Came together. (1-10)

Walcott and Ezekiel are poles apart in their perception and treatment of love as well as their handling of sensuality in art. Though Walcott decries
sex trade as a West Indian preoccupation in "Tales of the Islands" — "teach our philosophy the strength to reach / Above the navel" (12-13) — there is an ample room for his persona to indulge himself in casual affairs as his "Bleecker Street, Summer" bears out: "There is the Hudson, like the sea aflame. / I would undress you in the summer heat, / and laugh and dry your damp flesh if you came" (14-16).

In Chapter Nine of Another Life, the narrator recalls his adolescent lust for nude paintings: "the shepherdesses of Boucher and Fragonard, / and I raved for / the split pears of their arses, / their milk-jug bubs" (146-49).

The protagonist in "The Schooner Flight" confirms frankly to his own promiscuity and insatiable lust, suggested by the associations with the ocean in the lines: "... I tried other women / but, once they stripped naked, their spiky cunts / bristled like sea-eggs and I couldn't dive" (145-47).

Walcott's apprehension of sensual pleasure is also expressed through the imagery of another universal element, namely, fire. In "Nights in the Gardens of Port of Spain", night is feminized — "burning to be the bitch she will become" (14). Night is also associated
with "secret as sweat" (3) and an "impenetrable / musk" (2,3). The epithet "impenetrable" has sensual connotations, hinting simultaneously at the persona's inability to comprehend women totally.

Walcott resorts to the use of plain words in "Brise Marine", for describing a woman who fascinates him:

K with quick laughter, honey skin and hair, and always money. In what beach shade, what year has she so scented with her gentleness I cannot watch bright water but think of her. (1-4)

Walcott's sexual poems, diary-like, are predominantly autobiographical, and essentially and explicitly, physical. Often, there is no attempt to elevate sex above the body.

Strangely enough, Ezekiel has a large body of sexual poems, where there is a marked attempt to spiritualise physical sensuality. In the words of Iyengar, "The poet is painfully and poignantly aware of the flesh, its insistent urges, its stark ecstasies, its disturbing filiations with mind" (657).
In Ezekiel's "Paean", the persona emerges disarmingly confessional:

At night the body gives itself, by day
It pretends ... pausing before mirrors
Or in the street, awkwardly ignoring
Its constant agitation, until a smile
Or shaken breasts restore its memory. (1-5)

From the stark reality of such facts, the poem suddenly proceeds to assume a spiritual tone:

Always the body knows its nakedness.
The first baptism is not in water
But in fire. The limbs are shaped to lock
And love, the eyes — they say — show a
strange light,
And lives are welded which exist apart.
(11-15)

In "Admission", Ezekiel puts forth his belief in forthright terms: "The blood must leap before the spirit springs, / Perpetual life is in the mutual kiss" (10-11).

In "Nakedness II" also, the Indian poet emphasizes the significant role played by the body on mind: "... that in the working / Of his mind the body takes a hand" (13-14).
In Ezekiel, there is no dichotomy between the body and the soul. They are merely complementary to each other. In "Nudes 1978 VIII", he says, "this most unreal flesh / obstinately fills the soul" (11-12).

According to the poem, "Perspective", love is presented as the ultimate means by which man can fulfil himself: "... the body's movement in the dance / Is what the walker dreams of ... / And hears a voice insisting: find, fulfil" (9-10, 12).

In "Morning Prayer", Ezekiel wants his dreams of love to acquire "primal quiescence" (8) and in "The Problem", he expresses his desire "To feed the roots / Of our manhood's flowering" (11-12). In the eyes of the poet, sensuality acquires almost a tangible form and a sweet melody that figures as a dominant tactile imagery in "Nudes 1978 IV":

S e n s u a l i t y —
A word that stands by itself, or rather, lies down and stretches out.
You touch it, smell it, ... (1-4)

Ezekiel's witty poem "Cry" admirably presents the fusion of the male and the female bodies welded together in passion. The savouring of the sensual experience is deliberately spelt out in the process and word by word
each acquiring its own gradual but unmistakably strong momentum, plumbing and savouring step by step, increasingly complex levels of apprehension of the total experience:

Bodies
Savouring
Phenomena,
Sifting
Passion
To the fine
Point
Of penetration
Obscene
Noumena
Breath
Of my
Breath of my
Being. (5-18)

Sexuality, be it in the physical context as in Walcott, or in the spiritual mode as in Ezekiel, is fraught invariably from an underlying sense of guilt. In both, the guilt experienced is overt and genuine. In Walcott, perhaps there is a more profound expression of guilt as exemplified in "The Schooner Flight": "The pain in my heart for Maria Conception, / the hurt I had done
to my wife and children, / was worse than the bends" (135-37) and again Walcott admits with humility: "I have not loved those that I loved enough" (389).

Walcott turns at last, to his Maker for solace:
"Where is my rest place, Jesus? Where is my harbour? /
Where is the pillow I will not have to pay for — / and the window I can look from that frames my life?" (149-51).

Thus, the guilt in Walcott is expressed in the guise of an anquished cry of the soul. The guilt expressed in Ezekiel sounds more casual and less deeply felt, suggested by the rhetorical question at the end of the following lines in "A Time to Change": "Debtors to the whore of love, / Corrupted by the things imagined / ...
How shall we return?" (3-4,8).

Ezekiel does readily acknowledge his sin but dismisses it quite nonchalantly: "Let it go, let it go" (23). Though the "labyrinthine" desires instil in Ezekiel "the sour taste of sin" (21), he is unable to overcome them as can be seen in his "Nocturne":

And all to win
The sour taste of sin?
Ever so,
Let it go, let it go. (20-23)
Though Walcott and Ezekiel indulge themselves in several affairs with women, the works of the poets reveal certain specific women close to their hearts. Walcott may not dwell much on the moments he spends with Anna, but he pours out his feelings of solitude when she has departed from him in Chapter Thirteen of Another Life:

... In her absence
his nostrils pricked for the scent
of sea-grapes;

.........................
The cold glass was her lip.
Every room he entered was an album
from which her image had been crudely torn.

(206-07,212-14)

In Chapter Fifteen, Anna is inseparably associated with Walcott’s mindscape transporting him to times, other than the present: "Still dreamt of, still missed, / especially on raw, raining mornings, your face shifts / into anonymous school girl faces, a punishment" (1-3).

In the case of Ezekiel, he confesses in "Poster Poems" that he makes "love to many women / as to the same woman" (84-85), though there are some women who are special for him. In Ezekiel’s "Tribute" he writes of one
such person: "$\ldots$ She knows the things / To see, the shortest way to reach / The place, the joy an outing brings" (2-4). She is so loving that she makes him "feel at home in crowds" (11).

In "Platonic", he talks of another such woman having a "perennial dawn" on her face, and also a glow emanating from an inner soothing fire:

Simplicity, I know, you have achieved, 
........................................
You stand composed, related, absolute, 
And in your presence I am simple too: 
........................................
You quietly burn and find the fire good. 
(1, 3-4, 10)

In "Poem of Separation", there is yet another woman with whom the poet feels "my life had burst / and merged into yours" (4-5). Though she wants to leave him, he cannot let her go.

While Anna in particular emerges special to Walcott, Ezekiel has several such special women, who, however, remain nameless in his art.

Significantly enough, despite all his prolific output, Walcott has not written any poem on married
love. In striking contrast, in Ezekiel, one of the most dominant issues discussed is his statements on marriage, though his poems dwell chiefly on the despair and disillusionment caused by marriage. For most couples, the marital journey starts on a note of mystery and celebration of the flesh as in the poem "Marriage": "... The darkened room / Roars out the joy of flesh and blood. / The use of nakedness is good" (6-8).

Such an initial euphoria is soon followed by an alternative phase of desire and satiety, as suggested by Ezekiel's poem entitled "To a Certain Lady": "Of man and woman joined, exhaustion / At the act, desire for it again" (20-21).

Ezekiel's "Jewish Wedding in Bombay" closes with an ironic comment on the futility of the much-celebrated institution called marriage. Despite all its pungent irony, the poem highlights the existential predicament in the bond of marriage which is simply irrevocable. Neither the man nor the woman can undo anything once the marital knot is tied:

During our first serious marriage quarrel she said why did you take my virginity from me? I would gladly have
returned it, but not one of the books I had read instructed me how. (44-47)

In Ezekiel's "Song to be Shouted Out", the wife yells at the husband on his coming home in the evening:

Did you post that letter?
Did you make that telephone call?
Did you pay that bill?
What do you do all day? (3-6)

Such constant nagging sessions in marriage lead inevitably to hysterical tension and neurosis as can be seen in "Family" which presents children as the primary victims of the weaknesses of parents: "Let father go to Rajneesh Ashram. /Let mother go to Gita classes ... / All of us are sick, Sir" (17-18, 21).

An existential note of sadness and loss is easily discernible in Ezekiel's "Tonight" also:

Tonight I hear my woman breathing
Who loves me till my world is waste,
And leaning over see the child,

......................................................
What fate is this I'm captured by? (1-3, 6)
In "The Railway Clerk", Ezekiel directs his irony and satire with a genuine desire to present the helplessness felt by the railway clerk in the context of multiplying financial compulsions as a result of one's marriage: "My wife is always asking for more money. / Money, money, where to get money?" (8-9).

Ezekiel's marital life appeared to have had more than its due share of problems. Anisur Rahman says, "Marital failure is as much the theme of the poet as his other failures experienced from time to time" (50). To quote "Hymns in Darkness": "To his wife an impossible husband,/ To his children less than loving" (27-28).

In spite of his abiding sense of failure in marriage, Ezekiel seems to take life easy. He has a hearty though sardonic laugh at marriage in the third of his cynical poem, "Poster Poems", which closes with the following proclamation: "Let all the servants in the world be attractive, / ... Let the masters divorce their wives and marry the servants" (20,23).

Ezekiel's poems on marriage present several interesting but distinguishable stages of evolution. There is, for example, a great difference between his 1960 poem "Case Study" in which he declares with unalloyed bitterness: "His marriage was the worst
averted at the 1982 poem, "Song to be Shouted Out" where he manages to sing with a remarkable buoyancy of spirit. Things that shocked and embittered Ezekiel in youth, have now, at last, have begun to produce a mellow laughter.

Even while highlighting the self-centred fulfilment of sexual passion in marriage, Ezekiel is quick to recognize the value of sublime and quiet love which constitutes the anchor of marital concord. There is a note of hope and anticipation implicit in the closing lines of "Marriage Poem", besides an open willingness to adapt himself to life’s changes:

Earthly love, O earthly love,  
Be active when you will,  
But let the quieter passion come  
To every lover, till  
The nuptial pattern is secure  
Though you are still. (13-18)

Despite all his self-confessed debauchery, Ezekiel feels that marriage is necessary for every one. In "Virginal", Ezekiel is moved to pity for the ageing virgin "Remote from prospect of the wedding kiss" (4), who just keeps tuning a radio or reading a book, in order to lend a temporary meaning to her listless
existence. The inevitable stages of development of life after marriage, like pregnancy and consequent loss of beauty in women, somehow excite the poet's existentialist sense of pity and ennui:

You were not made to live like this, although Your face suggests that you are reconciled. Its gentle sadness as it slowly grew And crushed your liveliness, oppressed me too. The universe is much too small to hold Your longing for a lover and a child. (9-14)

Both Walcott and Ezekiel explore the man-woman relationship primarily from the masculine point of view. To them, women mostly appear as objects. Walcott compares women to the seascape and landscape, while Ezekiel compares them to landscape and inanimate objects. In Walcott's poems, there is a movement forward towards a total involvement with even the woman perceived as an object, while in Ezekiel the man remains utterly uninvolved and distant. Both the modern poets give detailed sketches of the woman's bodyscape. Nevertheless, even in this aspect, while most of Walcott's women have been given names and individuated identities, Ezekiel's women are dealt with mostly as a group or type. Walcott and Ezekiel are cynical and insensitive to the fact that women are as much flesh-
and-blood individuals as they themselves are. Often, they go to the extent of even failing to attribute normal human feelings to them and see them as beasts. Also, according to the poets, the woman remains primarily as an embodiment of corruption, defilement and disappointment, capable of evoking fear and disgust from men. While there is enough room for genuine love in the case of Walcott, most of Ezekiel's love relationships are based on mere "lies". Walcott's sexual poems are autobiographical and pronouncedly physical, while in Ezekiel, there is a tendency to spiritualize sexual experience despite all its pronounced carnality. Both the poets suffer from a secret sense of guilt after some misdeeds they commit in the name of love. Nevertheless, even in this aspect, the sense of mortification is not so pronounced in Ezekiel as in Walcott. Further, though Walcott and Ezekiel treat themselves to love affairs with numerous women, they do have their own peculiar affinity — soft corner for some women. Ezekiel also highlights several negative prospects in marriage in his poetry, though Walcott remains conspicuously reticent on the issue.