



**Research Article**

**THEMATIC CONCERNS AS PROJECTED IN THE PLAYS OF NISSIM EZEKIEL:  
A BRIEF ANALYSIS**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper throws light on the themes projected in the plays of Nissim Ezekiel. Through the plays of Ezekiel, one can get to know the dramatic and artistic skill of his. It neatly reveals how through his plays he brings out the theme of frustration & suffering and exposes the reality of the hollowness of the people who contrive for themselves, using his skill to picture human psychology and his own inner self.

**Key words:**

Themes, suffering, despair, psychology, hollowness, reality, inner self.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Nissim Ezekiel holds, no doubt, a significant place in post-Independent Indian-English Literature. Even since he came back from England in 1952, he has wielded great influence as leading poet, editor of many journals an occasional playwright and consistently a bright and notable critic. While critical works brought out on Ezekiel's poetry are available in abundance, the ones on his plays are quite negligible in number, for he has written only a limited number of plays, that too, all in the second half of his artistic career, the first half have been entirely devoted to the writing of poetry. He himself stated as follows: "I have been writing poetry for more than twenty years, while my plays are written in 1968, quite recently" (Blackwell 265). *Nalini*, *Marriage poem*, *The sleep walkers* songs of *Deprivation* and *Who Needs No Introduction* are the plays that have nourished the dramatic skill and art of Nissim Ezekiel. Every work is nothing but "an extension of myself" says Ezekiel. Whether a poetic piece or a play it comes from the salient and lively moments of its creators inner self and therefore, the message of the one is inextricable intertwined with the message of the other. Thus, to a reader of Ezekiel poetry, some sort of familiarity with psychological and social dimensions of his plays will be a rewarding experience.

Almost like Yeats and Eliot, Ezekiel has chosen a different medicine for there has been real paucity of Indian drama in English.

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In this regard, the observation of Murali Das Melwani may be noted here: "As against every play performed or published, three novels or six collections of poetry are published" (Karnani III) Critics of Ezekiel often point out that his plays suffer from an absence of psychological reality. This is evidently brought out here: "Nissim Ezekiel plays do not present any philosophical, historical or psychological problems" (Rahman 51). On the contrary, "Plays like *Nalini* and *Marriage Poem* put forth a psychological profundity for a careful reader" (Parameswari 4). The play *Nalini* is nothing but a picture of the frustration suffered by two aimlessly wandering executives while *Marriage Poem* epitomizes the agony endured by an incompatible couple. Laying focus on the psychological, social and profundity, the play *The Sleep Walkers* might be a farce on the Indo-American relationship, picturing a group of mindless Indians cringing before a dull American in order to win the American's favour where as *Song of Deprivation* deals with two nameless youngsters, a "He" and a "she" who indulge in a self-oriented telephonic conversation for an unimaginable long time and at last wind up their talk by coming together last play *Who Needs No Introduction* exposes the absurdities of the alleged great men who need, as they think, no introduction to anyone as they are prominent personalities. All these five plays are an effective expose of reality, of the hollowness people contrive for themselves.

Through the creation of these plays, Ezekiel has enriched the content of Indian – English drama. His play really contain multiple layers of meaning if read from a social, political and psychological point of view. Through his experiments in various fields, he has extended the range of Indo-English

drama and the possibility of making innovations in new forms. He not only wrote a comedy a tragic comedy and a force. Each play enacts a new form and novel technique with a presentation of new themes Ezekiel has structured all his plays from the point of view of human psychology in general and his own inner self in particular. A brief synopsis of his plays seems relevant.

*Nalini* is about the relationship of the two young advertising agents with Nalini, a young painter. At the center of the play lies the conflict between Nalini, a phantom figure of Nalini, the real woman, enacted in the consciousness of Bharat. The play *Nalini* as a social satire, impresses all. Here Ezekiel tries to show the immaturity of a whole class through the portraiture of two young men who are the types one can meet anywhere in urban India. Raj is not interested in paintings for their own sake. Instead, he treats paintings as a vehicle for getting closer to Nalini. When Bharat wants to know whether the paintings of Nalini are worth exhibiting, Raj cynically replies:

“Does this matter? They are paintings,  
Canvass with colour on them,  
Plenty of colour in various forms” (Three Plays 23)

Most people, like Bharat and Raj are not interested in paintings but only in publicity, so in presenting the shallow world of business executives, Ezekiel offers a lot of barbed social comments. The play presents a lot of wry commentary on the current art scene in India. The success of the exhibition seems to depend more on the way the publicity is arranged than on the intrinsic worth of the paintings. It is through the portrait of Nalini that Ezekiel projects the struggle of a genuine artist who wants to establish herself by her own effort. It is a fine social satire where the playwright comments on the American peace corps trying to increase Indian’s production of eggs, the desire to go abroad for “encounters with women, false values, materialism and wrong notions of superiority” (Karnani 118). In the presentation of all these themes, Ezekiel has managed to hold a mirror upto vulgarity of the middle class in India as a realistic satire, *Nalini* may be his finest play.

The theme of *Marriage Poem* is a brilliant combination of theme and reality. It is a one-act tragic comedy where Ezekiel mainly deals with the marital problems of a young couple. But it appears more like a comedy than tragedy. The play tries to depict the light and shade that comprise the social institution called marriage’. Marital failure is a recurring theme in Ezekiel’s plays. Here in the play, the man who is the father of two young children cannot help flirting with women other than his wife and is disturbed at this sight of any beautiful woman. The wife mala, who is very conventional often feels that her husband fails to understand her affection for him for Narash, the hero of the play, marriage is ‘a permanent contract based upon a temporary feeling’. Hence, Naresh has no love for his wife mala. The result is that their relationship is full of minor skirmishes and petty quarrels as what follows here;

Mala: Shall I pour out some tea for you?  
Naresh: Yes (satirically) and dip a slice of bread in it for me.  
(she freeze) put a slice of bread  
dipped in tea into my mouth...  
Mala: I will, I will ....  
Naresh: (chewing) Thank you. That was delicious.

This way, their joys and sorrows go on. But Mala a possessive wife who longs for her husband’s love affection and care,

cannot stand this kind of quarrel. She often becomes jealous, whenever her husband comes into contact with any other woman. She is the characteristic suffering woman who continues to nag her husband as he indulges in extra-marital affairs. He meets Leela once an hour every week an flirts with anyone else who comes along. As a results, his married lie becomes unhappy. From the beginning to the end, the couple indulges in petty quarrels, occasionally try to compromise but fail miserably. They even admit that their temperaments are very different but still indulge in useless arguments. Lack of communication between life – partners are the frequency occurring motifs of Ezekiel in his plays.

The frustrations and weakness of the primary couple are brought out here. The husband Naresh enters the house returning late. He tells her, “not to wait for him, because it is no pleasure having tea, in her company” (TP 158). The wife, having waited the whole day for the arrival of the husband, now sulks and ask him, “you are always in a bad moor in the evenings, and in the mornings you’re in a rush, so naturally you’re irritable then. Are you in a bad mood all day in the office too? Or are the bad moods reserved for me? (TP 158). Now it is Naresh’s turn to hurt and so he harshly replies, “I am always in a good mood in the office” (158). Mala continues to irritate Naresh in many ways, behaves in a kiddish manner and prevents him from taking rest physically as well mentally. There is every iota of dissatisfaction in Mala’s constant craving for love an Naresh’s lifeless participation in love-making. When asked for a kiss, he gives her a peck on the cheek. She complaints, “you call that a kiss?” she asks him to come closer to her but Naresh is so much fed up, that he says, “I’m close enough”. Both Naresh and Mala represent a typical Indian couple noted for their incompatibility.

*The Sleep Walkers* emerges not from the encounter of a wise group with a foolish gang but from the world of dunces where each in equally hollow, thoughtless and unintelligent. Therefore, Ezekiel’s message in the play is how men, whether Indians or Americans, could be mean opportunist. “The play is humorous, but at the same time uncomfortable to Indians as well as to Americans” (Blackwell 266), because all the characters in the play in some way or the other expose their absurdity and foolishness. All characters in the play wear masks to show that they are not authentic Indians. Except Mr. Varma and Miss Ganguli all the other characters are accompanied by their wives these women character refuse to participate in any intellectual discussions; they remain silent throughout. Most of the men like professor shah, Mr.Rahman, Mr.Morris, Mr.Kapor and Mr.West bring their wives to parties for reasons of social status, but at home these men are so domineering that their women will have to endure all their stubbornness and eccentricities. In such a domestic set up, the words and deeds of the women are of no real value or consequence whatsoever. Almost all the women in the play remain more as dolls to decorate the venue of their meeting than a intelligent human begins capable of participating in learned discussions. Obviously, the playwright hints at the chauvinism of his male characters. The discrimination of woman against men and in India has been portrayed through Mrs.Raman and Mrs. Kapur.

In *Song of Deprivation* Ezekiel tries to expose the neurotic effects that deprivation of human instincts has on the young men of India. It is the fourth play of Ezekiel which involves a phone conversation between the only two characters, the ultra-

mood, sexually oriented loves who are not in love with each other. It is the best testimony of the Eliotian motif of sex without love. The relationship between them is more infatuation and nothing else. The major cause of their sexual curiosity, which gets exposed in their telephone conversation, lies in the kind of restraints they are subjected to. The intention of the dramatist is to characterize them not as individuals with an identity of their own, but as types standing for the contemporary youngster's throughlessness in the trivia, especially sex-trivia. So he merely calls them 'he' and 'she'. Their love for trivialities is apparent in their very appearance and costumes the men called "He" enters the taste with his 'face made up heavily to resemble a white mask', the women, the "she" of the play, appears 'dressed in a bikini. The accessories of their room further exposes their cheap taste. Their telephone are in an extravagant shape and fantastic colour', the calls are decorated with pseudomoreder images. The Indian calendar in their rooms with bazaar paints to Hindu Goddess exposes their cheap taste. The glamorous fashion photographs from women's magazines and such other items which they think add to the beauty and richness of the room actually signify their paltry taste altogether it appears as if the rooms and their inhabitants rival each other in depicting the hollow and meaningless existence of the modern youngsters. The traditional upbringing of the two, their concern for the society and the social set up in which they exist have made the man and the woman repress their sex instincts which are last find an outlet in their lascivious talk.

According to psychologists, rigorous repression either turns a person into a victim of neurosis or finds an outlet in some way or the other. Here, the hero and the heroine find an outlet by indulging in a sexual telephone conversation. This long telephone conversation ultimately reaches the maximum level of eroticism. The play exposes not only the mindlessness of the people living in contemporary society but also presents an anti-throughout look quite characteristic of modern life. The main characters in the play are quite certain that sex can become a vehicle for social freedom but in reality it is not so. The entire play is also an extended metaphor hinting at the outcome of the erotic to me of the telephonic conversation standing testimony to it. In short, it may be said that the play *Song of Deprivation* summarily tries to expose the neurotic effects that deprivation of human instincts can have on the young men of India.

The fifth play of Nissim Ezekiel, *Who Needs No Introduction*, exposes the absurdities of the alleged great men who think they need no introduction to anyone as they think they are prominent personalities. It is apparently a social satire on the inner hollowness of the so-called prominent personalities. The chief guest and the chairman are the two speakers in this play. Their speech is based on the instinct of reaction – formation at work crisply stating, it is a tendency to compensate for what is missing in one. The chairman repeatedly asks for "non-evidence and non-cooperation ... co-existence" (WWNI 3) for such is his self-defense against his failure to practice them in his personal life.

The chief guest, while making a long winding and meaningless speech, uses the word 'think' a number of times. "I thought I would go to Delhi-I will think aloud, I will think on my feet..." (WWNI 4). It is highly ironic that his speech neither shows anything like thinking nor provokes any thinking in the mind of the listeners. He asks the youngsters to do

"constructive work in the villages to channelize their energies", because he wants to compensate the fact that he himself "visited a village nine years ago;" he has not done any constructive work for its development. By way of encouraging his audience, the chief guest says, "You can come to me anytime and I will listen to you with all my sympathy" (P7). However, he knows that he cannot and will not do anything for them. The climax of his speech figures when he tells the crowd". All I can say is be like me, be like me in all respect and the nation will benefit" (P7). The statement is ironical in many aspects. First of all, he has his children and certainly he is not a good model that way and next he has been a wide gap between his theory and practice. He speaks a lot but when it comes to the point of commitments, he is a zero. He has no inclination to help the younger generation for he describes their hair style and their dress making hinting at their external appearance but he has not knowledge of their dreams, thoughts and has no knowledge of their dreams, thoughts and ambitions. The chief guest uses the word 'dedication' a number of times which is indicative of his defense against his own failure to attain the quality 'dedication'. Then whenever the chief guest stops for a break, the chairman begins to narrate a story of his own adventures and experiences to the secretary. The chief guest is highly irritated at this. It is Ezekiel's humorous way of pointing out that some Indians are least bothered about the stage manners to the extent that they distract others by their speech and they just do not mind doing so.

In brief, it may be said that the play *Who Needs No Introduction* discloses the ludicrousness of the ostensible great men who think they need no introduction. Their absurdities have been clearly portrayed by the playwright. It is the foolishness of the chief guest and the chairman which make the readers laugh at them. Ezekiel conveys a very serious message in this comedy. He says that one should beware these great men so that one can save the society from them.

To conclude, Ezekiel is no doubt essentially a serious poet. However, as a 'playwright, he has not been known to many readers of Indian Writing in English. Though some of his plays are really good, he is not considered as a great playwright because the critical works on his plays are quite negligible in number. He himself avows that he does not "think too badly of his plays" and at the same time does not "think very high of them either" (Blackwell 265) Ezekiel plays are based on the theme of social satire. Some of them exhibit an extraordinary psychological profundity. His plays reflect his personality and also express some of his personal experiences. Through his characters he reveals the mental states of men and women and also the progression as well as the degradation that take place in the world around His themes are mostly social, all undoubtedly satirical.

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