

Unmasking the Mask: A Study of Nissim Ezekiel's *Nalini*

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Article Received: 12/04/2023

Article Revised: 8/05/2023

Article Accepted: 09/05/2023

Published Online: 10/05/2023

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2023.5.05.21

Abstract

Nissim Ezekiel is a significant satiric voice, particularly in the domain of theatre, among his post-colonial contemporaries. Despite his moderate contribution as a playwright, he has a keen and penetrating observation of the people, society and the issues affecting their corresponding relationships. True to his times, he deals with educated, middle class and urbane sensibilities of post-modern Indian people and unravels the shallowness, absurdities and oddities that is writ large on every miniscule aspect of his characters. His play *Nalini* talks about the longings and aspirations, disillusionments and frustrations, perversions and pride of the contemporary society where interplay between reality and dream, permanence and temporariness, substance and form appear as perennial feature throughout the play. The play is a journey from darkness to light, ignorance to enlightenment where the playwright unmasks the façade worn by man in an overwhelmingly patriarchal Indian society. The present paper focuses on the Ezekiel's treatment of issues of body, space, gender, success, career and ethics and consequently reveals the reality behind the mask of the Indian people by exposing their interiors.

Key words: mask, patriarchy, fake, pretension, absurdity, post-colonial, body

Nissim Ezekiel is a prominent post-colonial voice who dons many hats- poet, playwright, actor, teacher, editor as well as a critic. He is more prolific as a poet than a playwright, and like his contemporary Khushwant Singh he is a keen observer of the people and their milieu, and this allows him to go beyond the surface to see the real truth that affects their behaviour. He unmasks the façade worn by the contemporary society and he never stops short of satirizing, ridiculing and finally exposing the Indian people in different social set-ups. No doubt, his literary canvas is quite wide; however, his success as a playwright is moderate with his three plays-*Nalini*, *Marriage Poem* and *The Sleepwalkers* which were published in late 60s. In his plays he projects man in different urbanized settings where people are struggling to come to terms with reality. His characters are willing participants to remain in a world of make believe- a life full of show off where their egos are brazenly displayed. Man is obsessed with his own self and this narcissism makes man a foolhardy; he remains in a state of veritable confusion, a chaotic situation in thoughts as well action. Ezekiel traces a

connection between man and his times, and his close examination of human behavior in changing times, particularly ethical social values, describes how shallow and sham the modern-day youths are. The post-colonial India after initial baby steps has now started taking a huge churn with progressive thinking and development projects in the area of education, commerce, health and job sectors. The effect of the West is writ large on every page of the play; the youth feel aligned to the new ways of life not at personal level only but also at social and familial level. Everything stands defined as an object, even human being with bodily attributes- and to be sold in the market. Man is for market, to be used, consumed and this will determine his position in this world. One feel ushered in a world of modern American playwrights-Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams where man is reeling under the stress of American Success Dream. Miller's Plays *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman* discuss the interplay between human dignity and material success for standing in American society.

The Sleepwalkers and *Nalini* deal with the educated, urbanite but hollowed as well hypocrite Indian people who are projected as dim-witted and petty with their bizarre actions and behavior. Ezekiel discusses how disillusionment in life causes alienation, leaving man lonely, disconnected from his surroundings, with emotional vacuum. The material success and comforts can't be the substitute for communion and companionship in life; the overwhelming dominance of individualized version of life under the effect of the Westernized aspects of life is very much visible in the young generation depicted in the play *Nalini*. Ezekiel draws a world which is completely modern, educated, middle class full of aspirations and longings but at the same time disillusioned and fake. He keeps his characters pegged to their historical past, their traditions and cultural values through the projection of enlightened Nalini. She in her mind and actions puts the patriarchal forces to their spaces. Refusing to be cowed down by the dominant power structures she refuses to play the role of an objectified female figure; rather she questions the designs and patterns constructed by men like Bharat and Raj and extended by the willing complicity of Nalini. The glitter associated with the shallow and fake world leave human being drained emotionally, socially and culturally. The modern man longs for the missing solace, a bonding and solidarity in human relations that remains elusive in a world of false pretensions. Centered round aspirations and frustrations of 20th century youths of India, the play keeps shuffling between illusion and reality and brings to the fore the causes of their failure in understanding what they are. As Ezekiel himself had the first-hand experience of working in advertizing world, he knows very well how the showbiz world operates- a huge source of attraction as well as frustration for youths. As it deals in selling or the promotion of sells, everything in advertizing is for eyes, nothing to do with content or reality. The humans stand divested of any real identity; their projections are far removed from real life—a life full of glitter, success and smile outwardly but full of betrayals, perversions and failures behind the surface. The story revolves around three major characters-Bharat, Raj and Nalini, the latter having double projection- the vulnerable, objectified and submissive Nalini and the enlightened, confident and assertive Nalini.

Indian society is overwhelmingly patriarchal in structure; despite all sorts of advancements and modernity, woman is still viewed as an object of desire, a commodity, and the showbiz world is in perfect harmony with patriarchy to objectify woman. Bharat's comments that 'Men are never saints with women. At least this man is not,' (Ezekiel, 10) underline the position of woman in Indian society. Bharat and Raj, the advertizing

executives, look at Nalini as an opportunity for success in life while the latter also aspires to launch her career in the industry and becomes a willing partner to the guiles of Bharat and Raj. Nalini the advertizing model is a self-obsessed girl with focus on career building. She knows the ways of the male-world and uses her charm and body as a tool for her own advancement. In her talks with Bharat, she is very candid about her sexuality, her personal life. But she reads the designs of both the boys and allows them to take liberty with her in talks. All three-Bharat, Raj and Nalini belong to a type; a common corollary is visible in the mind, actions, behaviours of these characters. All three are extensions of patriarchy and strengthen it in their own way. Bharat knows that he has been trapped by the outward glittering aspect of the Americanness, but from beginning to the end the reality dawns upon him and he becomes aware of his illusory self. So, Ezekiel makes his characters realize their follies and this realization leaves his characters conscious and close to truth. Bharat is a cocoon; he has created a halo around himself and refuses to come out of it. His lack of confidence stops him from mingling with people unlike him: ‘...I can mix only with people like myself, who dress like me. That’s why I work in an advertising agency. The pay is good, and I’ve got an increment. Besides, everybody in the profession dresses well. I can’t stand people who don’t dress well.’ (Ezekiel, 12) Ezekiel points out the futility of the lives of youth of India when he makes Bharat confront reality and accept his own phoniness in life: ‘I’m unreal. I’m nobody. I don’t matter to anybody or anything. I can’t be sincere. I can’t be truthful. I can’t build anything. I can’t create anything. I have no future. I have no past. I am not a revolutionary. I’m not an Englishman...I have no caste, no community, no nationality, no culture, no morality. But I’m a man. I’m a human being. I’ve got feelings. I’ve got needs...I’m alive...I don’t know what I am, but I am.’ (Ezekiel, 38)

In *Nalini* Bharat, Raj and two Nalinis appear engrossed in their own selves and life; they are the product of modern-day materialistic society where the world is a market and money matters. Even man is a commodity; he has no existence and identity as a man. The suave Indian society is completely modeled on American society; Bharat’s speech describes how Indian people have internalized the ways of American manners and value system: ‘...We are the busy, active men of the city. We are all in good jobs. Our homes are well furnished. We read good books—foreign books, of course. We are not slaves of caste. We are not superstitious. We don’t spit. We don’t make loud, gurgling sounds when we drink our tea or soup. Our marriages are not arranged for us. We don’t dream about dowries. We are not communalistic, provincial or parochial. I could go on like that for an hour, it is good that we are not what we are not. But what are we? Liberal, modern, advanced, progressive Indians? Are we Indians? And if we are not Indians, what are we?’ (Ezekiel, 16-17) But at the same time he realizes how fake and unreal the people are. They are sandwiched between two worlds- the western and the Indian, and they become selective in choosing what suits them and this expose their hypocrisy. They try to be everywhere, as a result they belong to nowhere, and here Bharat accepts the hypocritical ways of their life: ‘We are modern only as it suits us, but we don’t fight for the modern against the dying and the dead. We are liberal only as it suits us, but we don’t fight for the liberal against the orthodox and the tyrannical. We are advanced only as it suits us, but we don’t fight for the advanced against the backyard and the primitive. We are progressive very cautiously, without ever confronting the forces that pull this country down. We are Indians by accident of birth.’ (Ezekiel, 16)

Ezekiel has effectively used binaries like body/soul, ignorant/enlightened, illusion/reality, permanence/temporariness, centre/margin, modern/traditional, passion/patience and so on. Man-woman relations are viewed with gendered lenses. A woman remains a spectacle to be enjoyed and chewed with gaze. For Bharat, Nalini is an object of desire, a piece of meat only and his sole purpose in helping Nalini in her advertising business, despite his limited understanding of this showbiz profession is to entice her : “He remains close to her, looking down at her breasts.” (Ezekiel, 27) A woman on account of her sexual identity and specific physicality becomes a site to be viewed and to be ensnared. Laura Mulvey in her famous article writes how gender affects the projection of a woman in a society that is overwhelmingly patriarchal: ‘In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly.’ (Mulvey, 837) Nalini the model becomes the target of these two boys piercing looks; on account of her sexuality and body contours she becomes a target for these pseudo art- executives. Raj’s misogynistic remarks about Nalini’s figure that “‘You are 35-24-35,’ (Ezekiel, 49) and later about her virginity speak Bharat is infatuated with Nalini’s body: “He remains close to her, looking down at her breasts.” (TP, 27) Body has a socio-cultural inscription; it doesn’t belong to one individual only but to the entire social discourse is directed at the body of a woman. A woman is labeled pure/impure, dignified/undignified on the basis of her bodily behavior, and Bharat’s concern about the status of Nalini’s virginity emanates from that deep rooted cultural notion of bodily purity: ‘You are not a virgin.’ (Ezekiel, 50) A woman’s body, Nicholas J. Fox says, assumes a different identity in powerful patriarchy: ‘The surface of the body is surely the most discussed, imagined, prescribed and proscribed, disfigured, disguised and disciplined surface in the physical world...Behind closed doors, professionals gaze upon the surface of the body for indications of what is happening beneath that surface.’ (Fox, 23) In their discussion Bharat and Nalini throws light on the changing morals of orthodox Indian society. In Indian society sex outside marriage or before marriage is considered unacceptable and labeled as illicit, but here the hypocrisy is evident when Bharat considers virginity important for a girl but he wants to get close to Nalini physically. On the other hand, Nalini is quite unorthodox and no such inhibitions regarding losing her virginity, with sex outside or before marriage. The conversation between Bharat and Nalini speaks about churnings happening in Indian society:

BHARAT. You’re not a virgin. (Pause)

NALINI. Did you want me to be?

BHARAT. No.

NALINI. Well, then, at least you’re not disappointed.

BHARAT. I’m not disappointed. I’m envious of somebody.

NALINI. Forget about it. I told you, there are plenty of other women in the world.

BHARAT. Not like you baby. (Ezekiel, 37)

The materialistic world focuses on satisfying the thirst for material things that the body and the post-war world demands while the interior realms of man’s life remains dried and empty. Man doesn’t get a sense of fulfillment and satisfaction in a world thriving on

show-off like advertizing world. For young people like Bharat, Raj and Nalini, body, show-off, outward appearance matters, not the soul or substance.

The cultural construct of woman makes her adept in using kinesics and body language while communicating in any given context. Since she has been a victim of subversive tactics adopted by man, she devises her own strategy to give messages to the people around her more through her body and silence than speech. In the gender construction process, body assumes a decisive role in acquiring space and socio-cultural positioning in a specific milieu. A woman's body because of her unique anatomy acquires a distinct and intense look from the man, and is consequently ordained to behave in a way that is in tune with the power structures of the day. Women well aware of the voyeuristic looks of men at times selectively use her own body to her own advantages as she knows the weak point in man's character with regard to the body of woman. A woman's body doesn't belong to her only; rather it belongs to the 'other'- and this 'other' wants to control not only the body but also mind of woman as well. Two Nalinis- dreamy and the real- are poles apart in their attitudes, mental make-up, perception of themselves as well as the world around themselves. The former is an extension of the patriarchy and becomes a willing partner to designs of men to advance her own career. Moreover, she is quite bold, [open and liberal in many ways], a quality that the young boys look for in girl they want to have a fling with. But this Nalini maps the mind of men around her, and she allows to happen whatever happens with her. The second Nalini is quite assertive, dominating and in front of her both Bharat and Raj appear dwarfs. She is so confident that nobody can take liberty with her. She even slaps Bharat and puts him in his place. The New Nalini announces the arrival of new woman, conscious, confident and commanding: 'I want to be on the side of change, the unpredictable, exploration, discovery, invention, in short the future, the evolution of the other woman within me, who must one day become me.' (Ezekiel, 43) The construction of two Nalinis, one ready to change for her career prospects while another for her dignity, shows the changing and evolving of a new world of women. Even male world feel jittery and nervous in front of assertive Nalini, and Bharat's acknowledgement of the powerful Nalini shows the world is transforming with regard to position of women. Between the two, Bharat likes the former but respects the latter, and this reveals the chinks in Bharat's character. The gender boundaries are continuously stretching, shrinking, making it difficult 'to take granted what it is to be a man or woman, or that the world is simply with divisions in it.' (Alsop, 2) Nalini is a continuously evolving character; she keeps on changing, adapting to the requirements that suits her. She is perfect modern girl who has the guiles of excelling in life. From the beginning she knows that Bharat and Raj have no substance and are novices in field of advertizing, but she knows that they can be of some help in launching her career. That's why, she allows the male duo to take liberty with her. Catharine A Mackinnon describes how a woman is objectified: "Sexual objectification is the primary process of the subjection of women. It unites acts with word, construction with expression, perception with enforcement, myth with reality."(Mackinnon, 124). For Bharat a woman is a plaything only, she has no existence of her own. That's why he feels that a woman without any independent stature can easily be trapped to his own advantage. When Nalini says she wants to be independent, he mocks at her: 'An woman, eh? How romantic' (Ezekiel, 30). The assertive Nalini never allows to be dictated and used by the people around her, men in particular.

Space plays a vital role in determining one's gendered position. Nalini by choosing to become a model for advertising agency alters the role of a traditional woman. By venturing into public space for ramp walk and to be viewed as an object by the people both sides on the ramp she has already stretched the already drawn boundaries by patriarchy. She assimilates two roles-questioning the patriarchy by venturing out in public domain and becomes subservient to man by accepting to become a plaything in the eyes of the onlookers. Kathryn Beebe while underlining the significance of space in gender-positioning defines space '...dynamic, constructed, and contested. It was where issues of sexuality, race, class, and gender—amongst a myriad of other power/knowledge struggles—were sited, created, and fought out.' (Beebe, 2) The significance of space in determining one's gender gets reflected from Bharat's talk with Nalini with regard to her subjects of education like Home Science as the latter is viewed as a preferred subject for girls further limiting their gendered identity within the four-walls or a kitchen. Bharat is a misogynist and an honest extension of patriarchy; he can't see a woman self-reliant, independent and confident. That's why, Nalini of his dreams suits to him because she is submissive, assimilative and can cater to the passions of men like Bharat and Raj. He feels cowed down by the Nalini of reality, because she is made of substance, a quality that Bharat considers is the hall-mark of male world only: 'She's an independent woman, with the intelligence of a man and the determination of an orthodox Indian mother-in-law. She's a living insult to me and to you, to all of us. Damn her' (Ezekiel, 45). Bharat's statement "You [Nalini] will learn everything' (Ezekiel, 29) is very loaded and full of sexual innuendo. Ezekiel projects two sets of characters here; enslaves and enlightened and the former going from ignorance to knowledge.

The process gender construction and attribution of a special kind of identity to a woman leaves her vulnerable to man because the latter controls the naming and defining process. A woman can be labelled as per the whims of man. Man wants a compliant, submissive but a plaything as a woman. Bharat towards the end realizes the futility of his wishful longing as well as his misunderstandings so far, the girl Nalini is concerned. Nalini of his dreams can fill his life with pleasure, but this pleasure is just a euphoria, and not permanent happiness, fulfilment or sense of satisfaction. It is only the Nalini of substance, one who is made of steely nerve that assumes special significance in the eyes of male characters. Her chilling comments cut Bharat to size and makes him face the reality: "The trouble with you is that you are incapable of being truthful. You resent me... find me disturbing and upsetting. But you just can't help shooting a line at me, hoping for the best. You are essentially a gambler" (Ezekiel, 37) Bharat describes the New Nalini: "She's an independent woman, with the intelligence of a man and the determination of an orthodox Indian mother-in-law. She's a living insult to me and to you, to all of us." (Ezekiel, 45).

Ezekiel creates an alternate, unreal world of advertisements and modeling, a world which works to entice the society and the people with all sorts of false notions of success and achievements, romantic relations, but these relations are skin deep as bodily attraction and demands are the pivotal forces behind them, and consequently bound to cause frustration, disappointment and mental breakdown. The life of Bharat, Raj and Nalini confirms this hard truth. The projection of the conscious Nalini in the mind of Bharat offers a way out of the present morass that mars the modern-day youths. The pressure of being successful in life characterizes the modern Indian youth much alike the American Success Myth, and this

longing results in discontentment, disappointment and ultimately leaving them misfit, trying to escape from reality. All the major characters except the split and awakened personality of artist Nalini are searching for elusive connection, bonding and solace in life. They are always on the run, away from reality; this temporality leaves them dejected, isolated and finally lonely. Their life trajectory signifies the hollowness surrounding the modern-day material life with its crass materialism.

Ezekiel through the complex maze of human relations is finally able to bring home the point that it is the substance that matters in life not the fake, phoney or a life of appearance only. From inconstancy, Bharat and Raj march towards constancy in company with real Nalini. Ania Loomba offers a coherent suggestion for a better world of mutual understanding and compatibility: 'It would be better to reformulate the relationship as more inter-active, since women are not just the ground for the enactment of agendas which are directed elsewhere but direct targets of these agendas.'(Loomba, 7) The life of both the boys Bharat and Raj is dictated by confusing impulses; they are not in harmony with their surroundings. Ezekiel doesn't talk much about the family background of his characters; rather his focus is own individual, isolated characters for whom their own life matters irrespective of the milieu. Bharat, Raj and the glam doll Nalini-all live in ivory towers; they are governed and directed by their own pre-conceived motions, and gradually in time they realize the futility of their life and finally come to face the reality with a realization that they are escapist and disillusioned. They are for exteriors only; they have no substance-in mind, body and soul. The contemporary pretentious society has reduced them to the level of a commodity, deprived of any sanity and enlightenment. They are for appearances only-dress, manners and actions, and are directed and dictated by the forces of market which essentially deny humanness. They are directed by the market forces of the day, and in this rat race for success they are reduced to the level of a non-human entity. Their primary concern remains temporariness, not the permanence. Through this juxtaposition of dream/reality interplay of modern youth Ezekiel underlines the predicament faced by delinquent youths in post-modern India, but through the wise Nalini, he finally usher into a world of light and knowledge where one can see everything- himself as well as the world around in proper perspective. The real Nalini sees through the antics adopted by the dominant patriarchy and tears apart the façade worn by these forces with her witty, candid and fearless comments: 'You have a formula; you can't imagine an individual woman. You can't believe that a woman may want to create a world of her own just as a creative man does, a woman with a will to explore herself and the world around her.' (Ezekiel, 38) She makes it clear that a woman has potential and doesn't need any body support to excel in life. But the moot point is that she rejects traditionally conceived notion of a woman-dependent, subservient and submissive. She asserts her own self and identity; she is not going to blink before the male chauvinists like Bharat and Raj. So, the play moves through various phases of 'mask -unmask – mask' and in the due course the playwright projects the deep morass that grips the pot-colonial urbane youth and also provides an outlet to the existing quagmire with certain suggestions in facing the world, and moves in a better and healthy world with realizations of one's limitations and foggy mindedness.

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