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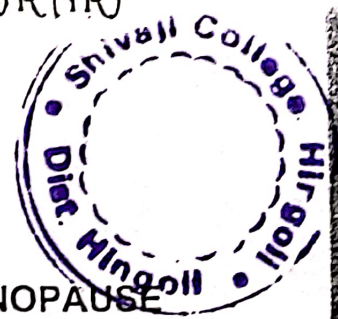
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NISSIM EZEKIEL'S MARRIAGE POEM: MARRIAGE AT THE MENOPAUSE



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Nissim Ezekiel's Marriage-Poem: Marriage at the Menopause

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Abstract

Indian drama in English is not so well-developed a branch of Indo – Anglian literature as the Indian novel or poetry in English. It has also not come-up for as much scholarly and critical attention as the other two. However, Indian drama in English is not devoid of excellence and even numerically there are nearly four hundred plays, full-length plays, short plays and playlets. While these plays are on different varieties of themes like the classical, mythological, and legendary themes, historical themes and political, socio-economic themes, most of the playwrights have shown a good grasp of the demands of the theatre and have attempted to present the themes in terms of conflict and tension which make them truly dramatic.

It is in the post-independence period that there has been a conspicuous attempt to deal with political, economic, domestic, psychological and other problems as themes in drama, Especially Playwrights like Nissim Ezekiel, Asif Currimbhoy, Girish Karnad, Badal Sircar and a few others have built enjoyable plays around some of these subjects. The present article is an attempt to focus on Nissim Ezekiel's play *Marriage-Poem* subtitled a tragi-comedy, is an effective treatment of the familiar marriage at the menopause; not the women's, but the man's...and consequently the marriages.

The theme of the play *Marriage-Poem* is the domestic discord due to the temperamental differences between the husband and the wife and also because of the extra-marital relationship of the husband.

Key Words: Classical, Mythological, Psychological, Socio-economic etc.

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Nissim Ezekiel's second play *Marriage-Poem* is a one-act tragi-comedy which reads more like comedy than tragedy. The play tries to depict the light and shade that comprise the social institution called marriage. For Naresh, the hero of this play, as for Hardly, 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 small inanities.

Mala is the typical suffering, nagging sort of wife who just does not know what to do keep her husband to herself. She has a strong feeling of being neglected and humiliated by Naresh. Hence, even insignificant lapses on his part like forgetting to post a letter given by her or failing to ring-up her sister etc. provide mala with opportunities to pick quarrels with him. Naresh also forgets birth and death anniversaries. Mala 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 and flirts with any one else who comes along. With the result that his married life is unhappy. When Naresh, for instance, shows her an invitation for dinner from the Guhas, her immediate reaction is, "I'm not coming. I don't like Mrs. Guhas" When Naresh hits back, "you don't like any of my friends, do you?" she twists his words and retorts, "Is Mrs. Guha one of your friends? I didn't know it." Later when Malati and her husband, Ranjit, call on them, Naresh talks to them freely and eloquently and particularly to Malati. When the guests are gone, Mala tells her husband, "I don't trust Malati, the way she looks at you" and later complains sarcastically, "You never want to say anything to your wife. But when visitors came, you know how to talk. What long speeches!" (P.77) There is a touch of pathos and innocence when she asks Mrs. Lall, "What would you do if your husband became attached to other woman?" Mrs. Lall's spirited account of how she would harass the other woman and also her own husband makes Mala resolve not to give up her husband: "I won't give up my husband either, He's married to me He is my husband. We have two children. I'll never give him up."

The lengthy advice of Mrs. Lall only adds to the misery of Mala who doesn't want to give up her husband. Naresh continues to live between dream and reality without perceiving the gulf between the two. In his mind, he continues to live the life of fantasy. He continues to make extra-marital love to Leela and persists with his weekly meetings.

Mala's suspicion about Naresh's involvement with other women is not baseless. On one occasion, when Mala leaves the room in a huff after one of her usual skirmishes with him, Naresh goes to the dream-world, where he meets his sweetheart, Leela. Leela she (Leela) could have him only once a week. Sometimes only for an hour." This Leela does not mind "the secrecy, the lies, the danger of Scandal" involved in her relationship with Naresh. However, Naresh's amorous games do not stop with Leela. When Malati with her husband visits him, Naresh, after flattering her on her charming looks, adds meaningfully, "We should meet oftener." Her reply is equally significant: "It's up to you. I am accessible." On this occasion, when Mala express her contempt for Malati, as usual, the argument between the husband and the wife begins on a mild note but grows into a heated exchange of words. When Mala becomes hysterical, Naresh cools her down by kissing and making love to her. In fact, Naresh is so fond of other women that he gets poetic in their presence. He starts valuing the freedom of the individual, though characteristically this freedom is regarded as the prerogative of men only. Naresh gives a lengthy poetic speech in the presence of Mala which completely mystifies her. But poor Mala is not able to understand this language of poetry. She doesn't like her husband getting poetic in the presence of other women while Naresh finds it farcical that he should lose his freedom and behave in a set mold.

Though the dialogue is crisp, the end is once again highly contrived. Ezekiel somehow can't do without the interplay of dream and reality. After Naresh makes love to his wife and she sleeps peacefully, this should have been the end. But the dramatist once again gets theatrical and rather contrived when we are told that Naresh "raises his arms slowly in the crucifixion pose against the door. Leela enters slowly, dream-walks towards him, wipes his face lightly with a handkerchief."

Naresh: (opening his eyes) You! I thought you would never come back.

Leela: I'll always come back whenever you need me. (P.80)

This dream is interrupted only when Naresh and Mala wake-up to the reality of the arrival of their two children. *Marriage-Poem* which is described as a one-act tragi-comedy has more of comedy than of tragedy. The tragic element is to be found in Mala still being in love with her husband and clinging to him with increasing

desperation. The dream-sequences which cut into the realistic scenes not only reveal Ezekiel's ingenuity in the matter of technique but also serve to show Naresh's attempts to escape the nagging of his wife by seeking the company of other women.

Perhaps the major point of *Marriage-Poem* is the hollowness that develops in marriage in which thought dies. On the one hand there's the problem that arises when a wife comes to know a husband too well- at least as conceived by the husband (P.74): "No more mystery in him, no more prospect of the unpredictable. Every weakness clearly seen, every strength seen through for the fraud it is." Yet, when the wife of the secondary supporting couple observes (P.75) that "husband and wife always think differently," her husband objects that it true "only to the extent that any two persons think differently, if they think at all." And that is the heart of the problem, "if they think at all." Usually they don't, or at least in this play.

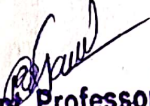
After the second couple leaves, the wife of the central couple says (P.77) "You never want to say anything to your wife. But when visitors come, you know how to talk. What long speeches." She summarizes what he had said, dismisses it as "rubbish," and asks what it all means. He tells her she would not understand. She sneers no, but that Malati... the other woman... "Understand it, of course." "I'm sure she did." "Why are you so sure?" "She's an understanding woman, that's why." Every woman is an understanding woman, except your wife." Throughout the play, again and again, they agree to quit quarrelling, only to resume in a few lines. But it is not with any such rational solution that the play ends, but with the arrival of the children, who seem to be all that cements their marriage.

Thus, *Marriage-Poem*, aptly subtitled A Tragi-comedy, is an effective treatment of the familiar marriage-at-the menopause; not the woman's but the man's... and consequently the marriage's. The intentional melodrama is reinforced by continuous background music which, as opening stage direction say, is "heard softly... when the dialogue is going on and... loudly at every pause. "The wife has the ubiquitous next-door neighbour to complain to, and the husband "the other woman for sympathy. Whether either is real or merely imaginary is intentionally unclear, as each appears in dream-like sequences, fading in and out; of course, the actual physical reality of either is irrelevant. What is important is the existence of the children, who knock on the door at the end, the husband ... "The children," the wife, "Our children."

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Classics in Literature Stand the Test of Time



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Abstract:

The function of literature is to act as the dominant note of the period in which it is born. Good literature is that treasure, which despite travelling the passage of time, not only remains relevant but also acquaints the reader with the past – with the way of the world as it was as well as with problems and the prevailing mood of the society. In his essay “On Literature Today”, Van Wyk Brooks wrote, “The public has a right to expect from its poets and thinkers some light on the causes of our problems and the way to a better future.” Thus, it seems plausible to call great literature the “soul” of the society. The present paper focuses on the role of literature and function of literature towards society.

Key Words:

Treasure, relevant, literature etc.

One of the key functions of literature is to enlighten the human mind. Good literature is essential food for the development of the mind and has



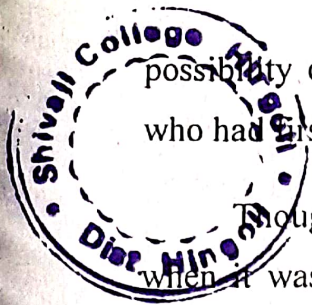
remained a parameter to judge the richness of a country's literary supremacy. It opens the locked doors of human conscience and feeds the inner recesses of a person's soul.

In an essay entitled "Science in liberal Education" Bertrand Russell wrote, "From the point of view of training the mind, of giving that well informed, impersonal outlook which constitutes culture in the good sense of this much – misused word, it seems to be generally held indisputable that a literary education is superior to one based on Science." Coming from a man of Science, this is indeed surprising but truth it is.

Every epoch has witnessed the emergence of the major writers who shaped the thinking and feeding of the society they lived in. Thus, the "Sickening business" of writing - as many masters including D.H. Lawrence have called it - comes with a certain amount of responsibility. It is sad that today, in the times of propoganda, many a writers stays aloof from this responsibility. Rather, they become, mouthpieces of political outfits they adore and try to convince their readers with their imposing ideas.

Great writers of the past had one thing in common: they shared the mood of their respective societies with utmost sincerity in their works. They took it upon themselves to highlight the flaws of the societies they lived in. They were all for truth and truth alone. For this reason, their ideas never faded, they all wrote with a literary sensibility more inclined towards truth and were able to shape their contemporary reality.

Some of the ideas of these avant-garde writers never lost relevance because they were adopted by the later writers. We have a great example in one of the most famous theories of science: evolution of species. The

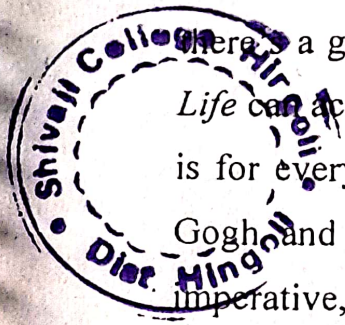


possibility of evolution of species can be traced to the times of Aristotle, who had first arrived at this theory in his early writings of ancient Greece.

Though he had merely hinted at the theory, it only became popular when it was adopted by Charles Darwin. Although the ideas that Darwin postulated in *On the Origin of Species* were not new to the west, he is generally credited for shaping them in to a definitive form. Darwin's theory may have redounded the minds of the society then, but more recent studies have questioned his theory and found many arguments presented by him to be flawed. That's how the classic theory of evolution weathered the test of time remained relevant and itself evolved with time.

Reading is not always easy either, especially reading wisely. One of the important aspects of a good book is its endeavour to persuade us towards the importance of an idea. That's where classics win hands down against the contemporary books. For we know they have been the bestsellers of their time and have miraculously remained in vogue-that's why they are classics of today. The chief reason why so many classics seem to speak so directly to us is that the writers who wrote them were consciously trying to reach out to readers like us with their profound ideas-those with which a multitude of readers could connect and will continue to do so.

Some books reveal so much to us about human nature; some come holding a world of knowledge waiting to be devoured. And it is so strange that sometimes fiction tells us more about life than the reality. One can learn so much about the female psyche from Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* which would take a whole lifetime to learn otherwise. Ernest Hemingway's *Old man and the Sea* is a celebration of human struggle against adversities -



There is a great lesson there as well. American dancer Isadora Duncan's *My Life* can acquaint one with the perils of instant fame. Knut Hamsun's *Hunger* is for every would-be writer. Pick any book about the life of Vincent Van Gogh and there is that bitter truth waiting for you that success is not imperative, it is will and hard work that matter in the end.

The most remarkable thing about classics is that they never lose their contemporary relevance. The style of writing of any period may be ephemeral due to a variety of shifting influences and pressures but the message of the work remains perennial. That's why Shakespeare is still so popular.

It must also be said that some classics commended upon students during their university education or at school are not always worthy of praise. They are considered classics because they were considered literary fashionplates of their heyday.

It is said that in our country, classics hold little significance for the reading masses, barring English literature students. Ask any publisher or bookseller about the kind of demand they have in the market, and chances are you will get an answer in the negative. Some books continue to sell merely because they have been prescribed in schools and colleges. A general reader prefers contemporary books over classics, bereft of the latter's eloquent persuasion and its promise of enlightenment.

The choice of books also has to do with now one has developed the reading habit. We are concerned here with the period when the reader starts reading serious books. Because one develops taste in books and intellectual excitement quite in one's life. One may wander here and there for a brief

period, hoping to find books worth reading but one is bound to stick to one's
passion for certain genres, and fondness for a particular kind of writing for
prolonged periods. The reason being: reading, like writing, has a lot to do
with individual experience and imagination, which can, of course, vary from
person to person.

It is also true that what we read influences our thoughts and
conscience greatly. Our writing, too, is somewhat a reaction to our reading.
It is thus, reading good literature and not only help one discuss it with an air
of connoisseurs but more importantly it can greatly help one cultivate an
articulate intelligence. For life and literature are interrelated. The books we
read reflect the shape of our experience. Similarly, our experience of life is
also shaped by the books we read.

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