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Women, Love and Birdwatching through the lens of Nissim Ezekiel

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Nissim Ezekiel's poem titled *Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher* explores themes of identity, desire, and the complexities of human relationships. Ezekiel has written numerous poems, but this one is different for a lot of reasons. Nissim Ezekiel is considered the pioneer of Indian English poetry. His poems paved the way for other poets to write poems that catered to Indian sensibilities. His poems were mostly about the Indian identity and the dilemma surrounding it. This poem here is different because it has a universal appeal since the roles it discusses are universal, a poet, a lover and a birdwatcher. These roles exist irrespective of cultural and linguistic boundaries. The poem deals with three processes broadly. It begins with talking about birdwatching. The birdwatcher's approach should be to never force the pace of his/her process. This approach applies to a lover who wants to win a woman's heart and to a poet who wants to write a poem. These processes, according to Ezekiel, should be natural, which implies that no external force should be involved. “

The fourth line of the first stanza, i.e, *The hunt is not an exercise of will*” can be analysed from various perspectives. This line if examined from a birdwatcher's angle, then one will realise that the birds won't move according to the birdwatcher's convenience, rather vice versa. If looked at from a poet's perspective, this can imply that the process of writing a poem should be a natural process, one cannot force it. This idea is similar to what Keats said about poetry- “if poetry comes not as naturally as the leaves to a tree, it had better not come at all”. When examined from a lover's point of view, I could derive two interpretations. Firstly it could mean when wooing a woman, one should be patient and wait for the woman. Here are the lines that I am referring to

*To force the pace and never to be still
Is not the way of those who study birds
Or women. The best poets wait for words.
The hunt is not an exercise of will
But patient love relaxing on a hill*

If I take all these points together then we arrive at the point that a patient wait will lead to a feeling of fulfilment. According to Ezekiel, waiting should not feel strenuous, rather it should feel like a patient love relaxing on a hill, but I would like to elaborate on my second

interpretation of a lover wooing a woman. The poet uses the word hunt both for birds and a woman. He could have used a different word here, maybe search or longing, but the word hunt. The poem does not demarcate these three roles, rather they are very much interlinked, and that is why I have arrived at my second interpretation, which is more of a question that I am attempting to answer here. Is a woman hunted? Are we equating wooing to hunting here? The role of the lover, if looked at from my second interpretation, then the lover becomes a predator. This line could be a commentary on the male gaze when looked at from a feminist point of view. Is Ezekiel a feminist poet? In the research paper titled *A Study of Indian Feminist Poetry from 19th Century to the Present* authored by **Ghassan Nawaf Jaber Alhomoud**, he states that Nissim Ezekiel is one of the poets who view love and women from a male perspective in his poems. This is visible in *Night of the Scorpion* where the woman, who was also a mother, was perceived as selfless and tolerant, and that is how the society perceives women. Nissim Ezekiel has extensively explored the male gaze in several poems. In the paper titled *Love, Sex and Man-Woman Relationship in Nissim Ezekiel's Poetry* authored by **Dr Mirza Sibtain Beg**, he explores the views of Nissim Ezekiel. He believes that Ezekiel's love poems diversify the concept of love. Love can be genuine, physical, emotional, and spiritual; love can be transient and temporary, love can be eternal. The *Couple*, a poem by Ezekiel explores the idea of love via a male gaze and how love can be extremely physical. This poem does not talk about love philosophically nor does it equate love with the sublime, rather it talks about love from a very physical perspective, which may often be looked at as something carnal. Here is a stanza from the poem *The Couple*

*You're a wonderful woman, he said,
and she laughed happily,
having heard it before from many men,
all trapped in the desire
to see her naked
and to know she surrendered
who was so hard and vain.
In that moment of mutual deception,
She was truly beautiful*

This poem shares a similar tone to the poem that is being discussed in this essay. The poem doesn't sound problematic when read from a birdwatcher or artist's point of view, because birdwatching does need patience, and creating art needs patience, but when one reads the

poem from the lover's point of view, one can easily sense the constant commentary that is going on. The second half of the first stanza is particularly interesting. It is at this point that the reader starts to notice that there is no clear demarcation of roles here and how the approaches are interlinked with each role. The subject matter of the poem becomes very abstract as all the ideas start to overlap. Here is the second half of the first stanza that I am referring to, to propose my arguments.

*“To note the movement of a timid wing;
Until the one who knows that she is loved
No longer waits but risks surrendering -
In this the poet finds his moral proved
Who never spoke before his spirit moved*

The fifth line of *The Couple*-” *and to know she surrendered”*

and the third line of the second half of the first stanza of *Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher*, *longer waits but risks surrendering*, both these lines have an element of surrendering. But what are women surrendering to? In *Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher*, a woman surrenders when she knows she is being loved but knows enough to surrender herself. In *The Couple*, the woman surrenders in a moment of mutual deception. These lines almost sound like being patient was a pretence, it was like a trap laid for the women to get vulnerable and fall prey to. The ideas had become so overlapping in this poem that it becomes hard to tell if the birdwatcher, the poet and the lover are separate entities or they are one entity altogether. The fourth and the fifth line of the second half of the first stanza, *“In this the poet finds his moral proved Who never spoke before his spirit moved”*, Ezekiel talks about the poet's moral being proved. From a poet's perspective, it could imply that the poet was patient all this time and now finally poetry has come to him and this feels right in his/her conscience, now when brought in the perspective of a lover it could imply that the lover had waited for the woman and now the woman had finally surrendered to him and he feels morally upright because all this time he didn't force the woman to fall for him but it was the woman who chose to fall for him. This brings in the concept of consent while courting a woman. Consent is important no matter what kind of relationship one shares with each other, but historically in a man-woman relationship or if we look back in time and take a look at how courting worked, then we would find out consent didn't have much space. Courting was all about being daring and maybe sometimes being weird as well. So here in these lines, there is a possibility that Ezekiel is trying to represent the new man who values consent or it could also imply that the man is placing himself on a pedestal for being patient and valuing the consent of a woman

but is failing to understand that this is a bare minimum and its silly to glorify it. Now if I look at the whole first stanza, it focuses a lot on being natural. The poet's approach to writing poetry, the birdwatcher's approach to watching the birds and the lover's approach to wooing and making a woman fall in love should be natural, but when I read it from a woman's perspective, it makes me question the nature of courting. Has the problematic way of courting become embedded in the minds of the lovers out there? Is this poem a modern man's guide to courting women the right way? It could be. According to Ezekiel, approaching nature should happen in a gentle manner and I believe he is mocking the hasty ways in which a lover approaches a woman. There is a possibility that he intends to tell the reader that women should be treated as gently as nature. He mentions in the second stanza that to witness birds of rarer species one must go to deserted places. Deserted places could imply that those places are not touched by the conventions of the society. To embrace nature in its purest yet realest version one has to go to places where no one makes the effort to reach. Those places may be isolated and ***"thorny like the heart's dark floor"***. According to Ezekiel, to know a woman truly one has to understand that she is not perfect. A lover has to fall in love with the real self of a woman, not with the picture he/she has created of the woman in his/her mind. This reminds me of a dialogue by Robin Williams from the movie *Good Will Hunting* where he says to Matt Damon who played the role of Will that ***"You're not perfect, sport, and let me save you the suspense: this girl you've met, she's not perfect either. But the question is whether or not you are perfect for each other. That's the whole deal."*** Ezekiel says if a woman can show all her shades to you, not just the ones that are likeable, that's when she has truly fallen in love or as Ezekiel puts it-

Remote and thorny like the heart's dark floor.

And there the women slowly turn around,

Not only flesh and bone but myths of light

With darkness at the core, and sense is found

The moment she is able to show all her shades, that's when the lover is successful in his quest of winning her over. It is easy to embrace the light, but to embrace someone's darkness is the real deal. This is the moment when a poet achieves the peak of his/her poetic creativity as well. The poem ends with the line-

But poets lost in crooked, restless flight,

The deaf can hear, the blind recover sight

There are times when the senses of the poet become impaired and this happens when the poets are lost in an unhealthy competition of producing work for the market in a hasty

manner, but they could regain their senses only if they wait patiently, like the lover waits for the woman, and the birdwatcher waits for the birds. It all comes down to waiting.