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**A STUDY IN PERSPECTIVES: LAND, PEOPLE, AND LOVE IN
SELECTED POEMS OF NISSIM EZEKIEL**



Dr. Muhammad Mahboob Ahmad*

*Assistant Professor, Institute of English Language and
Literature, GC University, Lahore*

mahboobahmad@gcu.edu.pk

Abstract

Nissim Ezekiel has long been acknowledged as the father of a modern Indian idiom; this paper examines the positions he takes up within it, reading his poetry of land and of love as a single study in perspective. A Bombay Jew writing through the city's transformation after Partition, Ezekiel is, in John Thieme's phrase, an "urban Bombayite" — yet one who "frequently seeks release." The paper first traces his oscillation between detachment and participation in "Urban" and "A Morning Walk," and his turn to the rural scene in "Night of the Scorpion" and "The Truth about the Floods." It then follows the same mobility of position into the love poems — "Two Nights of Love," "An Affair," "To a Certain Lady," "Advice," "The Old Woman" and "Ganga" — where love, his central motif, is treated with the maturity and complexity of urban life. Employing Wolfgang Iser's Reader's Response framework, the paper argues that no single attitude prevails across Ezekiel's work: observer and participant, insider and outsider, he places himself anew in each poem.

Keywords: *Nissim Ezekiel; Indian poetry in English; urban; Bombay; love poetry; perspective; Reader's Response Theory*

Introduction

Nissim Ezekiel has long been acknowledged as the father of a modern Indian idiom, and this recognition raises a natural question: from what vantage point does he write? The Oxford Dictionary defines 'perspective' as "a particular attitude towards or way of regarding something; a point of view," and 'position' as "a person's point of view or attitude towards something," while 'location' is simply "a particular place or position." This paper takes these three terms — perspective, position, location — as interchangeable coordinates for a single question: how is the poet positioned with regard to a defined set of relationships, the recurring motifs of his poetry?

Two such motifs are explored here: land and love. In Ezekiel's treatment of land, no single attitude prevails; his position toward landscape and people shifts from poem to poem. He is not always the observer describing a scene from without — at times he becomes part of the scene, and at other times an active participant within it. A similar inquiry into his love poetry uncovers the same mobility of position, with 'perspective' and 'position' used interchangeably throughout to describe how the poet places himself in relation to the motif at hand.

Ezekiel's own biography supplies the ground for this hybridity. Born in Bombay in 1924 to a small community of Marathi-speaking Jews, he was educated in colonial institutions and grew up in a multicultural environment; his complex ancestry placed him within Hindu-dominated Maharashtra during the last years of British colonial rule, and he watched his beloved Bombay become Mumbai after Partition. It is this position — Jewish, colonially educated, witness to the city's remaking — that drives his experiments with form and language, and that lends a complex, urban inflection to his fidelity toward his own roots.

His first book, *A Time to Change* (1952), is credited with “the arrival of modernism in Indian poetry” (Thayil, 2008, p. 1), and a substantial body of scholarship has since confirmed his standing. Editors introducing his anthologised work have not hesitated to call him the father of a modern Indian idiom: in her preface to the second edition of *Collected Poems*, Leela Gandhi observes that “Indian-ness and nation-love” are both “amply manifest” in his poetry, and describes it, without derision, as “the literature of home-remedies” — a phrase that suggests the comfort of a hearth, something she finds more pronounced in Taufiq Rafat and Ezekiel than in any other native poets (Gandhi, 1989, p. xvii). R. Parthasarathy, in the seminal *Ten Twentieth-Century Indian Poets*, goes further, noting that after Joseph Furtado, “Ezekiel is the only poet to have seriously considered the use of Pidgin English” (Parthasarathy, 1976, p. 8) — a torch-bearer, in other words, for later generations as much as for his contemporaries, whose *Collected Poems* display a range of formal variations that later Indian poets would go on to borrow.

This assessment has held over subsequent decades of scholarship: Dulai (2000) likewise credits Ezekiel with founding a distinctly modern, contemporary Indian English poetic voice, one still visible in the poets who followed him.

The present study proceeds in two movements. The first traces Ezekiel’s shifting position toward land: his oscillation between detachment and participation in “Urban” and “A Morning Walk,” and his turn to the rural scene in “Night of the Scorpion” and “The Truth about the Floods.” Land, it should be said, is a less obvious motif in Ezekiel than it is in his Pakistani contemporary Taufiq Rafat; it surfaces less as direct description than as an extended metaphor for culture, tradition, and people, filtered through the multicultural environment that John Thieme describes as an “urban Bombayite” condition — one, Thieme adds, “from which he frequently seeks release” (Thieme, 1989, p. xxiii). The second movement follows the same mobility of position into six love poems — “Two Nights of Love,” “An Affair,” “Advice,” “The Old Woman,” “To a Certain Lady,” and “Ganga” — where love, Ezekiel’s central motif, is treated with the same maturity and complexity he brings to his treatment of land and language.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Tracing the mobility of positions requires a framework that can hold more than one attitude in view at once, and that admits the reader’s own interpretive activity as part of the analysis. The paper draws on Reader’s Response Theory, in the formulation developed by Wolfgang Iser, whose model accommodates the subjective interpretation the inquiry requires. For Iser, a text “is composed of a variety of perspectives, which outline the author’s view and also provide access to what the reader is meant to visualise,” and as the reader’s viewpoint “travels between all these segments” of the text, it creates “a network of perspectives” (Iser, 2001, p. 1528). Methodologically, the analysis that follows is qualitative, employing a hermeneutic framework to interpret the selected poems, with Iser’s model supplying the interpretive latitude such a project requires; Ezekiel’s perspective is determined from close textual analysis, tracking how it changes from poem to poem. This analysis is also situated within a postcolonial frame, drawing on the theoretical vocabulary of *The Empire Writes Back* and on Jahan Ramazani’s work on hybridity and transnational identity in postcolonial poetic language. Since postcolonial writers retain the choice not to write in English, the choice to do so — as Ezekiel does — is itself worthy of scrutiny.

Ezekiel and the Land

The landscape is a less obvious motif in Ezekiel than Rafat, as stated earlier. He is a more diverse poet, so land appears at various levels, but it does so only in the extended metaphor of association with culture, tradition, and the people. Ezekiel has been influenced by a multi-cultural environment. Thieme's description of Ezekiel as an "urban Bombayite" who "frequently seeks release" from this condition holds in this analysis (Thieme, 1989, p. xxiii). Garman (1976) traces a comparable pattern of movement across Ezekiel's wider body of work, describing a poet who habitually sets out from, and returns to, fixed points of departure — a structural restlessness that anticipates the oscillation between detachment and participation traced across the land poems below.

"Urban"

In "Urban", we see the poet placed in the urban landscape, and looking for escape. However, the urban landscape seems to close in all around him, and it seems to him that "The hills are always far away" (Ezekiel, 1989, line 1). The space outside Bombay metropolitan becomes the inscape of Ezekiel's mind, where all the urban influences hinder the comfort and ease of the mind, not allowing him to feel free. Placed in the comfort of detached observation, Ezekiel looks inside his mind, and "He knows the broken roads, and moves/ In circles tracked within his head" (Ezekiel, 1989, lines 2-3). The desire to break away from the monotony of an urban life is born from an inability to connect with Nature:

At dawn he never sees the skies
Which, silently, are born again.
Nor feels the shadows of the night

Recline their fingers on his eyes. (Ezekiel, 1989, lines 7-10)

The bane of urban development is that as population increases, the need for more residences and offices necessitates the sacrifice of Nature's open spaces. Ezekiel realises that urban advance is the cause of vanishing skylines and dried seas, and this creates in him a desire to think of the hills far away, where he might escape not only the closeted spaces of Bombay, but also the cramped space inside his own mind. However, he has to admit that "The city like a passion burns" (Ezekiel, 1989, line 13). So, the persona in the poem might dream of "morning walks, alone,/ And floating on a wave of sand" (Ezekiel, 1989, lines 14-15), he is not able to break away from the routine of life in the urban centre of the country. He might escape for a few moments to dream of the hills and to grieve over the loss of Bombay's skyline to the advancing skyscrapers; however, he realises that he cannot escape the urban landscape permanently:

But still his mind its traffic turns
Away from beach and tree and stone

To kindred clamour close at hand. (Ezekiel, 1989, lines 16-18)

Ezekiel returns to the bustle of the urban landscape, because that is what he is most familiar with. He has to reconcile to the idea that the modern urbanised way of life has come to stay and is not something that could be avoided or denied. So, he celebrates the simplicity of an older way of life that he had once been witness to. But, the poem also realises that citizens must now adjust to the cluttered inscape and the horizon-less skies of the cities that they live in.

“

A Morning Walk

Thieme quotes from Sudesh Mishra, who has analysed the trope of the city in Ezekiel's work. Mishra has pointed out that “the emphasis on the dehumanisation of the individual is a derivative mixture of Eliot and Auden.” (as cited in Thieme, 1989). His initial work was Modernist and centred on London as the trope of a city. In his later work, he moves to a more localised cityscape, i.e. Bombay. Thieme then quotes critic K. D. Verma who sees the later poetry as “expressions of the kind of Modernist city angst that one finds in Eliot's *Waste Land* and Pound's *Cantos* and also influenced by the negative view of the city that one finds in Blake's “*London*” (Verma, as cited in Thieme, 1989, p. xxiv). In “*A Morning Walk*”, Ezekiel is again the observer:

He stood where several highways crossed
And saw the city, cold and dim,
Where only human hands sell cheap. (Ezekiel, 1989, lines 5-7)

As Ezekiel stands at the summit of his observation, the personal ‘I’ blends into a larger entity, and he seems to be part of the unfeeling, unmoved horde of Bombayites who spend their lives living in the city but never pause to wonder at the conditions they live in:

Barbaric city sick with slums,
Deprived of seasons, blessed with rains,
Its hawkers, beggars, iron-lunged,
Processions led by frantic drums,
A million purgatorial lanes. (Ezekiel, 1989, lines 15-19)

Simultaneously, Ezekiel is also part of the city's pulse. He can detach and look at the city but the observer is also a participant, always aware that the insalubrious aspect of the urban condition is something that has to be accepted as granted in postcolonial countries. So, “Returning to his dream, he knew/ That everything would be the same” (Ezekiel, 1989, lines 29-30). He returns to the ground and sees aspects of urban life that are in contrast to the slums that he is disgusted by. What he admires in the city of Bombay is that it is a cityscape that allows the persona in the poem a chance to dream of the kind of lifestyle which mitigates against the presence of slums and the less pleasant side of the city. The poet wakes from his reflections and finds his feet in a situation he cannot avoid, “The city wakes, where fame is cheap,/ And he belongs, an active fool” (Ezekiel, 1989, lines 41-42). The “active fool” is the active participant that Ezekiel has become, almost being a complicit partner with the city as it moves forward. The poet seems to be dancing in circles around his port city.

“Night of the Scorpion”

Ezekiel is not limited to the description of an urban landscape. While centring himself in descriptions of a largely urban setting, for a point of comparison, Ezekiel turns to the rural landscape in “*Night of the Scorpion*.” Coming from an urban setting, and being comfortable in living in the metropolis, it appears incongruent that he should write a poem with a completely rustic and earthy

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feel about it. "Night of the Scorpion," though, does have a gritty and grounded quality in describing the indigenous scene.

"Night of the Scorpion" describes the rural customs that come into effect at such accidents as when a scorpion bites someone. The poet is placed as an observer, quietly taking in the almost funereal atmosphere, where the "peasants came like swarms of flies" (Ezekiel, 1989, line 8). Religious superstition is an essential part of the rural mindset, and the peasants "buzzed the Name of God a hundred times/ to paralyse the Evil One" (Ezekiel, 1989, lines 9-10). Rural superstition is reflected in the next few lines as well, but these are not of a religious nature:

They clicked their tongues.

With every movement that the scorpion made

his poison moved in Mother's blood, they said. (Ezekiel, 1989, lines 15-17)

Incorporating these superstitions in the structure of the poem, Ezekiel does not appear to pass judgement or even comment on it. For a poet whose work is rooted in the urban landscape, he is compassionate in his description of a rural scene. He does not express any angst at the villagers' delay in calling a doctor. This detachment is necessary for the poet to be able to understand the idiosyncrasies of the native population. While Ezekiel experiments with various indigenous images, this poem is particularly useful in analysing the idiom. Since idiom is not limited to the use of language alone, and actually incorporates a depiction of local customs and traditions as well, "Night of the Scorpion" is significant for what it shows:

My father, sceptic, rationalist,

trying every curse and blessing,

powder, mixture, herb and hybrid. (Ezekiel, 1989, lines 36-38)

The missionary school-educated son does not pass judgement on the "sceptic, rationalist" father resorting to unscientific methods for combating the scorpion's bite. Eventually, when the bite loses its sting:

My mother only said:

Thank God the scorpion picked on me

and spared my children. (48)

Ezekiel is not as detached now at the end of the poem as he was in the earlier part of the poem. The ending is moving because it does allow the poet to shift his focus from being an observer to being a participant. This is the pull that the land and local customs, and the simplicity of rural life, exert on the poet. While reading "Night of the Scorpion," the reader forgets that this is a poet who is using a foreign language to represent a very local scene, which is a feeling we never lose when reading Ezekiel's work. The scene is described in such powerful terms that the language becomes irrelevant. Shahane (1976) identifies this same pull between scepticism and inherited belief as a recurring religious-philosophical strain across Ezekiel's poetry, of which the father's clinical remedies and the mother's fatalistic gratitude in this poem form a compact illustration.

"The Truth about the Floods"

"The Truth about the Floods" is a "found poem based on a report by V. K. Dixit in The Indian Express, Bombay, 25 September 1967" (Ezekiel, 1989, p. 185). The poet describes the panic and general state of confusion and desperation in the flood-hit areas of Balasore, Mayurbhanj, Cuttack,

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North Bihar, and Orissa, where “it is a job to get at the truth” (Ezekiel, 1989, lines 1-5). In the village of Mandasapur, after eight days of flooding, a villager says:

‘I have eleven children.

Two I have left to the mercy of God.

The rest are begging, somewhere. ’(Ezekiel, 1989, lines 19-21)

In the village, the persona in the poem is met with silent men, women, and children who “gazed at the sky” (Ezekiel, 1989, line 28). The villagers are convinced that he is a government official and therefore do not tell him anything (Ezekiel, 1989, lines 32-33). A relief party arrives and the villagers rush to them for help. Ezekiel describes the scene with an air of disinterested observation:

The villagers ran to them.

They slapped their bellies

and whined:

‘I have not eaten for three days.’

‘My husband has been washed away.’

‘My parents have abandoned me.’

‘My son is dying.’

‘I cannot find my daughter. ’(Ezekiel, 1989, lines 44-51)

Never once does Ezekiel show any reaction. He does not express pity for those who are describing their profound losses, but that does not mean he lacks any compassion for them. That he refrains from commentary is a necessary contrast that helps establish the insensitivity of what happens next:

‘Don’t make a noise,’

said the students,

‘sit down in a circle.’

The villagers sat down in a circle.

They did not say another word.

The transistor was on,

the biscuits were distributed,

the camera clicked.

Then the students left

humming the tune

of a popular Hindi film song. (Ezekiel, 1989, lines 52-62)

Describing the scene in his matter-of-fact tone, Ezekiel does not need to use any elaborate metaphor or any commentary to decry the insensitivity of the students who are only looking for a photo opportunity. The absence of any emotion on the part of the observer actually lends these lines a unique moving quality. That he has not acted liked the students is actually the poetic persona’s redeeming feature, and it allows him to appear to be compassionate without really doing anything practically to help the flood victims.

Representing the perspective of a journalist, the persona in the poem is tasked not with compassionately helping those hit by the flood, but with finding out the truth and ascertaining responsibility for any possible neglect on the part of the local administrators. As the district authorities at Balasore remind him:

Nature, they said,
had conspired against them.
'Write the truth, 'they said,
'in your report.'

And so I did. (Ezekiel, 1989, lines 83-87)

Ezekiel the poet has set himself a similar target. In order to describe the truth of the land and the people, he must dissociate his poetry from any emotion that might not let him view things objectively. He succeeds in doing so, and the poem is an understanding of the condition in the flood-hit areas, without any emotional outbursts blaming officials or Nature. This control is something that is rooted in Ezekiel's link with his surroundings.

Ezekiel and Love

Ezekiel treats the subject of love with the maturity and complexity of urban life that he has brought to his treatment of language and land. The poems analysed in this section are "Two Nights of Love," "An Affair," "Advice," "The Old Woman," "To a Certain Lady" and "Ganga."

In Ezekiel's work, love is the central motif in a significant number of poems. In fact, he talks more about love than anything else. Often, he celebrates the physical love between a man and a woman. For him, love involves many subtle shades, and he depicts them with variety and in the spirit of formal and contextual experiment that is part of many of his poems.

"Two Nights of Love"

"Two Nights of Love", as the title suggests, is a poem about physical love, something that Ezekiel often comes back to over the course of his poetic oeuvre. It is, thus, an important reference point to evaluate the evolution of his perspective. "After a night of love," the poet "dreamt of love" (Ezekiel, 1989, line 1), as he is "unconfined to threshing thighs and breasts" (Ezekiel, 1989, line 2). The act of coupling, in Ezekiel's opinion, should not be an act restricted to thrashing in bed. It should offer a release that is also binding in nature:

I wanted to be bound

Within a freedom fresh as God's name

Through all the centuries of Godlessness. (Ezekiel, 1989, lines 4-6)

The poet desires to find freedom and confinement in the act of making love. Desire, for Ezekiel, is a liberating force, and "After a night of love I turned to love" (Ezekiel, 1989, line 7), to the reassuring presence of "threshing thighs" and "singing breasts" (Ezekiel, 1989, line 8). Even though he is "exhausted by the act" (Ezekiel, 1989, line 9), he desires it again, because the act affords him a release, a freedom that is "fresh as God's name, through all/ The centuries of darkened loveliness" (Ezekiel, 1989, lines 11-12). The poet emphasises on physical love as a form of freedom because it has remained a constant through the centuries of human history.

In a later conversation on eros in his poetry, Ezekiel himself resisted a purely secular reading of this desire, describing physical love as continuous with, rather than opposed to, the sacred (Pandeya, 1996). Beg (2017) reads "Two Nights of Love" in similar terms, calling it "a very curious blend of the spiritual and the sensual" that recurs across Ezekiel's love poetry more broadly (Beg, 2017).

"An Affair"

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“An Affair” is a tongue-in-cheek description of a short-lived attraction between a young couple. They go through all the motions of modern dating, and Ezekiel subtly incorporates the influence of Western media and literature on daily life in India. They go to a cinema, and watch a couple kiss onscreen, and even after violent scenes in the film, “the lovers stood/ Poised for kisses” (Ezekiel, 1989, lines 6-7). This is the Western style of courting, whether it is going to the cinema or expectations of a kiss on dates. This sets the poem up for its climax:

And then she said: I love you, just like this

As I had seen the yellow blondes declare

Upon the screen, and even stroked my hair.

But hates me now because I did not kiss. (Ezekiel, 1989, lines 9-12)

The girl expects the hero of her real life to kiss her at all the crucial moments in a relationship, just as the hero on the reel kisses his heroine at every opportunity. This shaping of expectations and desires is based on Western ideals, and Ezekiel chooses in this poem to represent the perspective of an Eastern-bred young man who perhaps does not wish to follow the rules of Westernised courtship. He would rather kiss in the privacy and comfort of a long-term commitment. The atmosphere in the poem is light, and Ezekiel almost trivialises the concept of a kiss during courtship. That the man in the poem is able to laugh off the girl’s expectation of a kiss is indication that Ezekiel is not concerned merely with physical love. To him, the motif and metaphor of love extends beyond the physical act. This is a direct contrast to the previous poem “Two Nights of Love” where copulation seems to be the most important human relationship, and where the physical act provides some semblance of permanence while all else fades.

“Advice”

“Advice” looks at another aspect of human relationships, where those who are kith and kin, have a right to advise those younger or less privileged than themselves, and they consider it only natural that their advice would be accepted no matter what. This poem could be about an older brother advising a younger one, an older cousin or uncle, or perhaps even a father advising his son on what course to take in his life. In India, the act of advising those are junior to you is almost a ritual, even if the advice is rhetorical:

Taste the wide variety of things,

Uncertainties, incompatibilities,

And listen to no argument that fails

To push you out to sea or back to port. (Ezekiel, 1989, lines 9-12)

There is no real substance, and these are repetitive, almost meaningless sayings, but the persona in “Advice” has been allowed the luxury of hindsight. When the advice ends, there is a pause in the structure of the poem, and then the poetic persona advising the younger person reflects on the nature of the advice he dispensed with “And then I watched him die and turned away,/ Could not save him, merely had my say” (Ezekiel, 1989, lines 17-18). The ending indicates that for the person giving advice in this culture, it is not an option that he exercises but a duty. He has to give advice regardless of the consequences, which implies that the person taking the advice does not have the option of rejecting that advice.

This gives rise to two possibilities. On the one hand, the poet might be offering a compassionate justification for an elder who has dispensed misguided advice to a younger person who as a result has died, literally or metaphorically. It might have been career advice, and the young

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person has perhaps landed in a job where he is unhappy and insecure, thereby dying a psychological death. If so, the poet is inviting his readers to look at the adviser's traditional role as an elder with some compassion. The poet has succeeded in empathising with the older person and thus reduced some of the guilt of giving bad advice. On the other hand, the person giving the advice might be unrepentant at his harmful role in ruining the life of the person taking the advice. So, he is calling on his role as an elder and more experienced person, and is appealing to the indigenous sensibility that believes that elders advise in the best interests of their juniors, and if the advice turns out harming the person, it is just bad luck. If this second possibility is the interpretation that one sticks with, the poet now seems to condemn the elder person for his indifference and for not having a guilty conscience. Within the structure of one poem, Ezekiel incorporates two opposing perspectives on the right of elder people in the subcontinent to advise the young.

"The Old Woman"

This duality of perspective is again evident in "The Old Woman," where Ezekiel describes a woman with apparent indifference. However, as in the case of "Advice," the reader is invited to choose whether he/she feels empathy for the plight of the old woman, or anger at the way she has spent her life. She has a "timid childhood" followed by a "cautious youth" (Ezekiel, 1989, line 1) and is married. After marriage, her role is linked to that of Cain, "whom God protected from the wrath of men/ But knew himself a murderer" (Ezekiel, 1989, lines 3-4). This is a striking comparison, because it implies that the old woman is guilty of something and has that burden to bear. Perhaps it is guilt that "she let her husband die of too much dying" (Ezekiel, 1989, line 5), meaning that she perhaps failed to love him or give him company and abandoned him to his loneliness "behind the Evening News" (Ezekiel, 1989, line 6). This guilt drives her to "Churching and to Politics" (Ezekiel, 1989, line 7). So far, the reader feels she is the culprit and does not want to empathise with her. Ezekiel, however, grants her an alternative perspective in offering the reader a chance to know that:

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. (Ezekiel, 1989, lines 9-14)

As a young woman, she might have had the desire to inspire poets and arouse men, but perhaps her "timid childhood, cautious youth" (Ezekiel, 1989, line 1) and a loveless marriage led her to becoming emotionally unavailable to her husband. While the implication that she let her husband die of marital boredom is an indictment, the last few lines are a compassionate attempt to understand her plight. Maybe her timid upbringing and lack of exposure stilted her growth as a woman, and made her incapable of love. That she bears a Cain-like guilt is a redeeming feature, because she could have hypothetically not felt sorry at her husband's fading away. She could have been actually "hardened at the core" (Ezekiel, 1989, line 13), and reacted with indifference. Instead, she tries to keep herself busy in church and politics, therefore acknowledging that she too feels that there is now a void in her life where her husband's silent presence had been. She is not hardened like a stone, and Ezekiel offers her perspective a sympathetic ear.

"To a Certain Lady"

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A long poem, "To a Certain Lady", looks at the love between a man and a woman from various aspects. The poem opens with the couple engaging in physical love:

At first you hesitated, in your white blouse
And skirt of velvet, soft as hair,
But finally arrived in nakedness. (Ezekiel, 1989, lines 1-3)

The image of a shy woman being seduced is not portrayed with crass detail but with a subtlety that retains the erotic charm of the act but also lends it refinement. The lady seems worried about something, and the persona in the poem is trying to console her while seducing her:

Life can be kept alive
By contact with the unknown and the strange,
A feeling for the mystery
Of man and woman joined, exhaustion
At the act, desire for it again. (Ezekiel, 1989, lines 17-21)

This is the same strain as in "Two Nights of Love," where the physical coupling of a man and woman transcends the constraints of time and space, and in those moments of ecstasy the issues of change and permanence are temporarily suspended. However, the end of this first section of "To a Certain Lady" brings the poet back to the "commonplace" (Ezekiel, 1989, line 22), and as he looks at the "Books, carpets, curtains, glass,/ The simple things that make a home" (Ezekiel, 1989, line 26), he is reminded that even physical love is transient even though it appeared permanent while the act lasted. So, Ezekiel roots himself in a love for the familiar objects that define the comfort of a home, and it is perhaps only these objects and things that are permanent.

Love in its physical manifestation is, however, the greatest redeeming force in this poem, more so than the simple objects of daily life. Physical love is a "quick fresh response to goodness" (Ezekiel, 1989, line 44), and a purity and simplicity of experience must be found between man and woman before "in nakedness, simplicity, we come to love" (Ezekiel, 1989, line 48). Ezekiel appears delighted at the prospect of coupling. But, once the act is over:

Then, absences and quarrels, indifference
Sucking like a leech upon the flesh.
Crude acceptance of the need for one another,
Tasteless encounters in the dark. (Ezekiel, 1989, lines 49-52)

While in the throes of passion, Ezekiel eulogises physical love, but immediately afterwards there is a feeling of resentment at the fact that the desire is so strong that it makes him do something that he almost appears to regret afterwards.

Once the novelty of a new relationship is worn, the partners are tired of each other's company and take the relationship for granted. The poet addresses the woman in a curt tone when she asks for a lipstick. The novelty of physical love has become mundane, and as they settle into conjugal life, the husband and wife play a game. Having told his wife not to nag him, the persona in the poem then engages in a conversation during which we do not hear the wife's side, but it is easy to guess what she might be saying from what the husband says:

I shout at you
Because I love you, didn't you know?

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Well, now, let's change the subject,

I can't make poetry out of this. (Ezekiel, 1989, lines 73-76)

These four lines sum up the nature of marriage, where husband and wife engage in a love-hate relationship, fight but make up. From this domestic scene, Ezekiel takes us to the last observation he has to make about the nature of love. He invokes love as a muse at the end of the poem rather than at the beginning:

Teach us, Love, above all things, fidelity to music,

Sharpen our responses to the colours of creation,

Lead us undeceptively to what comes after passion,

And let us die, Love, as though we chose to, for a reason. (Ezekiel, 1989, lines 91-94)

Love as the muse is what remains after passion has been exhausted.

"Ganga"

The final poem analysed in this paper is "Ganga", which draws its title from a very common name for maidservants in India. The poem is about such a woman, but is told from the perspective of the employer, and it is not specified whether this is a man or a woman, or the poet himself. The poem is replete with ironic statements:

We pride ourselves

on generosity

to servants (Ezekiel, 1989, lines 1-3).

What form does this generosity take?

The woman

who washes up, suspected

of prostitution,

is not dismissed. (Ezekiel, 1989, lines 4-7)

The employer might be justifying some injustice by over-compensating. The condescending tone suppresses the servant's own perspective on the situation. From his or her pedestal, the employer trumpets their generosity. Not only is she given tea, "preserved for her/ from the previous evening" (Ezekiel, 1989, lines 9-10), but also bread which is "in good condition" (Ezekiel, 1989, line 12). She is handed old clothes once a year (Ezekiel, 1989, lines 13-14), and small change for buying sweets for her child. However, despite all this "generosity" on the part of the employer:

She brings a smell with her

and leaves it behind her,

but we are used to it.

These people never learn. (Ezekiel, 1989, lines 21-24)

Ezekiel characteristically leaves an ambiguity in the poem. While some readers would identify the compassion with which the poet views the ill-treatment of the servant, others might find themselves agreeing with the point-of-view of the employer and would feel that the servant is to be blamed for her dumbness. While Ezekiel does not advocate any sweeping emotions of love for the poor servant, he does invite the reader to consider why her voice is being denied, and why Ganga's story is told as the story of her employer. Mohanty (1995) identifies irony as one of the defining instruments of

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Ezekiel's socially observant poems, and "Ganga" is characteristic: the employer's self-congratulation is allowed to stand unqualified, so that the irony performs the critique the poem itself withholds.

Conclusion

Across the land poems and the love poems alike, Ezekiel refuses to settle into a single fixed position. In "Urban" and "A Morning Walk" he is at once the detached observer of Bombay's slums and skyline and an implicated participant in its "active fool[ery]"; in "Night of the Scorpion" and "The Truth about the Floods" the same oscillation appears as a movement between rural custom and urban distance, sympathy and reportorial control. Land, in other words, is never simply described in Ezekiel's poetry — it is a site on which his perspective keeps relocating itself.

The love poems trace an equivalent restlessness. "Two Nights of Love" and "To a Certain Lady" locate freedom inside physical surrender, even as "An Affair" and "Advice" withhold judgement on love's more compromised or dutiful forms. "The Old Woman" and "Ganga" extend this same mobility of sympathy to figures the poems could easily have flattened into either villain or victim, and instead leave suspended between the two.

Read together, these two motifs confirm what Iser's Reader's Response framework predicts of a text "composed of a variety of perspectives": Ezekiel's standing as the father of a modern Indian idiom rests not on any single settled attitude toward land, love, or language, but on his willingness to keep repositioning himself — observer and participant, insider and outsider — within each poem he writes.

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