

# "The Theme Of Conflict Between Individual And Society In Nissim Ezekiel's Plays Song Of Deprivation And Don't Call It Suicide"

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## **Abstract**

*Nissim Ezekiel's plays are statements of human relationships. Like his poetry, his plays are also simple introspective, and analytical. All his five published plays--Nalini, Marriage Poem, Sleep Walkers, Song of Deprivation, and Don't Call It Suicide--examine the predicament of individuals in a world of complex realities H.H. Anniah Gowda remarks that Nissim Ezekiel has "an aptitude for writing plays composed of gusto and social comment." The treatment of social complexities is cent and dominant in Ezekiel's plays. If Nalini is a drama on the plight of the artist, Marriage Poem dramatizes hollow human relationships. Sleep Walkers ridiculed the mad imitation of Americanism, and Song of Deprivation speaks of freedom-loving lovers. Don't Call It Suicide portrays the situations confronted by the 'non-adjustment people of the society.*

## **Introduction**

Ezekiel was born on 16th December 1924 in Bombay of Jewish parents belonging to the Bene-Israel community. He had his post-graduation in English literature from the University of Bombay in 1947. He was teaching English at Khalsa College during 1947-48. He lived in London from October 1948 to April 1952. During 1952-61 Ezekiel worked for many journals, including The Illustrated Weekly. He returned to academic life in 1961 as Professor, Head of the Department of English in Mithibai college. He was also the Vice-principal of the same college. He Joined the Bombay University post-graduate department in 1972 and retired in 1985. He was the editor of Quest Poetry India. Currently, he is editing The Indian P.E.N. He has also edited Indian Writers in the conference, we ting in India, Young Commonwealth Poets, and Another India: a penguin anthology of Indian Poetry and fiction (with Meenakshi Mukerji). Ezekiel has

published seven books of poems, from *A Time to Change* (1952) to *Latter-Day Psalms* (1982). The complete poetic collection of Ezekiel has been brought out by the Oxford University Press in *Collected Poems 1952-88*. Ezekiel has published five plays to date. *Nalini*, *Marriage Poem*, and *Sleep Walker* were published together under the title *Three Plays* in 1969 by the Writers Workshop, Calcutta. *Song of Deprivation* was published in *Enact* in 1969, and *Don't Call It Suicide* was published in *Bombay Literary Review* in 1989. He has a few more plays to be published. He won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1983 for *Latter-Day Psalms* and the Padma Shri in 1985 for his contribution to Indian literature in English.

If kamad recovers traditional symbols from history, myth, and folklore in representing modern society, Ezekiel mirrors the events in the commoners' life to depict the existing social milieu. The characters of Ezekiel's plays fight against the current social order and feel that fulfillment is not attainable in this taboo-ridden society. They try to escape into an imaginary world of their own for solace. In *Marriage Poem*, Naresh could have an affair with his girlfriend, Leela, only in *Imagination*. In the same manner, HE and SHE in *Song of Deprivation* could live happily only when they ignore the rule-bound society. In *Sleep Walkers*, the characters are also discontented with the existing community and yearn for an alien civilization. *Don't Call It Suicide* show how the Eldest son, unable to adapt himself to the norms of society, commits suicide. The play *Nalini* shows how the existing order hampers the freedom of women in particular and an artist general. In all these plays, the individual is seen to be at loggerheads with the society, which is tyrannical and oppressive. Ezekiel here captures the sensitivity of modern man in an inhuman mechanical society.

Like most modern Indian English play rights, Nissim Ezekiel is also not happy with the traditional way of life. Through the *Song of Deprivation*, Ezekiel pleads for a flexible society. *Piece of Deprivation* presents the conflict between the community and the individuals. Ezekiel is for individual freedom.

*Song of Deprivation*, a comic morality in one act, reveals the predicament of a pair of lovers in a hostile society. On an appointed day, SHE could not meet HE as her grandmother is in a "foul mood." Hence both SHE and HE meet in their *Imagination* through telephonic talk. They fancy sexual consummation in their minds. Till almost the end of the play, they are engaged in a telephonic conversation. SHE and HE image being "together somewhere, isolated from

everybody." The latent passion of SHE and HE comes to the fore in the following dialogue between SHE and HE:

SHE: Ah;

HE: We go out into the open, we run, we play games.

SHE: There's no one to see us?

HE: No one.

SHE: And then?

HE: We get fagged out. You perspire heavily.

You are bathed in perspiration and smell of it and beautifully  
dirty.

SHE: I'm beautifully dirty (She takes up a mockheroic pose, one foot on  
the table)

HE: We go in.

SHE: We go in.

HE: I undress you (Gives his mobile a turn)

SHE: You undress me ( Give her mobile a turn and stands on the table) (p.2).

Dream of having intercourse:

HE: You lie down naked and bathed in perspiration.

SHE: I lie down naked and bathed in perspiration.

(She leaps off the table and lies on the floor, on her tummy)

HE: What are you doing?

SHE: I'm lying naked, well, almost, and I'm not bathed in perspiration but imagine that I am .go.

On. Don't you undress?

HE: No, not yet

SHE: Well?

HE: (lowering his voice) I lick the perspiration off your body

SHE: (Turning over on her back) How sweet I (p.2).

SHE says that the imaginary doing of HE is "erotic." He says the game is not over and imagines bathing "together "with SHE. Since SHE and HE could not meet, they indulge in imaginary

sexual meetings. During the talk, they recollect their engagement in the train with nostalgic warmth:

SHE: The train was crowded. You were standing very close to me

HE: That's right,

SHE: From time to time, as you swayed in the moving train, you pressed against me. (Gives her mobile a turn)

HE: I remember (Gives his mobile a turn)

SHE: I had books in my hands. I couldn't move. My hands were pressing.

Against you, right there

HE: I felt them

SHE: I didn't know one could feel it there, so soft and resilient thought

The...(p.2)

Song of Deprivation is viewed as a revolt against the repression of the women community. SHE abhors the traditional society in which women's communities are not as accessible as men's. SHE says to HE :

It's easy for you to talk. You're free.

I'm not free (p.3)

When HE advises her not to listen to a transistor, SHE accuses him of 'preaching.' SHE is portrayed as a fierce modern girl longing for freedom. The speaking "quite a mouthful" on the issue of women emancipation:

...Half a dozen voices saying NO to me from the time I was a child. No childishness was permitted to me when I was a child. Don't do this. Don't do that. You'll fall, You'll hurt yourself. No sympathy in adolescence. No freedom as a college student. Not allowed to read certain books...(p.3)

SHE says that she was not allowed to see "certain files."

And "mix freely with boys ." She regrets that the women community is looking down upon with "suspicion and distrust" and expresses her

displeasure with her grandmother, who has never allowed her to wear a 'bikini.' She protests:

Resentment of spontaneity. Hatred of everything modern. Fear of fashion. Awful. Imagine listening

to endless talk about money and property

and food –yes, an infinite conference about food....(p.3)

She further points out

that the family suppression forced her to lead a life in a cage:

How I hate it. I always hated it. The atmosphere of gossip and petty-mindedness, the total indifference to ideas, the soulless routine of religious ceremonies without an iota of religious conviction, the muttering of long prayers without knowing their meaning, the hostility to everything new or different, without giving it a chance. Terrible, How can anyone live like that, as if inside a cage? How can they? It's absolutely sterile. They bring up their children exactly as they were brought up. They arrange marriages for them and want them to bring up their children exactly as they were. They arrange marriages for them and want them to bring up their children exactly as they were. Shameful! It's nauseating! How can such people ever create anything? How can they understand anything? They're dead, dead, dead(pp,3-4).

The principal characters in Song of Deprivation are not given names but just mentioned as SHE and HE. This characteristic technique of using pronouns makes the characters' types'. SHE and HE could be any woman and man.

Ezekiel dexterously uses the stage to secure compactness. HE and SHE are simultaneously found on the scene with a temporary "transparent screen of the central wall" separating them. SHE and HE are found engaged in an "erotic" telephonic conversation. The central dividing wall indicates that SHE and HE are in conversation from their respective homes. The main dividing wall in Song of Deprivation makes the stage into two rooms. The rooms are styled different. NISSIM Ezekiel vividly describes the stage-setting of Song of Deprivation at the beginning of the play:

A colorful abstract interpretation of two rooms widely separated in space and style. They are brought together by a wall that divides the stage in the center, from back to front. The total area of the two rooms does not exceed a fourth of the stage. The rooms are brightly lit, the rest of the location being in darkness. On either side of the dividing wall, the front center is a table with a telephone and a chair. Tables, chairs, and telephones are non-realistic in elegant shapes and fantastic colors. The front section of the dividing wall is of some transparent material. There is a substantial old-fashioned grandfather clock in the fitting room (from the audience's point of

view). One part of the wall in the left room is a collage of modern and pseudo-modern images. Air India calendar, cheap bazaar print of Hindu goddesses, glamorous fashion photograph from Indian women's magazines, etc.

At the point where the dividing wall ends is a pot of burning coals. With plenty of incense in it, smoking away. In both rooms are indigenous mobiles above the points where the tables and chairs are placed (p.1).

At the end of the play, HE and SHE decide to come together. HE suggests that they should join the "international underground" so that they can be free. She asks:

Let's join it, then

How do we enter it? (p.6).

SHE and HE shuts the audience by transferring the back-wall screen to the front" so that they are 'concealed.' But the next moment, SHE and HE find the audience still sitting in the auditorium. They both request the audience to leave. But the audience does not. Then SHE says that they should "pretend." As if the audience is "not there." He agrees to "pretend." They decide not to join the underground world but to remain in the same world without cognizing the people around them. Ezekiel symbolically suggests that the more we ignore the traditional-oriented society, the better it is since the rule-bound society suppresses the emotional being.

Don't Call It Suicide sub-titled "Tragedy in two acts "depicts the tragic predicament of an individual's maladjustment with society. The 'eldest son of Nanda's family commits suicide because of his inability to adjust to a group of people who are "entirely different from the rest of us." Sathé, a major character in the play, inform the audience of the 'alienated' people in a scene of Act I I :

It seems to me that some people are entirely different from the rest of us. I'm not thinking artists. I mean ordinary people. That sounds odd, I know. We treat them in the same way. Those unpleasant and puzzling things in the life which others accept, whether they are ordinary or extraordinary. The particular type I'm talking about is in a class by itself. They have the same good and bad qualities as the source, some essential power that causes non-adjustment to the things they are. It makes some persons in this group feel hopeless, and surprisingly, I've come to the conclusion that we, the rest of us, have something to learn from them(pp.117-1118)

Sathé seems to be reflecting the view of Nissim Ezekiel.

Though' eldest son commits suicide, the members of his family refuse to take cognizance of it. In the play, Nanda's wife never admits that her 'eldest son committed suicide and terms it 'natural .' Mrs. Nanda cautions her husband ;

Don't say suicide every time you mention his death. Say is death, that's all. And why mention I even? We can't do anything about it anyway (p.103).

The eldest son's wife, Meeta, also does not consider her husband's death suicide. In scene ii of Act I, she says:

What can women do whose husbands died at the age of 25 after only two years of marriage? I don't even have a child to love and bring up (p.103).

In a scene I i i

In Act I, Hari does not mention the fact that his eldest brother committed suicide. In instead, he calls it death. He says that he was 22 years old when his "elder brother died ." when Sheila venture to say that her eldest brother committed Suicide, Hari's wife Malati says :

Don't say his suicide; say his death (p.109).

With the possible exceptions of Nanda and Sheila, all the family members take pains to call it natural death. Nisim Ezekiel deliberately does not name the "eldest son" and calls him just "eldest son" to turn him into a 'type' in his usual way. The very title of the play Doesn't Call Suicide suggests society's apathy to the maladjusted. Only those who conform to the community are successful. Those who are "entirely different" are left to their fate without any help from society.

Ezekiel indirectly inducts the society for the tragic fate of the protagonist. The 'eldest son' dreams in vain of a flexible culture where people could "feel free to live his own life according to his own preferences, inclination." Don't Call It Suicide "can be regarded as the playwright's earnest plea to the people of the world at large, to broaden their outlook, cultivate tolerance and imbibe understating and he freedom-loving nature

Don't Call It Suicide portrays two groups of people –reactionary and non-conformist. Mrs. Nanda, Meeta, Malti, Hari comprise the reactionary group. Mr. Nanda and Sheila are from the non-conformist group. Gopal and Sathe are portrayed as characters in transition. Gopal does not like the way of the world. But he compromises with the system. He says:

Yes. I blame myself for putting up with them (p.112).

Nanda says that "it doesn't improve matter" and questions Gopal, "what do we do?" Gopal helplessly answers:

Continue to blame ourselves, I suppose, for putting up with the things we hate (p.112)

Nanda again says that "it doesn't improve matters." Then Gopal says:

It is better than becoming insensitive and indifferent to it, not even judging it as we should but merely shrugging our shoulders and saying to ourselves: how things are. Everybody or almost everybody does it, so there's no escape from it, no prospect of changing it. I know it sounds like some kind of empty hope and faith, but it's better than going over to the other side, behaving as most people do on the other side (pp.112-113).

Sathe, another character in transition, also understands the sensitivities of maladjusted people. But he forcibly adapts himself to the norms of society .on the other hand, Nanda cannot adjust himself to the crazy modern life and commits suicide.

The plays of Nissim Ezekiel portray, in general, the conflict between the individual and society. The personality of the sensitive individual is dwarfed by the hostile and apathetic society. Ezekiel draws our attention to the tragic predicament of the individual in the rigid rule-bound society. In the Marriage poem, Naresh cannot have a good relationship with his mistress, Leela. The protagonist's failure to achieve success in Nalini reveals a woman's plight in a male-dominated society. The Sleepwalkers implicitly suggest the individual's distrust of the existing social system though ironically, it results in blind aping of the west. Song of Deprivation, while highlighting the predicament of lovers in a hostile society, also focuses on a women's lack of the freedom to shape her destiny according to her will. Don't call It suicide presents the problem of maladjustment of an individual in society.

Unlike Karnad's characters who succumb to societal pressures, Ezekiel's characters resist society and register their unhappiness with it, however feebly it may be. Nalini does not succumb to the snares of Raj and Bharat and slaps them on the face. Naresh continues to have an extra-marital relationship with Leela though he could not marry her. HE and SHE of Song Of Deprivation assert themselves by ignoring society. Gopal and Sathe, in Don't call It suicide, at least express their displeasure against the social order. The characters of the Nissim Ezekiel are, however, not rebels, but they are in the transition stage of overthrowing the social taboos.



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