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Socio-Cultural Dynamics and Gender Re-alignments in Nissim
Ezekiel's *Nalini*

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Abstract

The representation of gender- masculine or feminine- is culture, space and time specific and gets effected and metamorphosed by certain signifiers that co-exists with gender constructing process The constructing agency showers praise and applaud to the conforming agent with approving terms as 'dignified' 'acceptable' whereas denounces and deplores those not going by the norms with smearing. Power determines all relations but at the same time it works as stimulus to create resistance to the agency of power. (Foucault, 1978, 95) The effect of power and resistance as co-existential terms is all pervasive and their interplay results in shaping the gender identity. The representation of gender in literary texts, both at private and public spaces, and of late at 'third' or 'shared space' as well, is the reflection of this power-politics involved in projecting gender. The long trajectory of resistance to gender appropriating forces expresses a gradual and perpetual churning of gender alignments, more from the perspective of the marginalized. Nissim Ezekiel in his play dramatic works brings to the fore the operational powers structures that determine the gender construction process and consequently the gender centric relations where important signifiers like body, space, language, socio-cultural dynamics determine the gender identities. The present paper discusses how in Nissim Ezekiel's play *Nalini* the process of gender construction gets affected when the gender boundaries are being re-marked, re-negotiated and re-appropriated with continuous socio-cultural interventions.

Key words: Gender, Body, Space, Patriarchy, Culture.

Introduction

The representation of gender- masculine or feminine- is culture, space and time specific and gets effected and metamorphosed by certain signifiers that co-exists with gender constructing process The constructing agency showers praise and applaud to the conforming agent with approving terms as

'dignified' 'acceptable' whereas denounces and deplores those not going by the norms with smearing. Power determines all relations but at the same time it works as stimulus to create resistance to the agency of power, as Foucault says: 'Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.' (Foucault, 1978, 95) The affect of power and resistance as co-existential terms is all pervasive and their interplay results in shaping the gender identity. Gender is created through socialization of norms and internalization of those social with approval from the society. Since the patriarchy has enjoyed complete control over naming and defining process, creating binaries and hierarchies like masculine/feminine, mind/body, good/bad, white/black, centre/margin, active/passive, reception/rejection, dignified/derogated etc. the projection gender with its multiple markers like body, space, place, gender, colour, ethnicity, dress, costume etc. reflects the stratagems of the centre (man) in subverting the margin (woman). The representation of gender in literary texts, both at private and public spaces, and of late at 'third' or 'shared space' as well, is the reflection of this power-politics involved in projecting gender. The long trajectory of resistance to gender appropriating forces – from small steps with suffragette movement, to Bronte sisters to Woolf to different phases of Feminism, alongwith massive socio-economic, cultural interventions transforming the world into a global world –all this express a gradual and perpetual churning of gender alignments, more from the perspective of the marginalized. The process of gender representation takes into accounts various spatial, temporal factors-fixed and fluid-like socio-cultural norms, sexual identity, ethnicity, body, language, spaces, racial features etc. and the process has been explored and analyzed from multiple aspects: Beauvoir's social construct theory to Butler's performance theory to Roland Barth's 'Death of the Author' (1967) at the expense of the birth of the reader and finally the arrival of digital texts and writings.

The creation of hierarchies and binaries has a design behind it; socio-cultural politics projects one at the centre and the other at the margin, the former controlling the latter, but in the modern world all hierarchies are questioned by those at the periphery. One's sexual identity is fixed, but the gender has attributes which are flexible and erasable because of socio-cultural inscriptions on construction of gender. The issues related to power, desire and control come into play when a male writer writes about feminine attributes by projecting man getting voyeuristic pleasures. Nissim Ezekiel, though not a very prolific in his dramatic accomplishments, assumes an important position among Indian playwrights of English. With his three plays *Nalini*, *Marriage Poem* and *The Sleepwalkers*, he has addressed many questions pertaining to man and his milieu in educated urban class in Indian society. He gives equal credence to his characters on gender lines by juxtaposing man and woman side by side, and removes the façade worn by the shallow, dim witted and disillusioned urbanite people battling with contemporary issues of hollowness, barrenness and inconstancy in human relation. His dramatis personae reflect the operational powers structures that determine the gender construction process and consequently the gender centric relations where important signifiers like body, space, language, socio-cultural codes of the day come into play in defining the gender identities and their corresponding relations between man and woman. In the play *Nalini* the story revolves around three major characters- Bharat, Raj and Nalini, the latter having double and opposite projections as real and imagined - the vulnerable, objectified and submissive Nalini and the enlightened, confident and assertive Nalini. The play exposes the hollowness surrounding the advertizing world and captures the psyche of two male characters toward a woman artist. Ezekiel's own familiarity with the advertizing world enables him to honestly delineate how this glitzy world operates. Bharat is a classic example of modern youth-delinquent, uncertain, shaky, living in illusions who shuns reality. '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) Ezekiel constantly raises the questions with regard to middle class, semi liberal and fake Indians who lack

substance and stature in his plays (*The Sleepwalkers*, *Nalini*) and ridicules the hypocrisy ridden Indian society: : '...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)

Discussion

The politics of representing gender encompasses various factors like body, space, place, speech and language, socio-cultural mores, economics, the power-structures—all having multiple signifiers. Ezekiel gives expression to the unique Indian culture and sensibility and depicts his keen observation of Indians oddities and absurdities in progressive modern India. For Ezekiel, body remains a prime signifier that affects the relations between man and woman. The patriarchy which enjoys a massive control over gender constructing process looks at woman through her body only. A woman has no existence without her body, the more specific the contours of her body and figure the more precisely she stands defined in her relations vis-a-vis man. For young men like Bharat and Raj a an object of desire, to be consumed. For them Nalini has no existence beyond it, her own self, identity or anything, its her that gets credence in societal existence. Bharat's 'looking down at her [Nalini] breasts.' (Ezekiel, 27) Raj's misogynistic remarks about Nalini's figure that "You are 35-24-35," (Ezekiel, 49) sums up the identity of a woman for Indian men, Further, Bharat's admission that 'Men are never saints with women. At least this man is not,' (Ezekiel, 10) underlines the marginalized and vulnerable position of woman in Indian society. Women are also aware of man's vulnerability for a woman's body, turning her site of obsession for man; her body becomes a public entity where others can feast; it belongs to the 'other'- the active, dominant male agency that wants to consume the woman's body. The body of a woman is not only a sexed body; rather it has socio-cultural, historical inscriptions, inscribed by the outside agency. Inscription on body (Female) is a continuous process with an ulterior motive; a woman's body is a testimony to all that had been done with her body by the patriarchy, and consequently reduced to silence, and ironically this silence on stage becomes a tool of resistance. A woman is a walking spectacle; wherever she goes she invites attention on account of her physicality, body, shape, colour, even the costume. In *Nalini*, Bharat's comment about Nalini's body: 'You are 35-24-35,' (TP, 49) confirms how a female body gets attention from men, and they feed their eyes. Nalini of dreams, with her body offers maximum voyeuristic pleasure to man: '...her hair done up in a beehive, her choli short, low-cut and backless, revealing a figure of some splendor. She wears her sari like a tight skirt and walks in with casual elegance.' (Ezekiel, 25) She is an object to be devoured by the male eyes as said by Laura Mulvey in her famous article: '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) The body has dual identity: subjective and objective, the representational and the material, physical. Nalini's body is looked down with two approaches—the conforming glam doll and the assertive, rational Nalini. Speaking about the significance of bodily signifiers, Nicholas Fox explains 'how bodies serve as signifiers, just as a text in a book or a piece of film. They have been attributed meaning, and they can be read by others, and rewritten, they *are* texts, carrying knowledgeability and power.' (Fox, 26) The denial of bodily pleasures to a woman as socio-cultural taboo, laments Cixous, is used as a stratagem to deprive her of identity: 'We've been turned away from our bodies, shamefully taught to ignore them, to strike them with that stupid sexual modesty; we've been made victims of the old fool's game: each one will love the other sex. I'll give you your body and you'll give me mine. But who are the men who give women the body that women blindly yield to them?' (Cixous, 1976, 885) As a woman communicates through her body and questions the established order of gender projection, the creation

of fleshy Nalini tests the psyche not only of the male characters but also the of woman herself in communicating through her body. Forrester, a literary critic writes about male gaze: 'We don't know what women's vision is. What do women's eyes see? How do they carve, invent, decipher the world, I don't know – I know my own vision, the vision of one woman, but the world seen through the eyes of others. I only know what men's eyes see.' (Forrester, 34) The mind/body (matter) hierarchical binary is at work in altering the glamorous Nalini of the showbiz world with the conscious and confident Nalini. Madalina further extends this argument that 'A woman does not live her body as an inert entity. Her everyday embodiment is complexly and continuously constituted as a socially constructed (female) body, a lived body, a constrained and regulated body and as a resistant body.' (Madalina, 111) Emphasizing on how a woman's body is perceived as something different and unique from any other male body, Bowden remarks: 'Women's bodies perceived to be more bodily than men's - and their minds accordingly weaker.' (Bowden, 49)

Indian society which is overwhelmingly patriarchal has identified its own set rules to control the 'other' gender-woman. In *Nalini* Ezekiel gives extensive space to his women—two Nalinis— to capture their reactions, both outward as well as at subconscious level—the enlightened as well as the stereotyped. The complete control of men labeling process leaves no scope for woman to be treated equally, with dignity, identity and recognition. The women who are unorthodox and unconventional in expressing their longings are looked with a smirk by the male dominated society, and are coerced into a set pattern conduct and character; if they refuse to toe line, they are labeled as 'sluts' 'witch' or seductress. Bharat's obsession about the virginity of Nalini arises from deeply ingrained cultural notion of bodily purity: 'You are not a virgin.' (Ezekiel, 50) Nicholas J. Fox categorically says that a woman's body 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: the hypocrite Bharat who values chastity but desires Nalini's body beyond marriage while Naini has no such inhibitions as sex outside or before marriage or losing her virginity:

BHARAT. You're not a virgin. (Pause)

NALINI. Did you want me to be?

BHARAT. No. (Ezekiel, 37)

By having control over defining and naming process, the dominant agency becomes intimidative: 'By defining women by the pure/impure binary, 'men could render them relatively harmless', blunting their male challenge to male privilege'. (Douglas, p.36) The deconstruction of terms like 'pativerta' and 'pati permeshwar' confirms the politics behind the projection of gender in a specific desired way in a patriarchal society. Rekha explains how the patriarchy operates to make 'Woman as conforming entity'—Those who conform are idealized, while those who deviate or resist, personify normative fissures, and tensions or embody ambiguities and thus produce unstable results, are demonized.' (Rekha, 11)

The society has devised plans in the forms of its norms and signifiers for labeling man/woman-good or bad, beautiful or ugly, acceptable or unacceptable. Colour of skin and body are the universally prevalent signifiers of gender, more particularly women, as the world of showbiz, through advertisements affect the psyche of the target people, and the post-colonial India, with its own cultural signifiers of gender like caste, religion, class, also akin to the western signifiers of gender. Butler argues: 'To be a woman is to have become a woman, to compel the body to conform to a historical idea of 'woman', to induce the body to become a cultural sign to materialize oneself in obedience to a historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporal project.' (Butler,

522) In the play, two Nalinis- the real and imagined- are poles apart in their attitudes, their perception of the world around themselves; the former is an extension of the patriarchy and becomes a willing partner to the designs of men to advance her own career. 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. Between the two, Bharat likes the former but respects the latter, and this underlines the inconsistency in Bharat's character. The sagacious Nalini very early in the play understands that both Bharat and Raj shallow men, devoid of substance in thought and action, and wants to use them in launching her career by allowing 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). But the second Nalini who is confident, aware and can see eye to the male world, and can never be taken for a ride. She candidly cuts Bharat to size: "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) Under the design of fashion and cosmetic industries, more particularly among the advanced sections of society, women, and of late men as well, are undergoing bodily changes, with the feeling that their bodies have some abnormality in them. In the world of show-biz a woman is preferred to have a specific type of body-shape, colour, ethnicity along with her status (single/married) Male are working as heroes in Bollywood well past sixty, women in thirties are offered the roles of mother. This cultural regulation of human bodies as normal/acceptable and abnormal/unacceptable bodies emanates from power agency having the backing of patriarchy but at the same time it makes identity fluid, not fixed. The masculine identity demands the projection of feminine in a specific, desired way. Gayatri Spivak explains how the centre-margin interplay of power-games are at work when a '...cultural identity is thrust upon one because the centre wants an identifiable margin, claims for marginality assure validation from the centre' (Spivak, 55) They are conditioned to behave, speak, and conduct in particular at private as well as public places. Anita Singh observes: 'Patriarchal traditions endorsed power hierarchies, main characters and standard social/artistic roles.' (Singh, 7) Women when pushed to the wall try to resist and negotiate through the tough terrain with the kind of arsenal they have at their disposal – body, language, space: 'Listen to a woman speak at a public gathering... She doesn't 'speak', she throws her trembling body forward; she lets go of herself, she flies; all of her passes into her voice, and it's with her body that she virtually supports the 'logic' of her speech. Her flesh speaks true. She lays herself bare. In fact, she physically materializes what she's thinking; she signifies it with her body. she draws her story into history.' (Cixous, 881) Svati Shah says that 'All women (on the street) are subject to, public moral scrutiny which evaluates women along binaries of good/bad, honourable/dishonourable, promiscuous/safe, etc.' (Shah, 234) The target body inscribed and codified with socio-cultural inscriptions turn into a platform of resistance as happened in the case of 'slut walk' and 'chaddi gang', as echoed by Grosz: 'Body is never simply a passive object upon which regimes of power are played out.' (Grosz, 64) Body here becomes a metaphor – and covering this body with various costumes also lead to different interpretations. Recounting the degree of violence against women, Gilbert admits that '...images of sexual violence suggest, women's bodies often function in post-colonial theatre as the spaces on and through which larger territorial or cultural battles are being fought.' (Gilbert, 215)

Space is an important signifier in determining gender, depending upon various processes of gender construction on the basis of spaces – private, public, or third or shared spaces. Man is conceived as an active agent, moving walking, controlling, signifies time whereas woman as a mass of body occupying a space, passive and ready to be controlled and affected. One's sense of identity is based on one's sense of body, and this body belongs to the individual as well as to the public; its movement in spaces is also regulated by gender-constructing forces. The German artist Marianne Wex observes how the gender defining forces affect the body posturing of man and woman in public spaces – women

make themselves smaller, shrinks, don't spread and take less space while men contrary to women, like spreading, covering more space than required. She argues that body language, with unconscious gestures, is the result of sex-based, patriarchal socialization behavioural pattern in daily life. She writes: 'Beginning as children, men are encouraged on all levels to make themselves broad, especially in front of women while the intimidation of women leads them to take up as little space as possible.' (Wex, 1984) Body and space are co-related signifiers affecting the gender projection process. Body, still or stirred requires space. It can shrink as well as expand as per the requirement of time and to convey a meaning with its posturing. The defiling of a woman's modesty with defacement of her body in the public space, on the stage is collapsing of those gendered spaces which are disadvantageous to woman. Woman's body is attributed to be a spatial reality, rendering her passive, an object to be affected, ordered, exercise of authority before an active male agent that wants to cover or control woman as a space. The advertising agency in *Nalini* works in public space, but the male world by exposing her to the public space wants to make inroads into her private space as well. She gets all attention on account of her physicality in spatial terms: 'Nalini enters briskly, pauses for a moment then moves in a fluttering walk into the spotlight. She is *slender and sweet, tall, fair completely modern in style.*' (Ezekiel, 25) But the New Nalini, much to the disappointment of oppressive male gaze and also in contravention to stereotyped projection of gender in media with focus body contours imbued with sexuality, wants to keep her private space for herself only, not to share with lecher like Raj and Bharat. Man treats woman's body as a space for exerting control, a territory for extension of man's dominance. Kathryne Beebe describes 'space' as '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)

Conclusion

Gender identity and its representation is going through a phase of churning, making it more fluid with gradual modification and erasure, more so in fast changing contemporary times where traditionally established boundaries rare collapsing fast, every day offering new conception and possibilities within the masculine feminine discourse. Within the masculine and feminine separately, there are layers and layers of further gendering, or cross gendering. Binaries are becoming obsolete with pluralities and multi-dimensional in every sphere of gender marking. Ezekiel is open to the changing dimension of gender in his dramaturgy. The playwright's projection of unconventional within the stereotypes represents gradual metamorphosing nature of gender, stretching and expanding the patriarchy-controlled- boundaries The characters of Ezekiel are what society or power structures made them; in the post-modern re-readings there are signs of sanity and humanness in their responses. The New Nalini sees through the designs of men like Bharat and Raj, and by slapping the former when he comments on her sexuality, she shows the place to the entire patriarchal forces of fixing gender: '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 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) Towards the end, Bharat realizes his folly in understanding Nalini as a woman, and admits it is the men who are wrong not the women: '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. She's a living insult to me and to you, to all of us.' (Ezekiel, 45). 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. The awakened Nalini challenges the established gender construction norms, rejects traditionally conceived notion of a woman-dependent, subservient and submissive. The patriarchal hegemony is continuously conceding the ground and getting weakened and the world is outwardly look becoming feminine but actually strengthening masculine

signifiers. 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) While speaking about alternate possibilities beyond binaries in the projection of genders, Rekha holds: 'The female subject that emerges outside the conventional straightjacket of binaries is one that is complex, interpolated/interpellated and as such, is the one that may both collide and collude with the masculinist locations.' (Rekha, 205) 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) It is through these processes of confrontation and assimilation between man and woman that gender roles are recreated, redefined and restructured where the patriarchy is becoming more accommodative before the collective, subtle but assertive maneuvering of women – writers, critics and thinkers.

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