

The Theatrical Devices Employed in Ezekiel's Nalini

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Abstract

Nissim Ezekiel is one of the legends in Indian literature. He is well-known as a poet, but he was a playwright of great calibre at the same time. Though Ezekiel will be primarily remembered as a poet, his contribution to the genre of drama is also very noteworthy. One of the plays of Ezekiel-Nalini is considered here for the study. The paper focuses on the effective use of various theatrical devices in the play.

Keywords: Theatrical devices, music, bell, setting, silence

Nalini is a comedy that runs in three Acts. It is Ezekiel's first play. It exposes the hollowness and pretensions of contemporary society by its realistic portrayal of life around us. It "explores the world of advertisement, to many the most glamorous and to others the most shallow of the westernised sections of the population" (De Sousa). The encounter of two successful modern advertising executives with a modest young painter becomes the central incident in the play. The playwright unmasks the vile tricks employed by the deceptive advertising agents and the bold resistance put forward by a genuine artist. Ezekiel's familiarity with the world of advertising first as an art critic of *The Times of India* and later as the manager of 'Shilpi Advertising' helped him shape the play into a powerful satire.

The play has a truly knit structure with a good beginning, a good middle and a good ending. There are only three characters in the play. Yet they are all well-differentiated to meet the needs of the plot. The entire action is woven round one central figure- Nalini. The play moves from reality to fantasy and again to reality. In the first act, Nalini's painting becomes the subject of discussion between Bharat and Raj. In the second Act, Bharat's encounter with two Nalinis - one in fantasy and the other in reality is presented. The third act brings back Bharat and Raj to their own life style. Thus, the play ends where it began. By proceeding from reality to

fantasy and back to reality, the play exposes man's interest "in shadow rather than in substance" (Karnani).

The play proves itself to be theatrically vital. The playwright employs certain audio-visual devices which make the play very powerful on the stage. The scene setting, the voices, the music and the ring of the bell add to the theatrical effect of the play. In Act I, Bharat's attractive small room, neatly furnished with books, modern paintings, excellent furniture, beautiful lighting arrangement and soft classical music is in agreement with the nature of a romantic and a non-conformist gentleman-Bharat. The shift in the mood of the characters is well suggested through minor changes in the setting. In Act II, a large flower vase is put and light is 'spotted down only at the centre' and the rest of the room is 'in virtual darkness'. It is in keeping with the jubilant mood of Bharat. The lighting arrangements make the dream contrivance possible in the play. In Act III, the bowl of flowers is removed and the large abstract painting is replaced by a mere conventional landscape. It suggests the sad aftermath of the crisis faced by Bharat.

The 'Voices' in Act I draw the attention of the audience and even control their minds. Sometimes 'optimistic', sometimes 'pessimistic' and 'idealistic' (pp. 20-21), they represent the hum and buzz of a city life. They may even be the voices of conscience of Bharat and Raj.

Ezekiel employs music to intensify the effect of the play. In Act I, 'soft, 'quiet' and 'classical' music is heard. It rises sometimes, and falls at the other thereby having its gripping effect on the audience. When the dialogue goes on, the music is lowered; and the short silence between the dialogue is filled with a rise in the music. In Act II, jazz is heard. It has snob value attached to it. In Act III, no music is heard at the beginning; but later Bharat switches on the gramophone which pours out the music. It suggests the characters getting back into their world of make-belief.

Ezekiel makes an effective use of the bell. Every scene begins with the ring of a bell, a modern urban gadget. The ring of the bell in the play is associated with the entry of a character on the stage. While Raj and Nalini of Bharat's fantasy make their entry with a ring of the bell, the real Nalini enters only with a 'knock' at the door. In Act III, the ring of the bell brings Nalini of fantasy to Bharat and Raj. They encircle her and bawl out lovely rhythms in mad ecstasy. When she leaves them, they wish for the return of the real Nalini. They order the ring of the bell and it rings; but Nalini never comes back. Again, the bell rings violently and they feel terribly 'upset' and insecure, they want the bell to be rung 'properly, sedately and decorously' (p. 53). Towards the end of the play, it does beyond human control and becomes a 'shattering roar'. The gentle ring of the bell in the beginning and its blasting out beyond human control in the end signify the demolition of egoism and hollowness of the two advertising executives.

All these- the setting, the play of music and the ringing of the bell- provide enough backdrop for "an exposure of hollow, morbid, hypocritical city man" (Rahman). The play, in this way, tries to put a realistic picture of the modern age and modern man. In the delineation of this all, the theatrical devices that Ezekiel used, play a vital role. The effective use of the devices not only enhance the level of the play but also enliven it to a great extent.

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