



A Critical Study of the Urban Imageries in the Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel

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ABSTRACT

Poetry is undoubtedly a powerful medium to express one's thoughts, observations, and even mirrors the complexities of life. Nissim Ezekiel emerges as a pioneer of Indian English poetry, writing in the post-independence era. Ezekiel is admired for the way in which he conveys the rhythms and cadences of city life in his verse. His poetry offers a variety of the urban experiences which allows readers to explore a comprehensive spectrum of the variety and complexity of urban life.

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Introduction

Nissim Ezekiel is widely regarded as a path-breaking Indian poet writing in English, contributing significantly to the Indian poetic tradition. Verse from his many collections reflects the pressures of his environment, particularly those of the city of Bombay. He has published more books than any other Indian poet. He signifies his crucial freedom from the conventional Indian English scene with a difference. He has a varied temperament that is reflected in his poetic diction as well as style. His wry experiences, his intrepid attitudes towards his surroundings, the dreams that he is ruffled with, and his responses to domestic life present him as a poet of contemporary concerns, widely depicted in the poems he contributes. His poems, reflecting contemporary life, provide a peek into the life of urban Indians in the mid-20th century, mirroring the psychological makeup of the city dwellers.

Themes and Motifs

Apart from the themes like alienation, existential search, personal dilemmas, identity crisis and complex thoughts of emotional, aesthetic and philosophical resonances, there are many recurring ideas which form a sample of his concerns. The complex theme of personal alienation and individual and national identity in the context of Indian society fits into a scheme that owes its persistence to qualities in the poet's work which give his voice a depth and authority which goes far beyond personal comment and observation.

Urban imageries have enticed various poets to weave fascinating tapestries capturing the pulsating persona of the burgeoning cities. Endowed with abounding paradox and ambiguity, his urban poetry does not merely unfurl the trajectory of modern civilization but also delineates the mode of human condition in the metropolis through recurring themes and motifs fashioned with an engaging style. Indeed, the city, being the prolific provider of pleasantries and opportunities often becomes an alien place. This place endures the feeling of being a stranger because one does not find his roots in the artificial urban scaffold casting gloom of being alone. Such urban isolation and the condition of aloneness are painted in the tapestries of an alien place.

The Urban Landscape

An exploration into the urban imageries in Nissim Ezekiel's poetry affirms the poet's multifaceted engagement with his urban experience in his native city, Bombay. It represents a gradual development of his preferred metaphors and recurrent images through a number of shifts and transitions. It demonstrates his ability to capture the mood and rhythms of cityscapes and street scenes with penetrating insight into the lives of ordinary urbanites. Thus the urban background of his poetry is rendered in a manner that bears out the argument that Ezekiel may rightly be called a poet of the city.

The city, for Ezekiel, is a space of complex and multiple experience; the urban landscape is depicted in all its chaos, colour, vibrancy and hostility. Unlike his response to the country, where he remains thoroughly ambivalent—the poetry vacillating between deep despair and a certain resigned acceptance—Ezekiel's portrayal of the city is marked by a greater sense of engagement, often affection, and a searing social consciousness aware of the glaring inequalities and injustices that are part of urban existence. Complex urban experience with all its vibrancy and also anxiety is multi-dimensionally reflected in the poetry. On the one hand, the modernity and the myth of progress as embodied, say, in the crushing view of the new skyscrapers emerging in the city. On the other hand, there are mingling of races, the street scenes, the bazaars and markets teeming with life and commerce, the festive air of the



religious processions, etc. All these image patterns delineate a space where disparate modes of existence come into contact and often clash providing for a unique display of cultural hybridization.

Cityscapes and Skyscrapers

Nissim Ezekiel visualizes skyscrapers in his urban poems as emblems of material and social aspirations of the middle-class striving to rise above its surrounding squalor. Skyscrapers stand as the supreme hallmark of aspiration. Built tall from a receding base, their growing height symbolizes the hopes elicited by their currently soaring altitudes. The residents of the poet's Bombay probably thought most of all about progress in economic, technological, and urban dynamism terms, while also contemplating their own more personal and often interrelated ambitions. Starting to appear in other South Asian cities in the late 1940s and 1950s, skyscrapers allowed for an enormous grandeur. The view from above determines a largely powerful perspective of the city, while to the unfamiliar the city appears internally confused and paranoia-inducing.

Street Scenes and Marketplaces

The street setting, which serves as a city's communal gathering space, is very much alive in the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel. Markets, though not always depicted as focal points, occasionally shape the dynamics in his poetry. These urban spaces reflect 20th-century and contemporary Bombay's bustling activity, marked by commercial trade, varied social encounters, and spaces of solitude. Street scenes illustrate a microcosm of urbanity, emphasizing interaction and cohabitation between the city's diverse social classes and cultures. The often-overlooked sensory experiences of the city streets emphasize the bustling activity, fatigued by the solitude in the urban stroller's perpetual movement

The marketplace is a similarly vibrant and bustling cityscape, sociably energetic with a linear and picturesque dynamic, reminiscent of the urban street. Even though gossips at the "weekly market" direct trade rivalry or failed relationships, the image exemplifies a space of convergence. Such a setting becomes integral to life's tapestry in portraying the choreographed dynamics of commerce and relationships, imbued with symbolic significance. With that, an exploration of bazaars and marketplaces unravels further into urban imageries in Ezekiel's poetry. The marketplace (and more generally, the street) embodies an extraordinary range of emotions, projected dynamically.

Alienation and Isolation



Urban life is a juxtaposition of various imageries, intermingling with the moral squalor, material beauty, and picturesque squalor. It has created a profound impact on the modern psyche of individuals leading to a deeper sense of alienation and isolation. It is this psychological strain in response to the urban setting, which has found a frequent representation in the individual capacity to internalize, articulate and pour into words. The chaos of urban society has transformed itself into one of the most important subjects for rendering the feeling of isolation and alienation on the part of the poet. The overwhelming advent of industrialisation has attributed to the challenges residing within the precincts of more or less profound alienation. Right from the onset of social view, the kind of rational gush of urban society opining from all corners have created an irreparable damage to the psychological tolerance of the modern psyche.

Modernization and Tradition

Urban experiences seen in conjunction with a rapidly industrializing society with the support of its civic structures are bound to throw up tensions that are evident as the city narratives of Nissim Ezekiel. Ezekiel has chosen to dispute with ciphers of the urban by collating particular details about city life. Nissim Ezekiel was a modern poet not only in his choice of subject-matter and diction, but also in his poetic ideology. Through these two apparent dichotomies some very engaging and intricate themes radiate, and urbanism is one of them. Modernization today is posing a critical challenge to tradition with swift and widespread alienation. The poet is curious about the anatomy of his life-world, the city, with its new-born degree of modernity, which other eyes hardly discern, and likes to put aside some friction in the process of doing so.

Imagery and Symbolism in Ezekiel's Urban Poetry

The poetry of Ezekiel often captures partly puzzled, partly yearning, and partly angry people facing an alien society. The imagery conveys the sense of confusion faced by the spectator who is also involved in his times. Image of subways, funerals, hookers, playgrounds, railway platforms where people defecate: all are flat, absurd, and vaguely menacing, disquieting.

The most powerful and striking aspect of the imagery in the poems of Nissim Ezekiel is its use of metaphors and similes. The images are vivid and create feeling not only because of the compositional skill, but also because they draw on only a few, but specific and significant traits. Therefore, the images and symbols in his poems seem to be moving away from Nissim Ezekiel towards a larger social canvas



dealing with the problems of urban society. In the poem “Urban” in *The Unfinished Man* he describes the predicament of modern man:

The hills are always far away,
He knows the broken roads, and moves
In circles trickled within his head,
Before he wakes and has his say,
The river which he claims he loves
Is dry, and all the winds lie dead,
The city like a passion burns.
He dreams of morning, walks, alone,
And floating on a wave of sand,
But still his mind its traffic turns
Away from beach and tree and stone
To kindred clamour close at hand.

Though urban imageries are always present in his works, it becomes significant that the imageries are presented in their broader perspective.

Symbolism of Urban Elements

In contemporary urban life, various urban imageries, like buildings, modes of transport, educational and professional institutions in the city space, occupy one’s daily life, contributing to the process of estrangement and re-establishment. Urban transport is not only important for reaching the destination from its location, but it is also important for the mobility of city spaces, and it is the link between the individual city locations and the collective city spaces. The conveyance mode is an important urban token symbol.

While cultural context has great bearing on a writer’s thematic choice and stylistic performance, the poet being an individual interpreter of his historical moment transcends geographical boundaries. Similarities emerge more readily when poems with analogous concerns are compared. Ezekiel is concerned with the anonymity, regimentation and routineness of urban life. To him, modern city is a



brutal living machine where raw humanity is wasted. His setting is Bombay—the western tropical metropolis of India emerging as the country’s commercial and industrial capital. This city has been built out of imperialistic commercial interest. The identity of the poet is inextricably woven with the angst of India itself—a country attempting to efface the ever-persistent pattern of urban inequalities by setting up a great society, which is maimed by the sudden capitalistic wolf after independence. Nissim Ezekiel’s extensive exploration of India’s urban spaces, particularly Mumbai, is unique. He lived in the city for a significant part of his life, which shaped his perception and experience of urban life there. In the poem “A Morning Walk” he describes the city of Bombay as hell:

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,
And child-like masses, many tongued,
Whose wages are in words and crumbs.

Literary critics have recognized this aspect of his oeuvre; some have praised it strongly while others have been critical.

Language and Style in Ezekiel's Poetry

His poetry speaks of the complex identity crisis he confronted as a Jew writing in a postcolonial country. The language he uses is marked by his distinctive choice; the colloquial speech and Indian English expressions place the poems firmly in a specific urban and middle-class context, yet it is clearly English. Similarly, his style has clear preferences treating his themes with direct honesty and often jocularly, but they also take root in urban realities and retain debts to Western lyric forms. This apparent dichotomy is explained by a close reading of the works, which in turn serves to present a detailed study of how a similar urban voice, grounded in a similar cityscape, is deployed in different conditions to voice variant responses. A significant aspect of his achievements as a poet is that he was able to express apparently simple thoughts and emotions in a simple, straightforward language that did not thereby necessarily limit the depth of meaning or the complex understanding of emotion conveyed. Simplicity resonates in the directness of the voice, which avoids overly rhetorical flourishes.



Conclusion

The urban landscape and setting have featured prominently in the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel. The sense of urbanism is two-fold in Ezekiel's poetry. From an angle, urban landscapes provide the framework for poetic creation. Though Nissim Ezekiel contributes significantly to the development of a modern Indian English literary tradition, his poetry is yet to receive sustained attention. The analysis undertaken here of urban places in Ezekiel's writings may demonstrate that his evocations of city life deserve a prominent place within the burgeoning field of urban literary discourse. The sense of identity that is conjured within the individual spaces of urban locations is a complex phenomenon.

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