

Nissim Ezekiel's Portrayal of City and Urban Life

Monirul Islam Mollah

Research Scholar

Mahatma Gandhi University, Meghalaya

Introduction:

Nissim Ezekiel, born in 1924, is a prominent modern Indian English poet. His poetry presents the condition of man in the Post-World War II situation. He has made a substantial contribution to poetry by having written poems depicting various aspects of Indian social reality, graphically and realistically. He was awarded with the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award and the Padma Shree in 1983 and 1988 respectively. He is generally to be the first new poet in Indian English Literature to express a modern Indian sensibility in a modern idiom and his first book 'A Time to Change' (1952) is said to be a landmark in the history of Indian English poetry. It also analyses various critical opinions in relation to Ezekiel's poetry.

Objectives:

Ezekiel's poetry reflects his observation, examines and expresses the condition of the Indian. He always tries to renew himself as a poet and experiment with poetry. He does not glorify the Indian custom and Culture but instead he sees it as it is. He reveals a consistent commitment to the craft, authenticity of articulation and sincerity of purpose. He gave an urban touch to poetry. He is aware of Indian social reality.

Materials and Methodology:

A close reading of the text itself, discourse analysis, making connections within the work, asking why and how the different parts of the texts are connected to society and social issues. He uses various techniques in his poetry, including symbolism, free verse, irony, symmetry, extrinsic and intrinsic approaches which focuses on the elements of the literature in itself such as using metaphors, similes and images. His poetry conveyed the quality of the heart through undertones,

irony and self-mockery. It aims to dissect his poems into smaller unit in order to take an authentic and comprehensive view of life and human issues in his poetry.

Discussion:

This paper is an attempt to focus on the portrayal of city and urban life in Nissim Ezekiel's poetry. Most of the Indian poets in English have tried to mirror the picture of day-to-day reality, moral and spiritual upheaval corroding the vitals of rich tradition and culture, a sense of alienation, frustration and desolation present in the society. Iyengar rightly remarks: "A new generation comes up with a striking individuality of its own, a sharpness in its features, an angularity in its gestures, a tone of defiance (or at least non-conformity) in its speech, a gleam of hope in its eyes, - a new ardour perhaps, and even new rhythms and nuances and acerbities of speech."¹

On the one hand, the contemporary Indian English poets are richly rooted in Indian myths and traditions and on the other, they are also influenced by the western forms and structures mainly propounded and structured by Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot and T.E. Hulme. The psychology of Freud-Jung-Bergson, the drama of Brecht-Beckett-Pinter and the threats and challenges of modern science have also influenced modern Indian poetry.

Nissim Ezekiel is one of the pioneers of modern Indian English poetry. Gifted with a keen, analytical mind, he made poetry central to life. He brought a calm, dispassionate, intellectual and ethical note to Indian English poetry. The city of Bombay forms the core of much of his poetry. '**Island**', a beautiful lyric, deals with his favourite urban theme, the city of Bombay with all its squalor and dirt, noise and violence, poverty and human misery. It becomes a part of the poet's consciousness and he identifies and acclimatizes himself to its dark and dreary spectacle. He cannot live without it:

"I cannot leave the island

I was born here and belong."

Besides '**Island**', it forms the theme of '**In India**', '**Background, Casually**', '**At the Hotel**', '**The Truth About the Floods**' and many other poems. Linda Hess observes: "He is a poet of the city, Bombay; a poet of the body; and an endless explorer of the labyrinths of the mind, the devious delving and twisting of the ego, and the ceaseless attempt of man and poet to define himself and to find through all 'the myth and maze' a way of honesty and love."

Bombay, with its paradoxical growth and contrasts, reflects the uneven and paradoxical growth of the poet's mind. He has completely identified himself with it and has to find his way in it. Ezekiel's identification with Bombay and description of it is highly symbolic, lucid and succinct.

"Unsuitable for song as well as sense

the island flowers into slums

and skyscrapers, reflecting

Precisely the growth of my mind

I am here to find my way in it."

He feels utter loneliness and isolation despite his complete identification and assimilation with the city of Bombay. He cries for help in the wilderness of isolation but nobody helps him. So he remains silent and keeps his own counsel. The paradoxical character of Bombay has passed into the poet's consciousness, so he hears:

".....distorted echoes

of my own ambiguous voice

and of dragons claiming to be human."

The poet deftly employs the device of paradox and contrast to describe the city of Bombay. The poem begins seriously enough. The image of the island is worked out at many levels; the city; the poetic self, and may be the subcontinent itself. In the opening stanza the city of Bombay is described through images as an island of "slums and skyscrapers." The glaring contrast between the poverty and dirt, symbolized through "slums" and the radiance of riches, symbolized through "skyscrapers", imparts a sense of authenticity to the poem. The city has "bright and tempting breezes" which separate "past from future". The air becomes calm and the poet sleeps "the sleep of ignorance". The city dweller, unable to escape to his "Lake Isle of Innisfree", accepts the paradox:

"Even now a host of miracles

hurries me to daily business,

minding the ways of the island

as a good native should,

taking calm and clamour in my stride."

Ezekiel has a strong feeling of belonging, of finding his identity in Bombay where he was born and brought up. He cannot do without Bombay. He accepts the urban reality with a spirit of resignation and detachment towards "The kindred clamour close at hand". He no longer feels romantically melancholic about his alienation. He takes "calm and clamour" in his stride. He loves the city of Bombay, despite its ugliness and wickedness and the neurosis and maladjustment that it causes.

As an urban poet, Ezekiel has successfully translated Bombay's bogus hurly-burly into poetry. He creates the picture of a man who wants to run away from the city's turmoil but does not know how he should do it. The poem '**Urban**' is a vivid record of the tension the poet feels in the city and his harmonization with his environment. The cityscape is depicted very vividly and picturesquely in precise and lucid style:

"The hills are always far away.

He knows the broken roads, and moves

In circles tracked 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 style is highly suggestive. "Broken roads" indicate the poor condition of the infrastructure. "Circles tracked within his head" is expressive of the poet-narrator's confused state of mind. "Dry rivers" and "dead winds" indicate atmospheric pollution. Ezekiel is thoroughly acquainted with the local topography of Bombay. He is also aware of the environmental pollution – polluted river and polluted air. He expresses the unhappy experiences he personally has in Bombay. He voices the drabness and misery in the widest commonality spread through vivid, apt and suggestive symbols and images. He bewails how he lost contact with nature in Bombay:

"At dawn he never sees the skies

Which, silently, are born again.

Nor feels the shadows of the might

Recline their fingers on his eyes.

He welcomes neither sun nor rain.

His landscape has no depth or height."

The poet has completely identified himself with the ethos of the city of Bombay and he cannot live without it. The noisy traffic haunts him wherever he goes. He conjures up images of the city:

"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."

'**A Morning Walk**' is even more eloquent and expressive.

The title of '**The Unfinished Man**' comes from W.B. Yeats's famous poem '**A Dialogue of Self and Soul**', and the stanza from which the title-phrase is taken is given as the epigraph for the book. Some of the best poems on the city life and urban theme are collected in this volume. In depicting the ugliness, sordidness, loneliness, inhumanity and frustration of urban life Ezekiel is unrivalled. The city of Bombay is a symbol of urban life. The poems demonstrate how Ezekiel's style cultivates greater epigrammatic force. Proverbial and pithy expressions such as "The city like a passion burns", 'Home is where we have to earn our grace', "The marsh where things are what they seem", "Barbaric city sick with slums", etc. show Ezekiel's flawless command over the language. He cultivates objectivity, impersonality and detachment. He skillfully universalizes the personal. To achieve impersonality he uses certain devices - the use of a person and the use of the third person to describe that person is one of them. This device has been effectively used in '**Urban**' and '**A Morning Walk**'. '**In India**' is one of the best poems on city life. It gives us a graphic description of the Indian milieu, its tradition and culture, its squalor and sordidness, its dirt and misery, its exploitation and corruption, and its tragic East-West tensions

through vivid and evocative imagery. Ezekiel suggests a synthesis of cultural polarities, which can enable a culturally alienated person ward off the haunting feeling of alienation and help him to find out his real identity. India, for him, is not merely the crowds of the noisy city but the innocent, peace-loving masses. In 'City Song' he finds positive identification with the city. Having climbed to a friend's terrace, he looks down at the view:

" I want to return

As soon as I can

To be of this city

To feel its hot breath

I have to belong....."

This feeling of belonging, of "setting in" after a long wandering reveals the poet's sense of complete identification with the place of his birth. 'Urban' is candid statement of the disillusionment and bewilderment of the city-dwellers. The city is the central image around which are woven associate images of "broken roads", "the dry river", "dead wind", "wave of sand", "traffic" etc. Adil Jussawala aptly remarks: "the city becomes a hell and it is one of Ezekiel's achievements that without being quaintly lurid or straining for exotic effects, he represents it as the hopeless Indian hell it is."

It is quite clear that Ezekiel is a critic and censor of the city life as he sees it, and not a champion or even an apologist of it. He has exposed to ridicule the ugly spots of the city and the deficiencies, failings and shortcoming of city life. He finds Bombay to be a sick and ailing city. And that is why he calls it a "barbaric city", full of slums, deprived of seasons and cursed with a million purgatorial lanes. The people search for comfort, solace and peace of mind in the city but they fail to achieve the same. In fact, they feel lost in the city to which they belong and in which the poet himself dwells as "an active fool". In the city the fog is thick, and the men get lost. This metaphorically refers to the ignorance of the people and their lack of direction. These people have been described as men of straw, having no feeling or sensibility.

The people of Ezekiel's city lead, sterile, monotonous and dull lives. According to Ezekiel, in the city a man fails to establish a lasting relationship with any woman; and so there is a general feeling of frustration and discontent among the men. In the poem

'To a Certain Lady', a man's encounter with a woman proves to be a disappointing exercise in sex. He describes the sexual act in this case as a crude acceptance of the mutual physical need, referring to it as a tasteless encounter in the dark, a kind of companionship with, neither love nor hate. In another poem "Quarrel", a man goes in search of a woman in order to establish an emotional bond with her, but his efforts prove futile. He talks to her during the night but his talk resembles a troubled dream of many words, unaccompanied by a single kiss. Ezekiel's own relationship with the city may be termed as a love-hate relationship. He hates, the many unpleasant and disgusting aspects of city life in India and yet he feels attracted to the city life because of his feeling that by making the people aware of the miserable conditions in which they live, he may be able to bring about some improvement. In another poem entitled 'Urban'. Ezekiel portrays the urban sensibility and a city-dweller's reaction to Nature. The city dweller sees no ups and downs in the landscape before him. He neither sees the morning sky nor feels the darkness of night descending upon him. His world of dreams and the world of stark realities stand apart; and his sense of mystery or novelty is swamped by the urban environment.

Thus, the metropolitan city of Bombay figures most prominently in Ezekiel's poetry and he may be described essentially as a poet of the city. Harish Raizada rightly points out that no modern Indian English poet has given a more comprehensive picture of the various facets of metropolitan life than Ezekiel has done. It is quite appropriate to call him an urban poet as he acknowledges the city and the cityscape as his background.

References:

1. Iyengar, K.R.S. : *"Indian Writing in English"*, Sterling Publisher, New Delhi, 1992, p. 641.
2. 'Naipaul's India and Mine', *Collected Prose Ed.* Adil Jussawala, O.U.P., Delhi, 1972, p. 99.
3. Gieve Patel (ed.) *Nissim Ezekiel, Collected Poems (1952-1988)*, (Delhi: O.U.P., 1989).
4. Raizada, Harish, *'Nissim Ezekiel, Poet of Human Balance'*, Vimal Prakashan, 1992.
