

## **Rattle and Bustle of Urban Life in the Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel, R. Parthasarathy and R.K. Singh**

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### **Introduction:**

Urban life has become an integral part of modern poetics. The city squalor, crowds and decay constantly figure in modern and postmodern poetry, whether Western or Indian. Squalor, dirtiness, seediness, poverty, exploitation and all other manifestations of urbanization are described with horrid reality by a number of modern and postmodern Indian English poets. In contemporary Indian English poetry, there is also a growing attack on humdrum existence on urban life., Nissim Ezekiel is one of the most notable post-independence Indian English writers in verse. Ezekiel attracts readers from other countries also as his poetry gives them the flavour that is India, the real India. He has added a new dimension to the treatment of urban life. The dehumanizing influence of urbanization on individuality is described with utmost clarity in Ezekiel's poetry. R. Parthasarathy, one of the major poets of Indian English literature and R.K. Singh, a notable postmodern Indian English poet describe graphically the urban cape with Ezekielean poignancy of expression. They also present a comprehensive picture of urban life in its different manifestations.

### **Objective:**

This paper takes up a few key ideas and words from the poetry of three famous Indian English poets Nissim Ezekiel, R. Parthasarathy and R. K. Singh in its attempt to establish that these poets have added a new dimension to the treatment of urban life in their poetry. The paper also makes an attempt to show how these three significant poets with the help of irony and satire expose the evils of urban life as well as society.

### **Methodology:**

The paper is based on content analysis. For constituting of the paper, primary as well as secondary sources are used. The primary sources include some original selected works of the poets taken for study. The secondary sources include reference books and other related articles.

### **Findings and Discussions:**

The urban theme dominates Ezekiel's poetry and this theme runs through all the anthologies published by the poet. Various images of 'city' which have become an integral part of modern poetry come out well in Ezekiel's volumes of early poetry such as *The Unfinished Man* and *The Exact Name*.

Nissim Ezekiel is a poet of the city, Bombay, which symbolizes modern urban life with all its complexity. In his poem "Island", the poet identifies himself with the city, Bombay, where he has spent the major span of his life. The city Bombay becomes a part of his consciousness and he has to acclimatize himself to its dark and dreary spectacle:

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.  
Sometimes I cry for help  
but mostly keep my own counsel.  
I hear distorted echoes  
of my own ambiguous voice  
and of dragons claiming to be human.  
Bright and tempting breezes  
flow across the island,  
separating past from future;  
then the air is still again  
as I sleep the sleep of ignorance.  
How delight the soul with absolute  
sense of salvation, how  
hold to a single willed direction?  
I cannot leave the island,  
I was born here and belong.

This is a definition of his attitude to the city. The first two stanzas describe Bombay paradoxically which also reflect the growth of the poet's mind. "My own ambiguous voice" suggests a confessional note, a voice both of resentment and reconciliation. The "bright and tempting breezes" deepens the note of paradox. The breezes symbolize the feeling of sweet breezes in the island of the poet's memory which separate the beautiful past with the ugly present. The poet has cultivated a feeling of attachment and identifies himself with the environment. The single image of the flower defines the poet's attitudes: gentle, delicate and lovable. It reflects not only the growth of the poet's mind but the growth of the phenomenon of the city itself. Both slums and skyscrapers are growths towards spiritual decay: slums because of poverty and skyscrapers because of hypocrisy. Party craze is a legitimate symptom of this spiritual decay. It is a sham and empty existence:

Ethereal beauties, may you always be  
Dedicate to love and reckless shopping,  
Your midriffs moist and your thighs unruly,  
Breasts beneath the fabric slyly plopping.  
("At the Party")

Ezekiel's poetry has acquired an unmistakable Indian ethos and local colour. Wading through Bombay is a mortifying experience for the poet in "A Morning Walk" where he exposes the poverty of the millions enveloped in the glittering façade of capitalistic sophistication. There is a profound sense of compassion, understanding, acceptance and sympathy for the city. The poet has seen and known this city in all its aspects:

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.

The city is both "cold and dim". It suggests lack of the warmth of human sympathy and ignorance respectively. There is a quick sympathy and human concern in what he writes. The tone is not one of denigration or denunciation; it is rather, one understanding and forgiveness. Ezekiel writes:

Always, in the sun's eye,  
Here among the beggars,  
Hawkers, pavement sleepers,  
Hutment dwellers, slums,  
Dead souls of men and gods,  
Burnt-out mothers, frightened  
Virgins, wasted child  
And tortured animal,  
All in noisy silence  
Suffering the place and time,  
I ride my elephant of thought,  
A Ce/zanne slung around my neck.  
(*"In India"*)

The poet is not dealing with the external reality of this life. He delves into the inner reality. "In India" has a subtle intention to debunk urban sophistication. There is no warmth of love, human relationship and the social concern in urban life. He reveals the pathos, tension and in human, barbaric ways of urban existence. He feels the pinch but he cannot leave the Indian scene because he has explored, though sometimes with feelings of remorse and bitterness and tension, his self in it. He is an inseparable part of the scene of hypocrisy. Yet with all its faults he loves it still. He has achieved complete identification with it. This sense of belonging and acceptance is evident in "City Song". The view of the city from the terrace of a skyscraper looks like this:

As I sway in the breeze,  
The city sways below  
Suddenly I learn  
What I always knew:  
I don't wish to go any higher.  
I want to return  
As soon as I can,  
To be of this city,  
I feel its hot breath,  
I have to belong.

Bombay, the symbol of any modern city, is the theme in a large number of Ezekiel's poems. The dehumanizing influence of the city on human individuality is described in "Urban". The poem is a vivid recordation of the tension the poet feels in the city and his intimate relationship with his environment:

At dawn he never sees the skies  
Which, silently are born again.  
Nor feels the shadows of the night  
Recline their fingers on his eyes.  
He welcomes neither sun nor rain.  
His landscape has no depth or height.  
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.

Here, Ezekiel describes the urban sensibility and a city dweller's reaction to nature. The city-dweller neither sees the morning sky nor feels the darkness of night descending upon him. He welcomes neither sun nor the rains; and he sees no ups and downs in the landscape before him. He dreams of morning walks; but in his mind is the traffic away from the beach and tree and stone. His world of dreams and the world of stark realities stand apart; his sense of mystery or novelty is swamped by the urban environment. The more he stares, the less he sees among the individual trees.

The people of Ezekiel's urban life lead sterile, dull, monotonous lives. In the poem "Occasion", Ezekiel describes the routine of a South Indian, a middle-aged, balding man. This man has to wait for half an hour in a queue to catch a bus; then he has to spend fifteen minutes in the bus; then he has to travel by a train for forty minutes, and finally he has to walk a long distance from the railway station to the slum in which he lives. In the poem "Hangover", Ezekiel depicts the people of both upper and the lower middle classes, including the ordinary people such as typists, drunkards, and harlots. He speaks here of a non-drinker drinking, a non-smoker smoking, the red-coated writers of Harbour Bar, and the dancing girl in the red-light district. In urban life, according to Ezekiel, a man fails to establish a lasting relationship with any women; and so there is a general feeling of frustration and of discontent among men. In the poem entitled "Quarrel", a man goes in search of a woman in order to establish an emotional bond with her, but his efforts proved futile. He talks to her during the night but his talk resembles a troubled dream of many words.

Ezekiel's own relationship with the urban life may be described as a love-hate relationship. He hates many unpleasant and disgusting aspects of city life in India and yet he feels attracted by the urban life because of his feeling that by making people aware of the miserable conditions in which they live he may be able to bring about some improvement. And his desire to improve the conditions of life shows his Indianness or his commitment to his country.

Urban life as well as the city, an integral part of modern poetics, is also an important image in R. Parthasarathy's poetry. It stands for an impersonal world of non-relationship. The poet finds the European city 'inhospitable' and also on return the Indian cities like Bombay, Calcutta and Madras are equally 'alien' to him. He feels like an 'alien insider' and his Eliotesque confession is significant in this regard:

Like a hand at rest, the pelagic city  
is immobile. Between us there is no commerce  
(Rough Passage)

The poet says that between Bombay and him there is no commerce. Since 'commerce' is the main concern of Bombay, lack of it suggests total alienation.

The city life continues to offer boredom to Parthasarathy. What it offers is only dust and noise:  
The streets are noisy, and trees  
on Malabar Hill blind with dust.

Spring had gone unnoticed  
Except for the fountains of colour in the park.  
(Rough Passage)

Streets become an embracing force in the fourth poem:

...I return  
to the city I had quarrelled with,  
a euphoric archipelago,  
to the hard embrace of its streets,  
its traffic of regulated  
affections, uneventful but welcome.  
(Rough Passage)

The city reeling under the heavy load of smoke is the topic of discussion in another poem also. There is scorching heat around and even the bird's struggle:

...pressing thin feathers against the glass of air.  
(Rough Passage)

In his own city, the poet discovers to his amazement that it is full of din and dust, of smoke and crowd, and his of it becomes graphic and pointed:

The city reels under the heavy load  
of smoke. Its rickety legs break  
wind, pneumatically, of course  
in the press of traffic.  
(Rough Passage)

Cities like Calcutta, Goa and Madras are repulsive in their overpopulated, over industrialized, polluted conditions. The incongruity of Westernization imposed in an undisputed Eastern milieu is effectively brought out, for even:

The sun burns to cigarette ash  
Clouds hiccough, burp  
from too much fume....  
and street unwind like cobras  
from a basket. A cow stands  
in the middle coming the traffic.  
(Rough Passage)

Recurring metaphor of the cigarette and clouding vision signifies that errors of perceptions are self-made. The streets of the city "unwind like cobras from a basket". The oppressive air of the city that affects birds and men alike. The language of the cities, no better than ghettos, is a noise that adds to the pollution.

R. K. Singh is a poet, critic and editor of eminence. Singh is an urban poet. His descriptions of urbanscape have Ezekielean poignancy, Squalor, dirt, poverty, exploitation and all other manifestations of urbanization are described with horrid reality:

Your vacant eyes  
reveal this city:  
dim, absent-minded, humid  
orchestering-bronchial noises  
by nights quakes in the face

swash my deep peace  
in cells naked gods mudge  
borrowed girls with wealth  
uncrease their seeds  
for hurried happiness  
boats toss about on  
prostituting men and women.  
(My Silence)

Singh describes graphically the urbanscape of Varanasi where he was born, educated and spent a major span of his life, and of Dhanbad, where he serves. Varanasi, the holy city, has become a sink of depravity and religious hypocrisy. The juxtaposition of opposites makes the satire biting and pungent:

Banaras  
seems holier at night  
mating dogs and bitches  
Join pundits  
in the name of religion.  
(My Silence)

The confluence of Yamuna and Ganga has no sanctity for the poet. It is

A homosexual union  
charming but sterile  
my friend knows well  
the road to heaven does not go  
through smoky waters.  
(My Silence)

The landscape of Dhanbad, sterile, uncreative, smoky and squalid, is described with utmost clarity and precision. The Dhanbad landscape hides death and destructiveness in its womb:

Swelled by humanity  
the mountain is a green cemetery  
hiding men and ages  
and-  
the poet hears  
death echoing in tunnels  
dark or grey, black or green  
itching like a whore.  
(My Silence)

The whole image suggests both uncreativity and corruption. The poet says that the modern urban life is persistently choking man. The modern metros do not provide solace and happiness but kill man with noise and pollution. It is the insidious and unholy deeds that keep man occupied and he cares little for the good and nice things of life. Even rouged faces of working girls show hidden frustration and nobody is really in a position to run away from the miseries of meaningless and futile search for identity. It seems that the poet who impersonates himself as a protagonist of modern man finally decides to -

Swallow pills to live in a safer tomb. (Music Must Sound)

**Conclusion:**

Thus, it may be concluded that Ezekiel, Parthasarathy and R.K. Singh have added a new dimension to the treatment of the urban theme. Ezekiel is an urban poet, a poet of the city, a poet of the body and a poet of the 'self', who tries to come to terms with himself as well as with his environment. K. R. S. Iyengar says, "The recurring note in Ezekiel's recent poems is the hurt that urban civilization inflicts on modern man, dehumanizing him, and subjecting his verities to pollution and devaluation". Nissim Ezekiel is a critic and a censor of the urban life as he sees it, not a champion or a sponsor or even an apologist of it. In poem after poem, he has exposed to ridicule the ugly spots of the city and the failings, shortcomings, and deficiencies of urban life. R. Parthasarathy and R.K. Singh also give a vivid picture of the various facets of urban life. Being disgusted with the rattle and bustle of urbanization, they graphically describe urbanscape and present in several of their poems various manifestations of modern urban life. These significant poets of Indian literature in English with the help of irony and mild satire expose the evils of urban life as well as society with utmost clarity and precision.

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