



# LITERARY QUEST

An International, Peer-Reviewed, Open Access, Monthly, Online Journal of English Language and Literature

## Indian Habitation as Portrayed in Nissim Ezekiel's Poems

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### Abstract

The experiences Nissim Ezekiel encountered in his career and the impressions he formed of places and persons got branded on his memory and he loses no second to delve deep into the depths of his mind, a receptacle of these innumerable experiences and impressions and that, at a touch of his pen, get themselves transformed into literary artefacts. This paper justifies itself by a discussion of how Ezekiel's Indian dilemma is symbolized by the city of Bombay and the Indian habitation.

### Keywords

Indian Habitation; Nissim Ezekiel; Poems.



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Bombay is the bitter native city where Ezekiel was born and brought up and where he lived till his death. He was born in Bombay in a Bene- Israel family and spent most of his life in highly westernized circles of the cosmopolitan city. He confesses that he cannot identify himself with India's comprehensive past with its culture and tradition. Many of his poems spring from his immediate environment. As remarked by Chetan Karnani: "Ezekiel's poetry derives all its sustenance from his immediate environment though it is written within the broader framework of the tradition of English poetry" (56).

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In the poem titled "Background, Casually" the opening line "A poet-rascal-clown was born" justifies what follows in the poem. The very atmosphere in which Ezekiel has had his upbringing has contributed to a child getting scared because of the hostile environment in which he has been placed in the school. He finds himself having been among Christians who called him a killer of Jesus Christ and among Muslims who frightened him always with their muscular strength. He also grew in terror of the strong "but undernourished Hindu lads"(179). The result was he could not eat or sleep properly or even play games like flying a kite or spinning a top.

A poet-rascal-clown was born,  
 The frightened child who would not eat  
 Or sleep, a boy of meager bone.  
 He never learnt to fly a kite,  
 His borrowed top refused to spin.

.....

A mugging Jew among the wolves.  
 They told me I had killed the Christ,

.....

A Muslim sportsman boxed my ears.  
 I grew in terror of the strong  
 But undernourished Hindu lads, ("Background, Casually,"

*NECP 179)*

Ezekiel claims to have made his commitment to the country of his birth and to the city of Bombay, the home of his choice. The climate sears his eyes but he has become part of it. His foreign friends feel surprised to see him managing to survive in the heat and squalor of India. He dismisses it as an exaggeration:

The Indian landscape sears my eyes  
 I have become a part of it  
 To be observed by foreigners. (*NECP 181*)

He has made his commitment, India is his home and he will continue to live in his chosen home:

I have made my commitments now.  
 This is one: to stay where I am,  
 As others choose to give themselves  
 In some remote and backward place.  
 My backward place is where I am. (*NECP 181*)

Ezekiel made a fool of himself by getting married and turning into a rascal because he used a knife in self-defence among three hostile communities and fell a victim to the seductive charm of a woman. All these bitter experiences got branded on his memory and made him a poet he became in life. Ezekiel's relationship with India is one of dichotomy. He brings out the contrasting pictures presented by India-- a land of slums and skyscrapers but even then he could not leave the Island because he himself says: "I cannot leave the Island/ I was born and belong" (182). Ezekiel lets slip no single opportunity either to laugh at the landscape or the people or the language they speak. In "The Egoist's Prayers," Ezekiel, is in the role of an egoist and prays to god to confiscate his passport:

Confiscate my passport, Lord,  
I don't want to go abroad.  
Let me find my song  
where I belong. ("The Egoist's Prayers," *NECP* 213)

"If there is no desire to go abroad, where is the need for the confiscation of passport?" asks Vedamani Palraj (32). It is very clear that Ezekiel's self is torn within itself because of its alienation from the traditional, social, religious and cultural mores of the masses.

The split-personality in Nissim Ezekiel is in evidence in his poems. The opening line of the poem is no word of praise of the island. He cannot glorify the city in songs because there is disparity of all kinds. But towards the end of the poem he asserts that he cannot isolate himself from the island. To quote William Walsh:

One is aware of a double impulse in the poet, which on the one hand keeps him at a distance from his environment as he clutches his private history and aspiration and which on the other, by the painful act of will, reconciles him to his environment (*Small Observations on a Large Subject* 106).

As a good native, he takes both calm and clamour in his stride. The city known for *sadhus* and saints with their miracles hastens him to lead his life in it minding the ways of the island.

minding the ways of the island  
as a good native should,  
taking calm and clamour in my stride. ("Island," *NECP* 182)

To quote G. Damodar:

Aware of narrow "cultural pitfalls," Ezekiel endeavours to find roots as a man basically and as one who belongs to a definite geographical and cultural tradition. For him rootlessness is a matter that bothers not merely the poet lifted from his moorings and transplanted elsewhere, but the man who has not been able to strike a sense of "belonging." A writer in Nissim Ezekiel's views has an immense responsibility to society. He has to make life, more enduring. The means with which he can do so is by discovering one's own identity with a sense of commitment.... The typical strength of his poetry arises from the fact that he has his ideas firmly rooted in Indian soil. ("Commitment in Nissim Ezekiel's Poetry: A Note" 31)

The poem "Urban" brands Ezekiel as an urban poet because he has had his upbringing and career development in the city of Bombay. The industrial city of Bombay affords no opportunity to enjoy Nature. Even the river which he claims he loves is "dry and all the winds lie dead" ("Urban" 117). The sky is over cast with the smoke from factories. With the result he is not able to enjoy the radiant rays of the rising sun or the gentle drop of drizzling rain.

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. ("Urban," *NECP* 117)

He is completely acquainted with the topography of Bombay with all its din and bustle. He has become accustomed to this city though wherever he goes never can he enjoy a morning walk alone.

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. ("Urban," *NECP* 117)

As stated by Kalaithasan:

The poem lists a catalogue of things the poet finds missing in his Urban life. He has dreams of lonely walks in the warmth of the morning sun and floating on a way of sand even though he accepts what the Indian Urban landscape offers. This way he acknowledges his Indian identity and no way does he swerve from it. (*Nissim Ezekiel* 99)

Thus this paper presents Ezekiel's initial alienation to his city Bombay and also his final acceptance of that city. The poems which are discussed in this paper vividly bring out the environment and landscape of the man-made city, which he finally accepts as his own place where he should live.

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#### **MLA (7th Edition) Citation:**

Ravikumar. "Indian Habitation as Portrayed in Nissim Ezekiel's Poems." *Literary Quest* 2.9 (2016): 62-68. Web. DoA.

#### **DoA – Date of Access**

Eg. 23 Aug. 2015. ; 05 April 2017.