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FUTILITY IN NISSIM EZEKIEL'S *URBAN AND ENTERPRISE*

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ABSTRACT

Nissim Ezekiel is one of the leaders of the modern Indian English poetry. The presentation of Indian reality in his poetry is one of his major characteristics as a poet. Although his background makes him a natural outsider, but in India he used to feel at home. He is basically regarded as an urban poet, and his life in the city of Bombay has infused in him the spirit of urbanity. His two poems, *Urban* and *Enterprise* among some other poems depict frustration in modern life. He is highly influenced by the great modern poets of English Literature and his presentation of squalor in modern life seems to have been influenced by them. Study will be made to analyze how the sense of urbanity devours him with a sense of futility which he depicts in his poetry.

Keywords: Indian reality, urbanity, devour, futility, modern, home

Nissim Ezekiel is one of the towering modern poets in Indian English Literature and he is highly influenced by Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, and other writers of the modern period of English Literature. Bruce King rightly says, 'With Ezekiel, Indian English poetry started on a new basis rooted in what were felt to be the traditions of modern poetry, as reformed by W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and W.H. Auden, using contemporary urban images, language and concerns' (qtd. in Mitra 248). He is a poet who grows up in a busy city like Bombay and he writes about the problems of city-life in his poetry. He belongs to Bene-Israel community and therefore there is an acute sense of alienation, desolation in his poetry. Bruce King writes 'His main significance is not, however, as a promoter of poetry; it is in his will to be a poet, his continuing involvement in the poetry scene and the ways in which the developing body of his work expresses his personal quest for a satisfactory way of living in the modern world (91)'. The critic says 'Life in the city, sexuality, the problems of marriage, the need to overcome alienation and to create integration among the various aspects of his character are Ezekiel's early and continuing themes (91)'. He writes in 'Background, Casually' about the mental trauma he has experienced in his early life :

I went to Roman Catholic school.
A mugging Jew among the wolves.
They told me I had killed the Christ,
That year I won the Scripture prize.
A Muslim sportsman boxed my ears.

Bruce King says 'Being a Jew and raised as a secular rationalist by his scientist father made him an outsider to Hindu-Muslim culture; it is his very outsidership, his marginality, which makes him a representative voice of the urbanized, western-educated Indian' (92).

In his famous poem 'A Morning-Walk' he writes –

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.

Bruce King writes- 'He aimed at a contemporary manner which would voice modern concerns'...(91). The poet is so deeply influenced by his city existence that he is totally blind to the appeal of nature –

He turned away, the morning breeze
Released no secrets to his ears
The more he stared, the less he saw
Among the individual trees.
The middle of his journey nears.
Is he among the men of straw
Who think they go which way they please?

In the last few lines Ezekiel seems to echo T.S. Eliot –

We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men
Leaning together
Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!
Our dried voices, when
We whisper together
Are quiet and meaningless
As wind in dry grass
Or rats' feet over broken glass
In our dry cellar
Shape without form, shade without colour,
Paralysed force, gesture without motion; ('The Hollow Men')

In his poem, 'Urban', the poet depicts the dirt and squalor of city life in Bombay and the poet says the people are far away from the soothing effect of Natural beauty –

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 senselessness, hopelessness, meaninglessness of modern life is depicted. 'Broken roads,' dried up river, and dead winds reveal the despair and desolation of modern life. In the second stanza the poet writes -

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.

In a city like Bombay, the business capital of the country, one cannot have a look at the open blue sky and the city dwellers are deprived of the blessings of nature. The last stanza also presents how the people in the city are away from rural beauty -

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.

In his famous poem, 'Enterprise,' Ezekiel writes about the disintegration and grim realities in modern life. The poem starts with a note of satisfaction and passes through sordid experiences to the utter failures of human efforts. Modern people have split personality and divided inwardly. They cannot remain stick to their goal. They are hollow and spiritually dead. A group of energetic people begin a journey to reach the destination or a higher goal. They are very enthusiastic at the start of the journey. The opening stanzas of the poem give us a note of enthusiasm :

It started as a pilgrimage,
Exalting minds and making all
The burdens light. The second stage
Explored but did not test the call.
The sun beat down to match our rage.

We stood it very well, I thought,
Observed and put down copious notes
On things the peasants sold and bought,
The way of serpents and of goats,
Three cities where a sage had taught.

The members of the group seem to be distracted from their goal. On their way to the destination, they seem to take keen interests in mundane and trivial things which the people with noble goal do not generally do. Scattered minds of the members make the enterprise, a collective effort, mutual relationship and joint venture futile and poisonous. The travellers fall into an argument regarding 'how to cross a desert patch' and start to separate as suspicion makes inroads. It is not a matter to be seriously discussed as the leader of the group is to be respected and the leader's decision should be followed in a noble mission. Personal opinions, beliefs, comforts need to be neglected while working in a group to reach a noble mission. But the modern human beings are spiritually bankrupt and believe in fragmentary existence. Indecisiveness controls their life. One after another, the members start deserting the group. The foundations of the endeavour are miserably shaken leading to the hopeless state of modern man. They have turned into 'A straggling crowd of little hope' and the trip teaches the remaining members bitter lessons of life, 'The trip had darkened every face.' Pritha Chakraborty writes :

The pilgrims are reduced to 'A straggling crowd of little hope,' 'who noticed nothing,' suggesting the lack of vision necessary for spiritual illumination. The 'Exalting minds' transform into a group in which: 'Some were broken, some merely bent.' This reveals the despair and disoriented state of the pilgrims, who crave for mundane things 'like soap.' In their listless state, the pilgrims had also been: 'Ignoring what the thunder meant.' It immediately evokes in our minds the last section of Eliot's *The Wasteland*, 'What the Thunder Said.' The hallucinatory terrain in Eliot's poem suggests a quest theme too, in which understanding the thunder's words are imperative in order to surrender before God and fulfil one's enterprise. (Banerjee, et al. 99)

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