

Original Research Article

Urban Realities and Indian Identity: Exploring Themes and Characteristics in Nissim Ezekiel's Poetry

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Abstract

This research paper explores how urban realities and the notion of Indian identity intertwine in the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel, one of the foremost figures in Indian English literature. Through critical analysis, thematic illustration, and close reading of selected poems, the study highlights how Ezekiel captures the complexities of city life, alienation, personal dilemmas, and the quest for identity in the Indian context. Emphasizing his craft, linguistic choices, and representational strategies, the study foregrounds his contribution to modern Indian English poetry as a chronicler of urban experience and cultural hybridity.

Keywords: Urban poetry, Indian identity, Bombay, alienation, modernity, allegory, microcosm, etc.

Introduction

Nissim Ezekiel (1924–2004) is recognized as a pivotal figure in the evolution of Indian English poetry, especially in the post-independence era. Bombay (Mumbai), his lifelong home, emerges as both the physical and metaphorical center of his poetic universe, providing a lens through which he examines social realities, cultural dilemmas, and personal identity. As a poet, Ezekiel weaves the urban literal threads with motifs of alienation, ambivalence, and realism, articulating the psychological and social texture of post-colonial India (Deka 896; Rao 74).

Research Methodology

This research study employs close textual analysis of Nissim Ezekiel's poetry, with a focus on poems where urban motifs and Indian identity are central themes. Relevant critical reviews and secondary sources are used to

contextualize his work in post-independence Indian English literature. The MLA Ninth Edition guidelines are followed for citation and referencing.

Literature Review

Scholarly discourse on Ezekiel highlights how the urban landscape infuses his poetry—not merely as setting, but as an existential condition. Deka argues that Ezekiel’s city poems “offer a variety of the urban experiences which allows readers to explore a comprehensive spectrum of the variety and complexity of urban life” (896). Rao similarly notes, “The urban theme dominates Ezekiel’s poetry. He does not hesitate to describe the dirt and squalor of city life. The city reduces human personality to zero. The recurring note in Ezekiel’s poetry is the hurt that urban civilization inflicts on modern man” (74).

Critical assessments also recognize how Ezekiel’s Indianness is a site of struggle, negotiation, and synthesis. As an Indian Jew, Ezekiel’s dual heritage informs his introspective quests and poetic explorations, making him “a poet of wrestling identities” (The Space Ink). Rao identifies in Ezekiel’s writing a “noticeable synthesis...between the Jewish and the Indian, the Western and the Eastern, the urban and the rural” (75).

Literary critics have praised Ezekiel’s modernism and urban sensibility. William Walsh calls his work “fastidious poetry, at once controlled and spontaneous,” while K. R. S. Iyengar highlights the “tautness and austerity in Ezekiel’s best verse...cathartic” (Rao 80). Deka insists, “Though Nissim Ezekiel contributes significantly to the development of a modern Indian English literary tradition, his poetry is yet to receive sustained attention” (902).

Analysis of Select Poems: Themes and Characteristics

Urban Landscape and Cityscapes

Ezekiel’s poetic landscape is overwhelmingly urban. Bombay serves both as a symbol and as a lived reality. Poems like “A Morning Walk” vividly depict the city’s chaos and vibrancy:

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. (Ezekiel, *Collected Poems*; Deka 901; Rao 74)

Ezekiel’s portrayal is neither romantic nor sentimental; he represents the city in all its harshness and paradoxical allure, combining affection and social consciousness. He describes how urban India is “chaos, colour, vibrancy and hostility”—a matrix of opportunities and estrangement, keeping its dwellers at once engaged and alienated (Deka 897, 899). In “Urban” (from *The Unfinished Man*), the poet presents urban life as isolating, rooted in existential modernity and the displacement from nature:

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... (Ezekiel, *Collected Poems*; Deka 900)

The lines express the psychological and literal alienation of the city-dweller, whose “mind its traffic turns/Away from beach and tree and stone/To kindred clamour close at hand” (Deka 900).

Indian Identity and Cultural Synthesis

Ezekiel's poetry directly grapples with Indian identity—not as a given, but constantly negotiated. His work embodies a “cultural synthesis,” blending “the Jewish and the Indian, the Western and the Eastern, the Urban and the rural” (Rao 75). Faced with an “identity crisis,”

Ezekiel reflects this in his verse:
 I have made my commitment 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. (Rao 75)

In “Night of the Scorpion,” Ezekiel uses a domestic crisis—his mother being stung by a scorpion—to evoke Indian social realities: superstition, collective mythology, religion, and family. The poem's colloquial idiom and observation of ritualistic behavior represent a subtle critique and affirmation of Indian identity (Grade Saver).

Motifs of Alienation and Modernity

Ezekiel's poetry reflects the alienation specific to urban experience, but this isolation is not merely negative—it is a space for introspection and personal wrestling. Deka suggests that urban isolation and aloneness “are painted in the tapestries of an alien place” (897). Ezekiel's alienation is intellectual and existential, resonant with post-independence Indian anxieties and modernist sensibilities.

Ezekiel also interrogates the tension between modernization and tradition, which pervades urban India: industrialization creates “challenges residing within the precincts of more or less profound alienation” (Deka 899). In his poetic ideology, Ezekiel treats the city as a site of both opportunity and loss, progress and estrangement.

Stylistic Features and Poetic Craft

Ezekiel's diction is marked by directness, lucidity, and conversational ease. He prefers “simplicity of thought and language in modern poetry,” aiming for “natural, flowing, direct and informal or conversational idiom” (Rao 76). Even in poems tackling complex themes, Ezekiel uses colloquial Indian English, anchoring his work in the middle-class urban context.

For example, in “Poster Poems”:

Customer
 In the shop of the world,
 Tourist from another planet,
 Citizen of past and future,
 Deceiving with appearances,
 Passing as a human being.” (Rao 76)

His colloquialism does not blunt the depth of his philosophical inquiry, as observed by critics: “simplicity resonates in the directness of the voice, which avoids overly rhetorical flourishes” (Deka 901).

Illustrations from Selected Poems

“Enterprise”

Nissim Ezekiel's “Enterprise” is a powerful allegorical poem that explores the struggle for meaning, identity, and fulfillment against the backdrop of urban realities, ultimately highlighting the quest for Indian identity in a modern context. Here's how specific lines and their explanations reflect these themes:

Urban Realities in “Enterprise”

“The sun beat down to match our rage.”

This line evokes both the physical harshness of the journey and the psychological intensity of urban life. The relentless "sun" can be read as a metaphor for the demanding environment of an Indian city, where ambition and struggle are amplified by external challenges (Boloji).

“On things the peasants sold and bought / The way of serpents and of goats. / Three cities where a sage had taught”

Ezekiel notices the dynamics of commerce and tradition during the journey. The reference to peasants and cities hints at the intersection of rural and urban India; the cities connect history, faith, and modernity. Urban India, to Ezekiel, is layered—it is both a site of ancient wisdom and contemporary enterprise (Poem Analysis).

This symbolic poem charts human efforts, failures, and frustrations as a journey. Ezekiel “cultivates impersonality, objectivity and detachment. He universalizes the personal” (Rao 79).

Indian Identity: Alienation and Acceptance

“Home is where we have to earn our grace.”

The poem’s concluding line encapsulates Ezekiel’s philosophy of identity. The "home" here is not just a physical location—it is India, but also a metaphor for acceptance and self-realization. The journey outward ends with a realization that fulfillment is not found by escaping one's reality, but by embracing it: “The effort to escape from the reality of life is utterly futile... it is the acceptance of home and not the avoidance of it that actualizes the quest” (The Space Ink).

“When finally, we reached the place
We hardly knew why we were there
The trip had darkened every face
Our deeds were neither great nor rare.”

These lines reflect disillusionment with the search for purity or enlightenment. The journey—the "enterprise"—mirrors the pursuit of modern identity, often complicated, ambiguous, and unsatisfying. This echoes the Indian urban experience, where collective ambition is frequently met with confusion and unfulfilled expectations.

Allegory of Urban Indian Life

The poem’s journey begins as a collective, hopeful enterprise (pilgrimage), but as it passes through different stages—facing nature’s hostility, internal divisions, and temptations—the group grows fractured, fatigued, and dispirited. This progression mirrors life in contemporary urban India, where communal efforts often break down into personal disillusionment and social fragmentation.

Division of the personalities became a raging storm
We lost the way, but it was not blamed on anyone
A shadow fell upon us as we struggled on. (Poem Analysis)

Such lines embody urban realities: ambition marred by conflict, disunity, and alienation. The poem’s allegory, therefore, works both as a commentary on the collective Indian quest for progress and a meditation on individual self-doubt and belonging.

Through “Enterprise,” Ezekiel transforms the journey of a group into a metaphor for the experience of urban life and the search for identity in modern India. The poem’s use of city, commerce, spiritual tradition, disunity, and final acceptance captures the tensions of a rapidly transforming society: success and failure, tradition and modernity, alienation and belonging. By returning home—literally and symbolically—the poet acknowledges that

Indian identity must be constructed by facing urban realities and striving for grace within them, not by fleeing or idealizing another place.

“Poster Poems” and “A Time to Change”

In Nissim Ezekiel’s “Poster Poems,” the poet addresses the precariousness of identity and the dissonance between appearance and reality in the urban world. Ezekiel’s voice emerges as distinctly modern, introspective, and shaped by the city’s obscurity:

“Customer
In the shop of the world,
Tourist from another planet,
Citizen of past and future,
Deceiving with appearances,
Passing as a human being.”

These lines present the urban dweller as both participant and outsider—a “customer” engaging in worldly transactions, yet a “tourist” estranged in his own environment. This duality is central to Indian urban identity, with Ezekiel drawing attention to how city life forces a perpetual negotiation between authenticity and performance. The poem’s imagery of “deceiving with appearances” resonates strongly with the masquerade necessitated by metropolitan existence, where selfhood is fluid and easily lost among crowds, roles, and expectations.

At the same time, “A Time to Change” unravels the urgency and anxiety of self-reformation in a rapidly transforming urban Indian milieu. Ezekiel’s speaker admits:

“We have imagined our flesh has been defiled by dreams of flesh
and we are debtors to the place of love.”

The line suggests that metropolitan fantasy and temptation often estrange one from genuine connection or purpose—the “place of love” being both literal (family, home) and metaphoric (the roots of Indian belonging). Urban space, with its seductive possibilities, makes one “a debtor,” emphasizing a continual sense of owing, longing, and incompleteness. Amid these constraints, the poem’s central appeal is for redemption: “Home is where we have to earn our grace.” This familiar motif from Ezekiel’s oeuvre turns deeply Indian—the idea that grace and self-worth are not external gifts but must be found and cultivated within the pulse and pressure of one’s own reality.

Both poems, therefore, are interlaced explorations of modern Indian identity against the canvas of urban realities. The speaker in “Poster Poems” navigates the masks and contradictions imposed by the city, while “A Time to Change” yearns for transformation and meaning within a world that is at once exhilarating and alienating. His poetry is acutely aware of the city’s power to both erase and shape identity, insisting that the journey for rootedness and authenticity must take place within its shifting, complex boundaries. Urban India, for Ezekiel, is not just a place but a condition—one that demands ongoing negotiation, resilience, and acceptance of imperfection as the pathway to earning grace and forming true identity.

“Night of the Scorpion”

Nissim Ezekiel’s “Night of the Scorpion” presents a vivid tableau of Indian life, negotiating the boundaries between urban realities and traditional identity. The poem is set in a village, yet its reflection on Indian society is relevant to urban contexts, exposing the deeply ingrained communal beliefs, domestic rituals, and social anxieties that persist even as India modernizes.

The poem opens with the striking, cinematic line:

The night the scorpion crawled
beneath a sack of rice,

placing us in the midst of a family crisis. When the poet's mother is stung, neighbors immediately
buzzed the name of God a hundred times
to paralyse the Evil One.

This scene is layered with meaning—Ezekiel draws attention to how, in both rural and urban India, moments of crisis activate communal responses rooted in superstition, faith, and collective myth. The lines “May he suffer as much as she did” and “May the poison purify your flesh / of desire, and your spirit of ambition” illuminate how local idioms and beliefs reflect not only collective anxiety but also attempts to control fate and suffering in an unpredictable world.

Despite the seemingly rural backdrop, the poem's urban relevance lies in its depiction of contrasting perspectives. The poet's father, “a sceptic, rationalist,” refuses to accept ritual or superstition; instead, he “poured a little paraffin upon the bitten toe and put a match to it,” suggesting the intrusion of scientific modernity into traditional spaces. Through these lines, Ezekiel foregrounds the tension between inherited beliefs and contemporary rationalism—a dialectic central to Indian identity, especially in rapidly urbanizing environments where tradition coexists with modernity and skepticism.

The poem ends with the mother saying simply,
Thank God the scorpion picked on me
And spared my children.

In this line, Ezekiel excavates the core of Indian familial identity: love and sacrifice, humility, and gratitude. The mother's response is universally resonant yet distinctly rooted in Indian values—her suffering is not individual but collective, endured as part of the family's shared destiny. Through precise and evocative language, Ezekiel reveals how Indian identity is shaped by the negotiation between communal empathy, superstition, progress, and enduring love—realities that permeate both rural and urban lives.

Thus, “Night of the Scorpion” stands as a microcosm of Indian identity in transition, where social practices, modern impulses, and core human bonds interlace in the face of adversity. Ezekiel's poetry, with its careful observation and subtle irony, offers a profound meditation on belonging and belief in an India that is at once ancient and modern, rural and urban.

The poem's vividness and engagement with Indian social realities has made it one of Ezekiel's most anthologized works. “The poet shows rare human interest” in his ethnographic detailing (Rao 78).

However, Nissim Ezekiel consistently portrays Bombay as a microcosm of Indian urban identity by using the city's vibrant chaos, its mingling of cultures, material aspirations, poverty, and contradictions to reflect the broader realities of urban India. His poetry captures Bombay not only as a geographical setting but as an emblem of the nation's diverse and complex urban character.

Multifaceted Urban Experience

Ezekiel's engagement with Bombay is deep and personal. He represents the city in all its “chaos, colour, vibrancy and hostility,” showing affection and a keen social conscience about urban inequality and the reality of poverty and slums. His poetry is populated with street scenes, bustling markets, religious processions, skyscrapers, and crowded lanes, all reflecting the dynamic intermingling of races, cultures, and classes—a “unique display of cultural hybridization” (Deka 898–901).

Symbolism of Skyscrapers and Slums

Ezekiel uses the city's “skyscrapers” as symbols of aspiration and progress for the middle class, while slums represent economic hardships and social stratification. He writes of a city striving for modernity yet mired in “squalor, heartlessness, brutality and destruction,” emphasizing the city's paradox as both a place of hopes and disappointments (Sharma 398–400; Suresh 1).

Reflection of Indian Diversity

Bombay in Ezekiel's verse becomes "mini-India," with people from all corners of the country coexisting, highlighting India's diversity. The "million purgatorial lanes" and "child-like masses, many tongued" in poems like "A Morning Walk"

Barbaric city, sick with slums,
Deprived of seasons, blessed with rains,
Its hawkers, beggars, iron-lunged,
Processions, led by frantic drums...

This illustrates the city's crowded, multilingual complexity (Deka 901; Sharma 398).

Emotional Ambivalence

Ezekiel's own relationship with Bombay vacillates between affection and alienation. The city is both "home" and "purgatory"—he admires its multicultural mosaic but is disturbed by its commercialism, vulgarity, and lack of ethical foundations. Through poems like "Island," he expresses both attachment and creative frustration, seeing Bombay as a challenging environment for sensitivity and artistic pursuit (Kumar 2).

Microcosm of National Modernity and Struggle

Bombay stands for the dilemmas of Indian identity—caught between tradition and modernity, progress and decay, prosperity and deprivation. The "brutal living machine where raw humanity is wasted," with its "great society...maimed by the capitalistic wolf after independence," positions the city as representative of both the nation's ambitions and its persistent social problems (Deka 901).

In short, Ezekiel's Bombay is much more than a city; it is a stage where Indian urban identities—complex, fragmented, diverse, and evolving—play out. Through his realistic, sometimes ironic, always insightful poetic lens, Ezekiel reveals Bombay as the heart and mirror of urban India, embodying both its promise and its predicament.

Conclusion

To sum up the analysis, Nissim Ezekiel's poetry stands as a testament to the compromise of urban realities and Indian identity. His work not only explores the cityscape's material and psychological textures but also examines broader questions of belonging, modernity, and cultural synthesis. Through colloquial language, lucid style, and philosophical engagement, Ezekiel bridges the personal and universal, the Indian and the cosmopolitan. His evocation of city life and individual identity continues to derive relevance as India's urban story grows ever more complex. As this analysis demonstrates, Ezekiel's poetry should occupy a prominent place in the emerging field of urban literary discourse and postcolonial studies in Indian English literature.

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