

PORTRAYAL OF BOMBAY IN NISSIM EZEKIEL'S POEM "ISLAND"

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Abstract

Nissim Ezekiel, renowned poet and a quintessential Bombay- man, is considered the father of the post-independence, modern Indian-English poetry. His poems are simple on the surface but have deep meaning, and lasting resonance. The connotations of his humorous poems, are also intense and impactful, and have a lasting impression on the psyche of his readers. He was born and brought up in Mumbai, (formerly Bombay) and this city of contradictions, had a deep impression on almost all his work. He was its genuine lover, soulful admirer, and harshest critic as well. This paper explores his poem "Island" in detail, its a poem that adds to his lasting legacy of beautiful creations, which have a trance like magical effect, and influence on his readers' minds and hearts.

Nissim Ezekiel is regarded as one of the most prominent, and revered figures of the Indian-English poetry. His poems express the vivid facets, and nuances of the urban life. Bombay (now Mumbai) finds an important place in all his beautiful, and best creations. The reverberations of his favourite city, with all its strengths, and weaknesses, finds an important place in almost all of Ezekiel's works.

A sensitive soul, his excellent and remarkable portrayals of his favourite city, have earned him a unique place, amongst all the poets, of the Indo- Anglian literature. Born in Bombay, and brought up in a traditional Bene-Israel Jewish household, his love for his favourite city, can be understood, by the depth of his artistic sensitivity, for this magnificent city, expressed so beautifully, and in vivid detail; in many of his marvellous poems.

He has experienced, and written about Bombay, like no other poet in the Indian- English literary tradition.

The poem “Island” is considered as one of his best poems, at once underlining the viciousness, and the vivacious magnetism of Bombay. It expresses the duality of urbanism and its contradictory existence, and experiences, both of agony as well as ecstasy.

The poem reads as follows:

“ 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 the future;

Then the air is still again As I sleep the fragrance 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.

Even now a host of miracles hurries me a daily business,

minding the ways of the island

as a good native should, taking calm and clamour in my stride.”

The poet was born and brought up in Bombay, the city he admires, and abhors in equal measure. His love and affection for his city, and its multicultural mosaic is amazingly, and beautifully expressed in many of his poems.

In “Island” although Ezekiel touches on a sinister side, hitherto unexplored, Bombay to him is home, but it is also a place which hampers his creative longing, as it is a place not suitable for sensitivity or creativity, it is vulgar and the commercialism and lack of ethics, is deeply disturbing, and disappointing.

Life in this city is tough, and not suitable for higher-minded pursuits of excellence, it is debilitating, devious and a utter disappointment for an artist or creator.

Ezekiel says that the city is full of slums, as well as high and mighty skyscrapers, that rise above and tower over the slums below, it reflects the chaos all around, most of the time the poet is on his own, he does not want to take advice from anyone, as there are very few persons, who understand his discontent at all, or offer any worthwhile suggestions, and as everyone around him is busy with their own pursuits. Everyone here is in the midst of delusion, discord, confusion and cacophony, it seems that they are out to get one another, and create havoc in the lives of others, like the evil, villainous and vicious dragons, who spit fire and only exist to damage, torture and harm others.

The only saving grace is the beautiful and cool breeze, that blows across the city, which is actually an island or to be more precise a peninsula, it takes the poet in a past, which is magical, amazing, and truly inspiring.

Ezekiel feels that ignorance is bliss, and he is happy for a while, and wants to be in a state of happiness, contentment, bliss and joy forever. He cannot leave Bombay as he was born and brought up in that city, and feels a sense of attachment, connect and belonging to this city of contradictions. He feels blessed sometimes, and carries on like other folks who inhabit his city, and facing both peacefulness and unrest, he goes on doing his work. He takes both these opposite opportunities in his wake, and carries on living in this city of extremes.

Ezekiel’s excellent expressions reflect how a majority of people who live in Bombay feel. They cannot live in the city calmly, but cannot leave it either, because they feel a sense of deep-

rootedness, and emotional attachment to it. They carry on with their daily lives, and survive the city with all their strength, and might that the human existence, and experience can offer. The poem could be called autobiographical in a sense, it is a twenty-five line poem. The boons and banes of urban life have been highlighted excellently and explored deeply, truly reflected by Ezekiel in a manner which is free-flowing, and language that is easy to understand. It appears that all his experiences, find a voice in this wonderful poem.

The urban problems are relatively same everywhere, and not tough to relate to, and understood by people who face the same situation, notwithstanding the exact geographical location. This is the magic and might of Ezekiel, simplicity is his forte, and a stark intensity his hallmark. This poem is certainly, one of his best creations, and an opportunity to understand his artistic craft and creativity.

Works Cited

Ezekiel, Nissim. *Collected Poems*. New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press, 2005. Print.