

Study Material for Degree III (Hons.), English, Paper-VII

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POEM: ISLAND

POET: NISSIM EZEKIEL

Island is a poem by Nissim Ezekiel. The poem was published in the 1976 in the collection of poems '**Hymn of Darkness**'. The poem is written in twenty five lines. In the poem, Ezekiel describes reality of the urban city of Bombay, now Mumbai. The poem reveals a conflict in the mind of the poet. The poet expresses his strong feeling of belongingness to the city of Bombay, where he was born. At the same time he is sad and frustrated to see the uneven development of the city. It is a city of skyscrapers and slums that has become a source of suffering and misery. As the poet explores the reality of the city he unveils his own feelings of isolation and alienation.

Nissim Ezekiel was born on 14 December, 1924 in Bombay (Mumbai), in a Jewish (Bene-Isreal) family. He died at the age of 79 on 9 January 2004. His parents were devoted to education.

Nissim Ezekiel is an outstanding figure among the new generation of Indian English poets. He set up a new trend in postcolonial literature in India. He was realistic and purposive in his approach. Through his poems he explored a variety of subjects like, love, sex, marriage and urban life. A sense of overcoming alienation and his quest of identity became dominant issues in his poems. In other words, Ezekiel's poems are results of his own experiences of sadness, happiness and hardship. Other poets of new generation, like, Kamala Das, Jayanta Mahapatra, A.K. Ramanujan and others also gave voice to their personal feelings and emotions. Ezekiel's first volume of poetry, '**A Time to Change**' published in 1952 became a landmark in the history of Indian English Literature. Other volumes of poems that were published included **Sixty Poems**(1953), **The Third**(1959), **The Unfinished Man**(1960), **The Exact Name**(1965), **Hymn in Darkness**(1976) **Latter Psalm Day** (1982), and **Collected Poems 1952-58** (1989).

The poem **Island**, which has Bombay as its theme, depicts the grim reality of the city of Bombay, now called Mumbai. The poet is closely associated with this urban city. The city has emerged as the most developed urban city of India. The city with its skyscrapers has

become a symbol of development, prosperity and richness on one hand, and then on the other hand, the mushrooming of the slum tells the sordid tale of poverty and squalor in the city. The poet through the contrast of images ‘skyscrapers’ and ‘slums’ portrays the miserable and deplorable condition of the city. The city no more possesses the past glory. The pathetic condition of the city is such that the poet finds the place:

*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.*

Inspite of the sadness and frustration that poet feels on seeing the deplorable condition of the city he desires to stay there, remain there because it is the city of his birth. He cannot leave that place because he has become a part of the city of his birth and the city has become a part of him. It seems that the city and the poet, both, have been integrated into each other. They cannot be separated from each other.

The sense of isolation and alienation makes the poet uncomfortable and unhappy. The lines ‘**Sometimes I cry for help/But mostly keep my own counsel**’ give an expression to his helplessness:

*I hear distorted echoes
Of my own ambiguous voice
And of dragons claiming to be human.*

The concept of development is a weird one. Human beings have become merciless and heartless towards each other. The word ‘**dragon**’ is used to symbolise the inhuman qualities with which human beings are possessed. Hence, the poet feels that the city is full of dragons where people lack human sensibility.

The poet is aware of the fact that the city has lost all its glory and beauty, yet tempts people to stay in the city. Perhaps the ‘*bright and tempting breezes*’ of the city is attractive enough to keep people glued to this city. It seems the attraction and temptation lies in the business and commercial purpose that is well provided by the city. Bombay has remained a

favourite theme for Ezekiel. He has written many poems inspired by the city of Bombay like, **In India, Background Casually, Urban** and many others.

He talks about the development and decay of the city. Sometimes, it appears that an idea of pure and natural Bombay is there in the mind of the poet. He seems to contemplate over the idea of clean and clear environment devoid of any modern evils.

As I sleep the fragrance of ignorance.

*How delight the soul with absolute
sense of salvation,.....*

The above lines mention that the moment poet tries to ignore the condition of the city he lives in he gets a feeling of salvation. What does the poet try to convey by the term ‘sense of salvation’? No doubt, the condition of the country has caused dissatisfaction and sorrow. The highly urbanised city dims the voice. Inspite of the presence of the negative aspects of the city the poet gets a feeling of salvation when he is reminded of his belongingness to the city. He gets respite from the frustration. The lines below echo his strong sense of belongingness to the city:

hold to a single willed direction?

I cannot leave the island,

I was born here and belong.

So like a true native the poet accepts the disturbance and dissatisfaction. He reconciles with the ways of the island as he writes, ‘*taking calm and clamour in my stride.*’ Inspite of the evils present in the urban city of Bombay ‘*host of miracles*’ keeps the poet engaged with the affairs of life and the ways of the city of Bombay.

The poem **Island** which began on a note of dissatisfaction and frustration where the island no more remained a subject of glorification ends with a sense of reconciliation. Ezekiel has by his poetic ability brought out the conflict in the poem. He uses contrasts and paradoxes and wit and irony to portray the city of Bombay (Mumbai) with all its ugliness, dirt, poverty, noise and pollution. The words, ‘*slum and skyscrapers*’, ‘*dragon claiming humans*’, ‘*echoes and voice*’, ‘*past and present*’ very effectively describe the city of poet’s birthplace, Bombay. The words ‘*calm and clamour*,’ bring out Nissim Ezekiel’s acceptance of his native land Bombay with all its reality. The poet uses irony like ‘*the island flowers into slums and skyscrapers*’. The word ‘flower’ here does not refer to sprouting of beautiful flowers but refers to the growth of slums and high rise building around the city of Bombay (now Mumbai) that depicts development with scars of poverty and suffering.
