



NEGOTIATING LAND AS SPACE IN THE POETRY OF NISSIM EZEKIEL

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ABSTRACT

Land along with home and space has been significant subject in postcolonial discourse which has been conceptualized in different ways by scholars and thinkers. After the obligation of Edward Soja's famous book *Third Space* (1996) and Henry Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1974) and significant discussions offered by Homi K. Bhabha (*Location of Culture*, 1994) and Salman Rushdie (*Imaginary Homelands*, 1992) on 'Imaginary Space' and 'in between space', the importance of 'Home' and 'Space' has been increasingly felt. At the same time, landscape is also problematized as 'space' and 'place' which contribute substantially to the individual identity on the one hand and socio-cultural identity on the other. The present paper is an attempt to investigate Nissim Ezekiel's notion of land, home and space in regards to city space, rural space and domestic space on the backdrop of postcolonial theories.

Keywords : home, space, land, place, postcolonial, identity

Together with Home and Space, Land has been an important subject of deliberation in postcolonial discourse. After the obligation of Edward Soja's book *Third Space* (1996) and Henry Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1974) and significant discussions offered by Homi K. Bhabha (*Location of Culture*, 1994) and Salman Rushdie (*Imaginary Homelands*, 1992) on 'Imaginary Space' and 'in between space' (Trishanku), the importance of 'Home' and 'Space' has been increasingly felt. To situate 'land' as 'space' is to bring into discussion the very many meanings and nuances associated with landscape as physical space, geographical space with considerable environmental significance. At the same time, landscape is also problematized as 'space' and 'place' which contribute substantially to the individual identity on the one hand and socio-cultural identity on the other. However, the 'Spatial Theory' offered by Meskel and Preucel has been contradicted by the famous Marxist Philosopher Henry Lefebvre. In his seminal book (1991), Lefebvre problematizes space as a 'passive container'

occupying an abstract arena. Lefebvre's contention is that apart from space as physical place and environmental space/landscape, one may argue in favour of mental space. While deliberating on space as a concept, he further introduces ideas like 'perceived', 'conceived' and 'lived' spaces. Whereas 'lived space' points to the immediate surrounding / environment in which people live, the 'conceived space' signifies the 'mental space' in which idea is conceived in an abstract level (6). The 'perceived space' on the other hand, is associated with feelings and reaction to the 'lived space'. This Trinity of space is further satisfactorily problematized by Edward Soja. In his seminal book (1996), Soja introduces the concept of 'Spatial Trialectics' which comprises 'perceived space', 'conceived space' (mental space), and 'lived space'. It is now evident that Lefebvre and Soja revolutionized the concept of space in the postcolonial condition by interrogating the conventional concept of space which shapes and determines the identity and social relationship only' (Lefebvre 65). In the diasporic

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discourse, critics like Uma Parameswaran tends to argue in her book (2003) that “home is there where our feet are”(118). The diasporic consciousness is grounded upon a wider vision which corresponds to the extensive explanation of the concept of space. In postcolonial discourse, critics like Homi K. Bhabha and Stuart Hall talks about Third Space, Hybridity and Dynamic Identity which contest the essentialist's notion of home and space. As a result, the postcolonial thought process envisages different kinds of spaces such as domestic space, rural space, city space, cultural space, environmental space and nation as space. In his seminal essay '*Cultural Identity and Diaspora*', Stuart Hall maintains that identity is not a static or stagnant construct but a dynamic process- 'Cultural identity is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past” (225).

Whereas domestic space points to reclamation of home and identity thereby vindicating the traditional idea of home as secured and sacred space, detached from the public sphere. McDowell (1999) spotlights exploitation of women in domestic space. She maintains that 'the burdens of nurturing and caring for others were placed on the shoulders of women (232). Le Blanc and Medine in their book (2012) consider home as 'the site of our first wound, our first understanding of self as separate from other'(47). They further describe home as multiple space where people accept differences, negotiations, conflicts and most importantly, love for one another' (41).

City as home incorporates the idea that city can present possibilities of an ideal home, which can offer spatial resistance to national politics. But there is always an inherent conflict between dreams of the city and its dwellers i.e. material reality. In view of constant human exodus to the city, the urban space has to be constantly reconfigured to meet the needs of its ever growing new and cross-cultural population, which convert the city to an eternal utopia in the making. The city thus offers a space for people to materialize their dreams. But the spatial dimension of Utopia as manifested in the urban space presents a more complicated picture of Utopia. In this connection, Upstone in her book (2009) aptly observes that the physical structure of the city, its spatial

policies, the opportunities offered by it for its citizens, and the utopic vision rendered conspicuous by the city from the distance for the yet to arrive city migrants epitomize the multiple dimensions of “City Utopia” (85).

The multiple identities associated with home and the consideration of home as space demands a thorough study. It may be mentioned that the term 'home' functions as a repository of complex, inter-related and sometimes contradictory socio-cultural ideas about people's relationship with one another, especially family and places, spaces and things. It can be a dwelling place or a space of interaction among people, places or things. John McLeod (2000), opines that home acts as a valuable means of orientation in one's live by giving him/her a sense of place in the world and it testifies to one's place of origin thereby vindicating one's identity (210).

Home and space cannot be separated from identity because identity is a multifaceted concept that involves domestic, social political, economic and cultural implications. Postcolonial thinkers have critically viewed the relationship between home and identity and also the concept of self. They are of the opinion that the home, which they typically conflate with house, is an expression or symbol of the self. The concept of home becomes all the more popular in the aftermath of the emancipation of different colonies from the bondage of colonial hegemony. The colonial people exercised their free mind so as to conceive of home as the symbol of freedom with broader implications. Obviously, then the canvas of home in the postcolonial period extends from the periphery of domesticity to the larger spectrum of society with significant socio -political -economic implications. The postcolonial critics such as Ashcroft Bill, Homi Bhabha, Alison Blunt, Mark Cartwright, Dipesh Chakraborty, David Harvey, Stuart Hall, Salman Rushdie, Gayatri Spivak and Edward Soja have problematized the concept of home in different ways highlighting home as a power center, city as home, rural space as home, home in relation to environment and landscape, geography, and above all nation as home. They have negotiated home as a global construct in the backdrop of globalization, migration, transnational thoughts and diasporic vision of the world.

In the light of the above discussion on home and land as space, Nissim Ezekiel's poems can be revisited from the said postcolonial perspectives. Ezekiel highlights the postcolonial conception of home in the aftermath of India's independence. After the colonial subjugation of the Britishers was over, Indians became free enough to exercise their mind and imagination to receive new ideas through cultural negotiation and an era of enlightenment set in in the backdrop of Bengal Renaissance which was inseparably tagged with India's emancipation from political, economic and cultural bondage of the British. Under these circumstances, Indians became increasingly conscious about the importance of both rural and urban space. A brief trajectory into his poem 'Enterprise' reveals this Post-independent Indian consciousness and Ezekiel aptly voices this consciousness that 'Home is there where we have to gather grace'(line 30). Indian writers in English such as Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayanan, Raja Rao, Jayanta Mahapatra, A.K. Ramanujan, and Nissim Ezekiel tended to negotiate both city and rural space in order to conceive home as a complex and composite construct.

Ezekiel's poetry explores his urban and rural sensibility and his poetic corpus encompasses wide ranging themes relating to Indian ethos, spirituality, alienation, social evil and other nuances which reflect his realistic treatment of poetry with postcolonial attitude. His poetry stands in stark opposition to essentialist's notion of home and space, idealism and romanticism.

His famous poem such as 'Background Casually' 'In India', 'A Morning Prayer', 'Urban', 'Island', 'Jewish weeding in Bombay', 'Irani Restaurant', 'City Song' (from Collected Poems 1952 to 1988) deal with urban sensibility where his relation to his native city and the hypocrisy of city life find a telling expression. The Postcolonial concept of city space as home is reflected in these poems and his effort of negotiating city as home comes to the fore. His 'Background Casually', expresses the travails to an intelligent Jew boy growing up in multi-cultural and multi-linguistic urban society. Born in a Bene-Israel family migrated to India generations ago and living in the city of Bombay, Ezekiel longs for his land and identity. He confesses here that the land where he

belongs and exists is his space, his home space. He himself once said in *Ezekiel's Selected Prose* (1992), "....my background makes me a natural outsider: circumstances and decisions related me to India." While going to England, the feeling of alienation haunted him there and he added, "In other countries I am a foreigner, in India I am an Indian." (99) He expresses in the poem 'Background Casually'-

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. (CP-181)

In his famous poem "City Song", he expresses how he negotiate urban space as his land of belonging after experiencing a complete sense of identification with the place of his birth. Here, a culturally alienated person tries to find out his identity and his land of belonging. He constantly efforts to assimilate with Indian ethos and claims sharing it.

Urban space and his attachment to it comes to the fore in another poem titled "Island" where he tends to negotiate his land with urban space. Here island refers to Bombay where he was born and brought up. He explores the charm of Bombay (Island). After expressing disgust for urban space initially in the poem, he declares his association with Bombay towards the end of the poem implying a sense of negotiation. He had to accept his urban space as home despite his disillusionment with the same. He declares—

I cannot leave this island,
I was born here and belong. (CP- 182)

Contradictions to urban life has been highlighted in another significant poem 'A Morning walk' where he expresses the perplexing situation of human existence in urban space considering city as barbaric. He regards his native city as 'barbaric' looking at its inhumane and uncivilized environ which hardly professes love and humanity. Ezekiel bears a profound sense of compassion, sympathy and negotiating attitude. Despite all its repelling qualities, he tends to accept Bombay as home. Certainly, he expresses his helplessness to be the dweller of a city. The fact is that he negotiates home and city

space in order to accept city as home. He evokes –

The city wakes, where fame is cheap,
And he belongs, an active fool. (CP- 120)

Both urban space and rural space occupy an important place in Ezekiel's poetry and he seems to be in a sort of dilemma while searching for his identity. For Ezekiel, India is not merely the crowds of the noisy city but the innocent, peace loving masses. Ezekiel endeavours to dig roots in the meaningful centre of Indian life. The poems dealing with rural landscape authenticate his rural sensibility as well as his notion of rural space as home. A. Raghu (2002), authenticates Ezekiel's rural sensibility stating, "Urban experience constitutes an important segment of Ezekiel's work, bringing him fame as a Bombay poet but so does rural experience: Ezekiel was the first poet to allow the significant entry of rural experience into Indian poetry in English" (9). The poem 'The Night of The Scorpion' is a brilliant testimony that unfurls his notion of rural landscape. This celebrated poem gives vent to Ezekiel's concern over rural life of India and his deeper sense of Indian ethos. The poem explores the reality of rural life in India pin-pointing poverty, superstition, sufferings, ignorance, communal unity, Indian mother's selfless love for own children. Peasant's coming like swarms of flies, hints at the unity among the villagers. At the same time, their chanting the name of God to redeem the pain of poet's mother, expresses the prevailing superstition and also their ignorance. The gradual intrusion of scientific and rationalistic approach to rural India is also reflected here by the temperament of poet's father using less scientific method to treat his wife. Except for drawing these issues relating to rural landscape of India, the poem highlights how family is integrated with community. Here the rural home turns out to be a place of unity where outsiders are welcomed. The postcolonial concept of home as a site of resistance as advocated by bell hooks (*Yearning*) is contested here. Again, the bond of the family members in rural site in the form of husband's concern over wife, mother's sacrifice for children, belief on rebirth and sin and belief on efficacy of prayers manifested in the poems establish home as a spiritual construct. It is noticed that Ezekiel endeavours to find root as a social being and

cultivates a sense of belonging. His quest for a peaceful landscape as home is projected through this poem. He describes-

The peasants came like Swarms of flies
and buzzed the Name of God a hundred times
to paralyze the Evil one. (CP- 130)

In the poem 'In the country cottage', Ezekiel has hinted at the ecological system of nature which is balanced automatically by the natural elements. His deep sense of love for the country landscape and ecology come to the fore in this poem. He talks of the lizard hunting the cockroaches amidst the darkness here. Pests are created in nature to maintain a balanced eco-system which is based on a healthy relationship between biotic and abiotic elements. Ezekiel's wide variety of images belonging to animal world or nature, are symbolic in an innocent and simple way. He considers these birds and animals depicted in different poems, to be more humanly in comparison to the hypocrite and polluted city dwellers. Thus, he has projected the rural landscape as a space which is free from hypocrisy, pretention and politics of power. Certainly, his poetry does not merely castigate India as geographical or political entity, he also focuses on the people, its culture, ethos, mythological background. Ezekiel is fully involved in and concerned about his environment, i.e. his land India and he embraces her in its totality. Consequently, he was not confined to his city Bombay alone but extended his look to the rural landscape and ecology also.

H.M. Williams (1977), maintains that many of his poems derive their effectiveness from the poet's puzzled emotional reaction to the modern Indian dilemma. His poem 'Background Casually' testifies the point. It is now evident that Ezekiel's Poetry is a powerful vehicle of expressing home, space and identity. Identity constitutes the cardinal core of both rural home and city home. But the difference is that in the former case, identity is ascertained on the basis of ancestral glory and cultural heritage, whereas in the latter, home has postcolonial connotations that involve power, politics, and economic considerations. A re-reading of his poetry in the light of Postcolonial theory obviously throws new light on his conception of land as space regardless of rural and urban

landscape. Notwithstanding his alien root and living in a multi-cultural and multi-linguistic urban society, he tends to negotiate his city of dwelling with his land of belonging. Ezekiel seems to be very much concern and aware of the immediate environment, the surrounding which he himself reveals in his famous essay 'Naipaul's India and Mine'(1976) -

“India is simply environment. A man can do something for and in his environment by being fully what he is, by not withdrawing from it.”.(100)

In conclusion it may be conceded that as a learned poet, Ezekiel intensely experienced the efficacy of both urban space and rural ecology and that in his postcolonial vision land as space involves both the rural and urban implications thereby indicating the operation of a sound eco-system.

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