

The City Described by T. S. Eliot and Nissim Ezekiel: A Comparative Analysis of the Hollow Lands

Dr. Abhilasha Chauhan

Mohan Lal Sukhadia University, Udaipur

Article Received: 02/03/2025

Article Accepted: 01/04/2025

Published Online: 02/04/2025

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.04.09

Abstract:

T. S. Eliot and Nissim Ezekiel are mainly the poets of City and the modern world. In their respective poem, *The Waste Land* and *Bombay poems*, they tried to give a description of a real city that is away from the whims and fancy. The city they described is much like Hale. The hollowness of modern man and the degradation of values and ethics have been substituted by greed and lust. Here in the present research work, the concept of the modern city is under scrutiny through comparative analysis.

Keywords: Modern City, Hollowness of Human life, Degradation of moral values.

Introduction:

Nissim Ezekiel is one of those poets of the post-independence era in whose writings we discover a genuine attempt to harmonize the diverse elements of our volatile urban culture. Ezekiel was born in Bombay in a Bene-Israel family and has spent most of his life in the highly Westernized circles of the cosmopolitan city. He claims that he began writing in English because he did not know any other language well enough to express himself. "Contemporary poets in India generally write in English when they have gone through English medium schools," wrote Ezekiel, "*I write in English for this reason and cannot write in any Indian language*".¹

Ezekiel began with a sense of alienation from the world around him. His poetry has attempted to establish some kind of recognizable order and relevance for himself in the irrational and featureless world that surrounded him. The poet's gradual emotional disassociation from the immediate environment of the city where he was born began in early childhood. At school, he considered himself a "Mugging Jew" among the Hindu, Christian, and Muslim "wolves," perpetually a "frightened child."² His failure to get into the mainstream of Bombay's life is symbolically expressed:

*He never learned to fly a kite. His borrowed top refused to spin.
(Background, Casually)*²

One of the earliest influences on Ezekiel was T. S. Eliot. *A Morning Walk*, in spite of its unquestioned originality, compels comparison with Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Eliot's theme is the drabness of European civilization immediately after the First World War. Ezekiel's theme is a walk through the decadence of Bombay's soul, which began immediately after the Second World War. Both have their purgatory of existence in the turpitude of sunken values. Both are searching for new insights in a world where new insights are only those of agony and frustration. The central image of *The Waste Land* is that of land blighted by a curse where crops do not grow, and animals are cursed with sterility. Ezekiel's *Morning Walk* resembles the journey of the protagonist in Eliot's poem to the Chapel Perilous through parching and agonizing areas of horror and darkness where "one can neither stand nor lie nor sit"³

Later, Ezekiel was to write, "*I am not a Hindu, and my background makes me a natural outsider. Circumstances and decisions relate me to India. In other countries I am a foreigner. In India I am an Indian*".⁴ The original tension in Ezekiel's poetry was probably born out of this agony of being a fortuitous Indian outside the pale of India's dominant culture.

Indian sensibility is neither an issue to be debated with reference to the writings in various vernaculars in India nor with various literatures of the world such as American, Australian, Canadian, British etc.

However the moment we speak about the reflection of Indian sensibility/experience, we start analysing it in terms of 'Indianness' of the literary critics. The matter lies here that there is a need of particular tradition for the writers writing in English, particularly in India, which is obvious to belong to.

Nissim Ezekiel's contribution as a poet in Indian writing in English is very substantial and valuable. Being a Jewish, his family had long ago migrated to India and settled down in Mumbai. Nissim Ezekiel was born in Mumbai.

Ezekiel is a poet of multitudinous themes. One of the most recurring themes in his poetry is the sensation of oppression in a crowded civilization represented by the city of Bombay. It is the "*bitter native city*"⁵ where the poet was born and brought up and where he lives now. A recurring note in his poetry is the wound urban civilization inflicts on unattached men. His poetry gives the impression of an oversensitive soul caught in the tentacles of a cruel city civilization, unable to escape from its vagaries and consequently developing a love-hate relationship with its tormentor. Ezekiel has seen the splendor and poverty of the great city, its air-conditioned skyscrapers, and claustrophobic slums, its marvelous capacity for survival, and its slow decadence. His reaction to the city's oppression is a light-hearted, ironic, and often sardonic exposure of its several hidden faces. For Ezekiel, this Indian dilemma is symbolized by the city of Bombay.

Too much has been said about *The Waste Land* to make an original comment about it possible; it has become immortal, as *Hamlet*, one of those central works around which criticism feeds upon itself, and everything one says about the poem must finally be about not

just the poem but what has already been said about the poem. Eliot himself, with his appended notes and references, made *The Waste Land* a poem to be read in the context of prior readings of the poem. However, Eliot's notes have an even more ironic purpose in the poem, for they prove the extension and richness of the past as the past and thus prove the narrow poverty of the present. With the fragmented discourse and simultaneous voices of *The Waste Land*, Eliot finds the objective correlative for the meaninglessness of modern life that had eluded him in "*Gerontion*." He finds as well, however, with the intrusion of time into the poem, the meaninglessness of modern death, the meaninglessness of his own future death, for though the poet, by his creative act, may stand outside the chaos he describes (the ascription of meaninglessness is, after all, an ascription of a sort of meaning), he cannot stand outside death. The poem longs for a resolution to the poet's fear of death,

Eliot and Ezekiel were trying to break that cycle by revealing it. They showed the monotony that modern life can be. While their work doesn't offer an alternative, it does show the end result of living a life in that way. It is up to the individual to find out what there is to live for. The individual has to rise up above the nine-to-five's and the race to beat the closing Tube doors. Otherwise, he will sink into a self-absorbed despondency and insanity. Once it is realized that the world is burning, is it possible to get out of "The Waste Land?"

Another aspect of dehumanization in "*The Waste Land*" is that of spiritual death or the separation of God from Man. Throughout the poem, religion is treated with an air of disregard. It appears to be there but is treated without care or respect. For instance:

Madame Sosostris, famous clairvoyante,

Had a bad cold, nevertheless

She is known to be the wisest woman in Europe,

With a wicked pack of cards... (43-7)⁶

It is interesting, and perhaps humorous, to picture the "wisest woman in Europe" as a tarot card reader with a head cold. It seems to undermine the whole idea of connection to the spiritual realm. After all, if people do not understand how to connect to each other, how could they possibly know how to connect to something beyond?

Most Indo-Anglian poets have dealt with the oppression, inertness, and decay of city life. Particularly, the city of Bombay has become a tantalizing symbol of the bitterness and decadence of urban life in India. The poets who have made Bombay their native city and the poets who have known Bombay through short spells of residence there have written about Bombay's divergent moods and modulations. The impact of the city's growing and decaying civilization on the consciousness of these poets has produced some of the most telling Indo-Anglian poems. The poets, one and all, have developed an ambivalent attitude of love-hate towards the city and have been unable to escape its several seductions.

Likewise, more than any other Bombay poet, Nissim Ezekiel presents a comprehensive picture of the city, at once realistic and ironic. *Background: Casually* expresses the travails of an intelligent Jew boy of "meager bone" living and growing up in a multi-racial, multi-religious, and multi-linguistic urban society where he was so alienated and frightened that.

One noisy day, I used a knife (Background, Casually)⁷

The "point" Ezekiel mentions in this early poem is "how to feel at home ." "This has continued to dominate his poetry in several forms till today. In *The Edinburgh Interlude* (1983), Ezekiel wrote,

I have become part of the scene

Which I can neither love nor hate⁸

He lived through a "life of cheerful degradation normal in my neighborhood" until a mature awareness ensconced him. Today towards the fag end of his career, as a condemner of the great city's iniquitous ways, Ezekiel has come to realize

I cannot save Bombay

You cannot save it

They don't even

Want to save it

(The Edinburgh Interlude⁹

In spite of his disgust with the futilities of the sprawling city, Ezekiel, early in life, made a commitment to choose Bombay as his place of residence.

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. (Background, Casually¹⁰

Both the writers give a ray of hopefulness at the end of their work. The reference to Buddha's *Fire Sermon* is also a key aspect of "The Waste Land." In summary, the Buddha addresses the bhikkhus, telling them that all perception is "burning." He focuses chiefly on sexual desire, saying, "Burning with what? With the fire of lust, with the fire of hate, with the fire of delusion." The way to overcome the burning is to conquer passion. By doing that, it is possible to overcome lust and desire. After the typist's husband has his way with her and she resumes life, it appears that self-defeat, or at least acknowledgment, takes place:

"On Margate Sands.

I can connect

nothing with nothing.

The broken fingernails of dirty hands.

*My people are humble people who expect
nothing."*

la la

Burning (300-11)¹¹

The connection of "nothing with nothing" is representative of a wrecked mind or a personal breakdown in which the speaker admits that everything is burning. It would appear, judging by some of the ramblings in the fifth section: "What the Thunder Said," that it is the

former. Some of the fifth section seems to represent a mind that has broken down and accepted insanity:

*If there were water
And no rock
If there were rock
And also water
And water
A spring
A pool among the rock
If there were the sound of water only
Not the cicada
And dry grass singing
But the sound of water over a rock
Where the hermit thrush sings in the pine trees
Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop
But there is no water (346-59)¹²*

This is accompanied by the final stanza:

*I sat on the shore
Fishing, with the arid plain behind me
Shall I at least set my lands in order?
London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down
O swallow swallow
These fragments I have shored against my ruins
Why, then, does Ile fit you? Hieronymo's mad again.
Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.
Shantih shantih shantih¹³*

A Morning Walk is a great poem that translates the sense of the bustle of the "barbaric city" into a gnawing pain that oppresses the poet's memory. The picture of the city deprived of humaneness, seething with poverty, dirt, noise, and bustle, emerges with disturbing clarity in this poem.

*Barbaric city sick with slums, Deprived of seasons, blessed with rains,
Its hawkers, beggar, iron-lunged, Processions led by frantic drums,
A million purgatorial lanes, And child-like masses, many-tongued,
Whose wages are in words and crumbs (A Morning Walk)¹⁴*

The paralysis of the will and the finer emotions the Bombay man suffers from is succinctly suggested by a chain of metaphors. The "cold and dim" city is his purgatory. The morning breeze and trees, the cool garden on the hill, and the hedges cut to look like birds are the symbols of Bombay man's unattained and unattainable hopes. The poet poses the question of why

*His native place he could not shun,
The marsh where things are what they seem? (A Morning Walk)¹⁵*

Ezekiel's irony is at its best in *In India*¹⁶. With him, irony is like a moving searchlight that sheds its brilliance on hitherto undiscovered corners of our dark existence, enabling us to see the reality that lurks behind appearances. The Roman Catholic Goan boys hastening to prayers after having their "solitary joy" with "high-heeled toys," the Anglo-Indian gentlemen drinking whisky in company with secretive Muslims, the wooden Indian wives who sit apart at parties, and the ubiquitous Bombay typist (or secretary) who is seduced by her English boss after an initial struggle are some of the tinged close-ups presented with devastating irony in the poem.

The "unplanned city has a death wish" and attracts several kinds of healers. "All of us are sick" and so need some kind of barbiturate meditation, a Guru or a godman.

We cannot find our roots here and don't know where to go, Sir
(*Family – Song for Nandu Bhende*)¹⁷

Caught in the vortex of a soulless city, the poet longs for salvation. His poetry becomes a perpetual quest for identity and commitment in a world of eroding individuality and lack of purpose. The poet expresses his dilemma thus:

.... *The door is always open, but I cannot leave (The Room)*¹⁸

Clearly, the image Eliot describes is not a new one. The masses have always been seen as downtrodden individuals, slaving away toward the sunset – waking up and starting all over without any change in scenery or routine. Eat. Sleep. Repeat.

The dehumanization of the modern world is caused by the monotony of the workplace, which naturally carries over into personal life. The sexuality of "The Waste Land" is an important aspect of its spirit.

The typist home at teatime clears her breakfast, lights
*her stove, and lays out food in tins. (222-3)*¹⁹

From the very beginning of the poem, the reader comes into contact with a barrage of images. What is interesting about the images themselves is that they combine concrete with the abstract to create a montage that evokes an overall picture in the reader's mind. The sun beats on what? The dead tree is sheltering what? What is the cricket relieving? There is no center to the images, thereby making them "broken" (*Waste Land* 22). By using a specific image and giving it no particular action or purpose, Eliot simply suspends the image in abstraction until others are pasted around it, thereby creating a dream-like scene. He uses this technique of concrete abstractions throughout the poem in order to piece together a setting and convey more abstract or lofty meanings.

Lawrence Rainey, author of *Revisiting "The Waste Land,"* writes about the effect of the fragmented imagery:

*To read the poem was to plummet through a series of broken sketches, antic turns, and fitful moments of oracular solemnity and lyrical intensity—a dreamworld experience that startled and disturbed. (111)*²⁰

Eliot wrote a good deal of the poem in London but worked on it while undergoing some rest-therapy at Margate and Lausanne. Eliot was known for having a nervous disorder, and the weight of balancing his jobs as a bank clerk, poet, and editor— all of this exacerbated

by the chaotic and stressful city life of London– gave him the need to search for some restoration elsewhere. In a sense, he stepped away from the wasteland for a while so that he could have a better look.

"The Waste Land," in its entirety, is a poem about the decline of Western traditions, values, and culture. This decline, perceived by the artists of the time, took place across all of Europe and America, but that scope is broad. Volumes could (and have) be written about the hollowing out of Western ideals. My interpretations of the research I present in this blog and the observations I take from London itself will focus on making London T. S. Eliot's symbolic inspiration for "The Waste Land." This will involve looking at the architecture of the city as inspiration for the fragmented form in which Eliot writes. It will involve visiting sites that are specifically mentioned in "*The Waste Land*" to witness firsthand the sights and sounds that inspired Eliot. It will involve studying the people of London, both historically and contemporaneously, to better understand the voices that echo in "*The Waste Land*". The dead and dying are to be found in the twisted ancient corridors of the massive city that has roots twisting all the way to ancient Rome, and it is the death in London that Eliot writes about.

Conclusion:

The idea of living death is very visible in London, not to mention other metropolitan cities. Hundreds of dead faces walk into the Tube (London's underground transit system) every day. Faces that can't afford a smile because they think you may try to sell them something or simply smile. Each one is buried in a book, a newspaper, a thought, or the floor in order to avoid acknowledging other human beings. Routine and responsibility have claimed them.

The idea of living death is fully introduced in the opening lines of 'The Waste Land':

April is the cruellest month, breeding Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing

Memory and desire stir dull roots with spring rain.

Winter kept us warm, covering Earth in forgetful snow, feeding

A little life with dried tubers. (1-7)²¹

When T. S. Eliot writes of "The Waste Land," he writes of the living death of the spirit and of the traditions of Western culture. The death is spiritual, cultural, and sexual in nature.

Similarly, Adil Jussawalla says that "*Nissim Ezekiel's poems are the records of the moral aches and pains of a modern Indian in one of his own cities*"²² The poet who has gone through the travails of the city finds no alternate tabernacle of hope. This existential frustration is expressed in *Enterprise*.

Like *Morning Walk* and *Entertainment*, this poem is moulded out of the fallouts of frustration in a "barbaric city." *Enterprise* is an allegory of the pilgrimage theme with a suggestion of futility. Journey from the city to the hinterland is a metaphor for contrived change from frustration to fulfilment. Even here a "shadow falls" on the group of pilgrims because.

.... .. differences arose on how to cross a desert patch (Enterprise)²³

The group ignores the thunder, which is nothing but the inner voice that should have guided the group. A man deprived of the inner voice or insensitive to the call of his own soul invariably rushes into impediments:

*Another phase was reached when we were thrice attacked and lost our way
A section claimed its liberty to leave the.... ... (Enterprise)
Home is where we have to gather grace. (Enterprise)²⁴*

Ezekiel incorporates the heat and dust, the sun and floods, and the sense of poverty and deprivation into the texture of his verse. The images of 'India' pervade all through his poetry. The changing reality of love and the human relationship on the one hand and the unchanging contours of the Indian landscape on the other are, as it were, the Spiritus Mundi from where he draws all his images. The commitment to 'self' and the city of his living helps him to create central images like those of his hero, the city, and the woman. In *The Unfinished Man* and *The Exact Name*, one notices that the city has moved forward to a prominent position in the poet's consciousness.

References:

- Nissim Ezekiel, Answer to questionnaire in *Modern Indian Poetry in English*, 2nd Ed. by P. Lal (Writers Workshop, Calcutta, 1971) p. 168
- Nissim Ezekiel, *Background, Casually*
- Nissim Ezekiel, 'Naipaul's India and Mine' in *New Writing in India*, Ed. Adil Jussawalla, p. 88
- T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* - V, Selected Poems (Faber) p. 64
- Nissim Ezekiel, 'Naipaul's India and Mine' in *New Writing in India*, Ed. Adil Jussawalla
- H. M. Williams, *Indo-Anglian Literature 1800-1970, A Survey*. (Orient Longman Ltd. 1976) p. 116
- T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* - V, Selected Poems (Faber) p. 64
- Amit Chaudhury, *At Churchgate Station*
- Chetan Karnani, *Nissim Ezekiel* (Arnold Heinemann, 1974) p. 105
- Nissim Ezekiel, *Urban*
- Garman, Michael 'Nissim Ezekiel – Pilgrimage and Myth' included in *Critical Essays on Indian Writing in English* Ed. by M. K. Naik, S. K. Desai & G. S. Amur (Macmillan, 1971) p. 145-46
- T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* - V, Selected Poems (Faber) p. 64
- Nissim Ezekiel, *Healers*
- Nissim Ezekiel, *Songs for Nandu Bhende – Family*.
- Anisur Rahaman, *Form and Value in the Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel*. (Abhinav Publications, 1981) p. 54
- 'The New Poetry' included in *Readings in Commonwealth Literature*, Ed. by William Walsh (Oxford, 1973) p. 79
- Iyengar, Srinivasa, K.R. *Indo-Anglian Literature*, Bombay: International Book House, 1943.
- Iyengar, Srinivasa, K.R. *Indo-Anglian Literature*, Bombay: International Book

House, 1943.

Iyengar, Srinivasa, K.R. Indo-Anglian Literature, Bombay: International Book

House, 1943.

T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* - V, Selected Poems (Faber)

Lawrence Rainey, *Revisiting "The Waste Land,"* (Yale University Press, 2005) p.111

T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* - V, Selected Poems (Faber) p. 64

Nissim Ezekiel, 'Naipaul's India and Mine' in *New Writing in India*, Ed. Adil

Jussawalla, p. 88

Ezekiel, Nissim. *Collected Poems*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989. Print.

zekiel, Nissim. *Collected Poems*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989. Print.

Citation:

Dr. Abhilasha Chauhan" THE CITY DESCRIBED BY T. S. ELIOT AND NISSIM EZEKIEL:A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE HOLLOW LANDS"*International Journal of English and Studies (IJOES)*, vol. 7, no. 4, 2025, pp. 1-9. DOI: 10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.04.09.