Chapter-II

THE CONTEXTS OF THE SELF

Essence and existence, as two distinct identifiable categories, are integral to Nissim Ezekiel's concept of the self. Essence signifies the given code of the self; it transcends and is prior to the process of existence. Existence involves the self in process; it brings the self into contact with the external world. An attempt is being made in this chapter to relate Ezekiel's concept of the self to the conditions of existence as represented in his text. It is assumed that the view of existence as represented in his writing reveals not only a socio-economic reality but also a complex construct of ideologies, perspectives, presuppositions, preconceptions, reassessments, reviews and realignments. It transcribes a reality, which binds the East and the West in a new socio-economic, politico-historical relationship. In the context of Ezekiel's environment, the existing social and historical facts of existence, reveal not so much the disparity of cultures, as the emergence of "a new world system", a new reality under which existence regroups as a heterogeneous and diffused network of conditions, characterized by the criss-cross overlapping of political, economic and cultural determinants that are the contributions of more than one region or tradition. And the medium that interacts with this reality, the
framework within which the poet works and views his experience, shows, to a considerable extent, the prevalence of certain habits, methods and assumptions that can be associated with the non-native, imperial English tradition.

Post-colonial writing is a part of this new reality and Nissim Ezekiel’s poetry, as a typical post-colonial structure, contains the characteristic ambivalence and complexity of this East-West relationship. The desire for a separate voice and identity is evident throughout his writing, but the necessity of this desire, the genuineness of his cause, however, fails to altogether do away with certain imperial propensities which had developed into organic elements of post-independence aesthetics itself. Niranjan Mohanty writes in an essay on the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel:

The post-colonial writing ... does not fully dissociate itself from the fabric of the historical truth of coloniality.¹

In the same essay, he writes:

It is perhaps most gratifying to view the post-colonial as a continuum of experience in which colonialism is perceived as an instrument of disturbance which besides unsettling the native discourses of culture brings in English discourses.²

English discourses mediate Ezekiel’s writing by implanting certain premises in his thinking, in his way of seeing the world, which brings
along with them what Robert C. Solomon calls the "transcendental pretence" and a particular way of viewing social and cultural phenomena from a universal point of view. The idea of universals is inextricably associated with the "transcendental pretence" which constitutes an inseparable component of western thinking and western worldviews. This tradition of interpretation based on a single imperial perspective creates a crucial problem for literatures such as Ezekiel's whose society and culture provide contesting perspectives and history. The awareness of this essential contradiction is one of the major concerns of Ezekiel's poetry. While he cannot completely rid himself of these influences, there is also an accompanying awareness of a basic cultural incompatibility which enables him to examine his own tradition and regionality vis-a-vis the overwhelming western heritage which the colonial process has implanted into his own consciousness.

The universal as a category has been a constant of western thought; it has been institutionalized and enshrined by the works of several writers in the English tradition. This is because within their episteme "truth" required a universal space and constancy. Western metaphysics or logocentric metaphysics shows an inherent inability to accept inconsistencies, incoherence and disparity. Samuel Johnson's famous
defence of William Shakespeare’s universal relevance is a classic instance of this tradition.

The major discourses in the English tradition, shows a general inability to proceed without a universal premise. The universal persists as an underlying axiom, a transcendental framework that pervades and is also outside the ambit of particular experiences and circumstances; an ideal form presiding over the many variants and transience of actuality. In the works of Plato and Aristotle, the source of all western theories and traditions, in the dictates of Samuel Johnson, in the romantic poems of Wordsworth, in the essays of Dryden and the epistles of Alexander Pope, in the theories of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in the absurdist view of existence, in the modernist works of T.S. Eliot, T.E. Hulme and even D.H. Lawrence experience and existence are interpreted from a single cultural and historical point of view that forms the basis of their universal world views. All these texts seem to overlook the existence of other cultures, other histories, other societies, other political and economic systems. From the post-colonial standpoint they seem to embody a text that seeks to transfix human diversity in a single universal and uniform relation; an imperialist myopia/delusion that translates particular experience and situation into universal predicaments and in its insensitivity to other modes
of being “overlooks the casual distinctions of country and condition.”

The imperialist concept of human nature/condition that these discourses establish, suffer from the limitations that are implicit in the very notion of universals.

The barriers of class difference collapse before Alexander Pope’s summary of existence, which in its fervour for universals is ready to sacrifice the inconsistencies provided by actual circumstances:

Condition, circumstance is not the thing;  
Bliss is the same in subject or in king,  
Heav’n breathes thro’ ev’ry member of the whole  
One common blessing, as one common soul.5

When unity or wholeness is the principle of truth, variation and difference become inessential and all circumstances and conditions tend to proceed towards sameness and harmony. The organic theory of Coleridge cited the ultimate form of poetry in “the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities”6 in a brilliant diffusion of the poetic power, where unity binds dissimilarity in a single imaginative formula and the conflict and the disease, and the incomplete forms of the finite world are absorbed by the ultimate beauty of truth and infinity. The euphoric visions of Wordsworth based on his experience of the English country side, apparently, does not take into consideration the presence of more
hostile habitats and less agreeable landscapes. These discourses suffer from an inability to look beyond the horizon of their own civilization. The horror of the World War I failed to exercise the ghost of the universal. The writings of the time reflect the terminal despair of a civilization that cannot escape its own doom. The world became a trap and the immensity of their horror could not conceive the limits of this predicaments. As stated by Jonathan Dollimore in Beyond Essentialist Humanism:

"It is sustained now by two surrogate universals — the absurdity of the human condition and (once again) consciousness as the grid of a determining absence, the latter now so powerfully conditioning experience and knowledge as to function as a kind of inverted Kantian category of consciousness... Texts like Waiting for Godot do indeed sustain these surrogate universals though only by collapsing them almost entirely into the subject where they survive not as the forms of unchanging truth but of an etiolated suffering stasis."

The universal is instituted in Ezekiel’s writing through the presence of ideas that posit the urban situation as an abstract predicament characterized by a common network of conditions. The urban situation defines a condition of existence, which in contemporary writings, signified a total subversion of human values by forces which were alarmingly unifying and transforming the world of man into an urban space. The urban system could nourish only the material needs of man and led conversely to an emaciation of man’s inner being. The urban as a modern structure,
signifies a spatial and semantic profusion that is quite incompatible with its 
traditional definition and amounts to a social crisis. The city in this context 
acquires an inseparable predominance over man’s existence and relegates 
the rural and the natural to the corner of man’s being. The urban system is, 
of course, as old as human civilization, but after the industrial revolution, it 
had assumed a significance that can be comprehended only in terms of a 
crisis, since it creates a break between the present and its past and is for 
that matter also modern.

The term modern can be used here to emphasize a repression of the 
old, a decimation of traditional modes of being and the emergence of a 
present that refers to its past as a distinct history that signifies its 
difference. Contemporaneity, as defined by Anglo-American Modernists, 
can be used to designate a specific stage of human civilization where 
certain established relations between man and (his) environment, the self 
and (its) existence had to be rethought; where existence and environment 
revealed conditions and characteristics that contradicted certain basic 
assumptions about man’s origin, nature and destiny. The forces of 
urbanization and the process as a whole affected man’s existence in areas 
where the city as a structure did not physically exist. The city no longer
simply represented a specific economic and industrial area but symbolized the home of modern man in general.

Such a view, however, cannot describe the entire human population. Modernity, itself, can be interpreted as a specific outlook, a specific ethos, a specific condition associated with the experience and knowledge of writers living within a determinate cultural area. It seems propitious to situate this phenomenon within the social and economic reality of the West. Though, as a particular way of life, as a specific way of theorizing and viewing the world, the modern overlaps into other times and cultures, historically it remains a distinct western phenomenon.

Within English literature, the modern can be more or less associated with a consciousness that tries to discover itself and its ‘present’ in the absence or disavowal of tradition and a past that has been irretrievably severed from its memory. The city as a literary motif had acquired a significance of its own by the nineteenth century. With Dickens, a new reality began to take shape; the urban landscape begins to replace the benign landscape of romantic poetry, the issues become shabbier and the ideal is removed by more finite and more immediate social problems. It was the age of cooperatives and the solicitude and identity of the individual was lost in the urban crowd. As writers like Dickens and
Arnold, saw the world around them, man’s environment, his place of work, his dwelling space was no longer edifying to his being, but has become a trap, a congestion of space, a devitalizing workshop from which escape and excursion was meaningless, if not altogether impossible, because this was the reality, the overwhelming, inescapable state of existence. Against the mechanical, scientific and material progress, writers like Dickens, Arnold, Ruskin and Carlyle saw an opposite decline in the life of sensibility, values, judgement and beauty. D.H. Lawrence writing on the urban system finds ugliness everywhere:

Now although perhaps nobody knew it, it was ugliness which really betrayed the spirit of man in the nineteenth century. The great crime which the moneyed classes and promoters of Industry committed in the palmy Victorian days was the condemning of the workers to ugliness: meanness and formless and ugly surroundings, ugly ideals, ugly religion, ugly hope, ugly love, ugly clothes, ugly furniture, ugly houses, ugly relationship between workers and employers. The human soul needs actual beauty even more than bread.8

In the writings of others like W.B. Yeats the sense of emptiness remains undiminished. as the tradition continues, the scene becomes gloomier and consciousness disintegrates into “a thousand sordid images”,9 unable to relate the disjunctured shifting sequence of reality. The Modernist critique of the city finds existence a burden and the city a modern inferno, a barren land where society, religion, culture, knowledge,
and consciousness are deracinated, disintegrated and dead. Life goes on without all these, a meaningless process, an incorrigible monotony, a mechanical duty, an industrial routine. Unity, which had been the conventional basis of truth, breaks up into ambiguity, anonymity and anarchy.

The city, whether, as a landscape/locale/metaphor/construct of writing has been immersed for too long in the purgatorial vision of the centre. Deposits of imperial writings, traces of western signifiers permeate and pervade its architecture, its landscape, its health, its very anatomy, its very existence. Outside the western horizon, it accepts only an addition, a localization, a variation that cannot be dissociated from the modern western proposition in which it has been conceived. It looms over the literatures of the world like a monster that cannot be domesticated into a regional/local species. It is because of this inevitable, inescapable, irrepressible enormity that the urban system cannot perhaps be thought except as a modern predicament, a universal as manufactured by the West in global proportions. The global markets and its freemarket policy, the gigantic Information and Technology system seem to reinstate the universal as a social, historical, economic and municipal fact that
undermines the barriers of human diversity and claims all places and peoples as its unit.

A poetry nourished by the axioms and aesthetics of the centre could not evacuate its deposit of knowledge without excising a vital part of its own history and anatomy. But at the same time the ‘transcendental pretence’ implicit in the centre’s world view as well as the universal clause attached by the centre to modern existence and the urban system could not have completely explained the complexity of existence as it existed in Ezekiel’s environment and time. It seems appropriate to quote Niranjan Mohanty again:

It is true that we live in an age of information where the process of globalization has taken an unimaginable enormity. Yet because of the specificities attached to one region, it remains so different from the other regions so that the artist or the poet or the writer retains his or her distinction by adhering to and celebrating, albeit sceptically exposing, analysing these specificities of that particular region. Nissim Ezekiel has successfully tried to eke out such an identity in his poems written in Indian English.¹⁰

All the same, Ezekiel is also not exactly free from the hold of the centre. The sprawling city, Bombay, spreads before him like an irrepressible universal. He cannot expunge the western matrix from his perception of the city. He cannot view its hopelessness, its emptiness, its squalor except as the symptoms of a universal phenomenon. It places his
poetry in the tradition of discourses that institutionalizes universals. The centre claims its share from the periphery.

The subject in ‘Urban’ is trapped in the city:

The city like a passion burns
He dreams of morning walks, alone,
And floating on a wave of sand
But still his mind its traffic turns
Away from beach and tree and stone
To kindred clamour close at hand.


The universe shrinks into a city. It circumscribes his being. The word “alone”, throws up the possibility of an escape into identity and selfhood: “He dreams of morning walks, alone, (117). But the city detains the mind; he cannot break the cycle of “kindred clamour close at hand”, (117). The fixity of the urban system is relentless, it enmeshes the individual in its process. The same inevitability is described in ‘Something to Pursue’:

To save myself
From what the city had made of me, I returned
As intended to the city I had known.

Knowledge and experience are conditioned to a point where departure becomes impossible:

He knows the broken roads, and moves
In circles tracked within his head. (117)
Therefore “The hills are always far away”, (117) and “His landscape has no depth or height.” (117) It leads to a depreciation of the inner being or all that is considered most vital to man’s being. “Being” is defined not by the present (or presence) but by an absence. It is always, already expelled from existence or at the most represents a worn out space, since

His will is like the morning dew. (‘A Morning Walk’)

His senses are dead:

At dawn he never sees the skies
Which, silently, are born again,
Nor feels the shadows of the night
Recline their fingers on his eyes.
He welcomes neither sun nor rain.
His landscape has no depth or height.

The rhythms and processes of nature cease to have meaning in his existence. It leads to what Heidegger calls a “forgetting of being”. Human being is in exile from his history and what remains of man is not an embodiment of humanness but a ceaseless evacuation of his history, tradition and truth. Human nature/condition in itself represented a specific relation between history, tradition and truth, which has been effaced by the history of modern man. Modern man is, therefore, a displaced being cut off
from his home without an identity, a faceless unit of the urban system. The environment is equally sterile; the elements are a part of this stasis:

The river which he claims he loves
Is dry, and all the winds lie dead. (117)

“The view from basement rooms” (39) in ‘A Poem of Dedication’ focusses the myopia of a generation. Man is a mutilated organism, consigned to an existence that stifles his faculties. The “basement rooms” signify the constriction and congestion of the self, a reduction of the self in terms of space and significance. The limitation becomes so oppressive that consciousness closes around itself, the self cannot break away from the circuit of his diurnal, quotidian, municipal boundary. His world is reduced to:

A patch or two of green, a bit of sky
Children heard but never seen, an old wall,
Two trees, a washing line between, windows
With high curtains to block the outward eye; (39)

The situation leads nowhere and the horror of such a survival rests not in an apocalyptic culmination or a sudden break. The horror is diurnal and worse for its plainness, it exists in the inexorable regularity, in the ceaseless repetition of “The ordinariness of most events” (138), a repetition that consumes hope and relief and elongates into despair. The city in ‘A Morning Walk’ with its architecture, its crowd, its occupations, its
transactions, its habitations, its street recur “like a tedious argument”, the sameness is horrifying:

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. (119)

The city is sick and the seasons do not bring change. There is no rebirth, no respite, the pain is a part of existence; it is a modern inferno. The pain abides in sex and conjugation:

However many times we came
Apart, we came together. The same
Thing over and over again. (124)

The disintegration is irreparable, the sterility is terminal. The self cannot emerge out of the prison of his own consciousness. Communication and communion is not possible.

According to ‘Nothingness’, only in nothingness there is reconciliation, because it frees the self from the burden of living. The curves of existence enchain and enmesh the self in the modern city. The narrative of living is composed of:

The impulse and the fear of love,
Small ambition sick at the roots, (50)
“dissolution”, “twenty thousand abysses”, “the turth/of nothingness, mortality”. If there is any pattern, that is absurdity and nothingness. ‘Sotto Voce’ suggests that life is incompleteness, imperfection and “Desires are half-desires”, (52) and love is unconsummated. This fact can be communicated only through the “fragments of a poem”, the “broken limbs” of poetry, scattered and diffused which “cannot make a man”. ‘For Her’ shows that even “A Knowing Creature” (67), someone really reliable, helpful and sympathetic cannot involve the whole self, cannot restore the coherence and identity of the self. The self wasted in the modern city without roots, without history, without identity in a present that continually alienates and displaces him. The self is elusive, fragmentary and disjointed and marriage, sex and friendship cannot redeem his wholeness.

All these add up to no end, no mitigation, no transformation; it only adds up to a despairing knowledge, that places nothingness at the bottom of existence:

    he knew
    That everything would be the same. (120)
    OR
    It seems that nothing changes, nothing grows, (39)

Nothingness seems to be the common feature of all cities, a sort of surrogate universal that ultimately reduces the existence of modern man into uniformity. The city in Ezekiel’s writings embodies an ideal, a
prototype into which the plurality of “cities” are being transfused, suppressed and lost. It gathers into itself the monotony of truth. The conditions of existence that it describes, the emptiness, the morbidity, the squalor, the stagnation, the disintegration, the chaos seem to be the inseparable constant of every city; they recur like postulates of an absolute precondition that pre-empts, mediates and determines each instance, each manifestation, each writing of the urban condition.

This aspect of Ezekiel’s writing affiliates him to discourses that viewed the urban phenomenon in universal, absolute terms. But the complexity of the East-West relationship places his poetry in quite a different plane by itself. His poems acknowledge the urban reality posited by western literatures but there is also the awareness that regional circumstances disrupt the seeming universality of their vision. Amidst the universal nothingness that pervades his urban poems there are evident gaps, moments of release, glimpses of hope that seem to mitigate the given totality of the colonizer’s world-view. In ‘A Poem of Dedication’ after enacting a circle of nothingness around itself:

Suddenly the mind is loosed of chains
And purifies itself before the warm
Mediterranean, which fills the veins,
To make the body beautiful and light —
Heaviness of limbs or soul can mimic calm —
I close the eyes to see with better sight. (39)
The residual irreconciliability between the centre and the periphery clearly comes out in ‘In India’:

The wives of India sit apart.
They do not drink,
They do not talk,
Of course, they do not kiss. (133)

Such differences, however, do not wholly exempt the region from its affinity with the centre. But in their own way these incompatibilities expose the limits of the colonizer’s theory, they reduce its scope and identify areas where the invader failed to leave his mark. For a poet trying to assert his own voice, the presence of such gaps is cause for defiance and joy, it provides him with materials to exhibit the specificities of his own region. As Niranjan Mohanty writes:

Ezekiel, living “among the beggars
Hawkers, pavement sleepers,
Hutment dwellers, slums,
Dead souls of men and gods,
Burnt-out mothers, frightened
Virgins” ... in the island
“unsuitable for song as well as sense”
and watching the monkey-show on Bombay’s streets
where “only the monkeys are sad” and where “some in shame, part
With the smallest coin they have” has in the process learnt
how to endear the city, hold on to its diverse electrifying facets of survivalism.¹³

This is a departure from the universal perimeters of the city and an identification with the actual and diverse conditions of city life in Bombay.
The limitations of the colonizer’s view about urbanization and modern man are evident in the Indian context. The social and religious life of India provides enough diversity and differences to counteract the supposed universality of the centre’s world-view. It can be said here that within the social, religious and cultural context of India, the conditions of existence were perhaps not as decaying and dehumanizing as in English or Western cities. Spiritual morbidity and psychic desiccation were symptoms not exactly relevant to the Indian situation. If rootlessness and displacement was the common scourge of capitalist cities, perhaps, in India, the roots of society and culture were rather too deep and old. Orthodoxy and conformity to established rules and customs were having the opposite effect in Indian societies. If the loneliness and incommunicability of the individual in modern societies was becoming unbearable due to the disintegration of common beliefs and codes, in Ezekiel’s society “the question of the individual ranged against establishment assumes a sharp and strident note” because “the poet has to cross the hurdles set by code ethics, or grapple with fossilized tradition.”

At the moment when Ezekiel scripted these poems (A Time to Change to The Exact Name) there was a vast difference in the political atmosphere of the West and India. India was romancing with its new identity as a nation and experiencing the immensity of nationhood, a new feeling, because for
the first time in its long history, all of this diverse subcontinent was being stitched together into such a big whole.

Depression, malaise, entropy or ennui scarcely seem to have been part of the consciousness of a new political community initiated into independence. The socio-cultural relations were relatively static. The adoption of a western style political edifice, did not bring about much actual change in the social and cultural life of India. India still lived in its villages. Urbanization affected only a small section of Indian society. Continuity was still an impressive characteristic of Indian culture. The political upheaval and the long history of invasions had failed to shake institutions, such as the caste system, the family structure, and marriage laws — some of them thousands of years old. Rituals and rites, customs and codes were essential and vital to an individual’s being. Of course, it is not appropriate to attribute a person with individual freedom and autonomy in the Indian context. The history and civilization of India does not sanction such a meaning and concept. The concept of a secular human condition, extricated from social and religious antecedents appears anomalous and alien within the tradition of India. Humanitarianism, equalitarianism and secularism are not traditional Indian values. Legal systems were established to sustain the interest of privileged social and religious groups.
Inequality is an integral part of Indian social life. Values could not be conceived outside the established codes of religion. The self's function and value were inextricably linked with religious destiny and origin. A woman's social importance contained in progenition. Sex and marriage had explicit social purpose. Marriage was not solely a union of individuals but an equation involving familial, racial and caste interests.

The paradigm of Indian civilization, strictly speaking, did not recognise the individual site, as a self-determining and autonomous entity. So the problems that arises at the individual level in Ezekiel's poetry the "I" that suffers in his poems, the consciousness that addresses and articulates the predicament of the individual falls outside the tradition of India. His poetry contains a way of seeing, a way of writing that privileges the individual in a sense that is not historically provided for by his native space.

The idea of the individual is itself a culturally limited term. It represents an idea, a discovery, a space made possible by certain specific relations involving definite economic, social, religious, political factors and events that were limited to Europe. In his study of Renaissance or the city states of fifteenth century Italy Jacob Burckhardt finds in this period, as Tony Davis writes:
The development of a universal capacity to think of yourself, in a fundamental way, as an individual: not as Florentine or Marseilles or a sailor or Roman Catholic or somebody's daughter and grand-daughter, important though all these affiliations might be, but as a free-standing self-determining person with an identity and a name that is not simply a marker of family, birth place or occupation but is 'proper' — belonging to you alone.\textsuperscript{15}

The notion of the individual, is more or less a typical bourgeois discovery; the bourgeois revolution of modernity, as a matter of fact, developed exclusively in the west.

Such a condition did not exist in India. Its history does not provide any combination of circumstances, events or developments that would have been congenial to "the development of a universal capacity to think of yourself, in a fundamental way, as an individual".\textsuperscript{16} The story of the "individual" a complete being, a Christopher Columbus, a Don Quixote or an Odysseus, going out for adventure and survey in hope of glory and discovery, returning back in time, a Prufrock or a Godot, disillusioned to find himself alone, incommunicable, rootless and lost in a modern purgatory is irrelevant in the context of Indian history and culture. The concept of the "individual", perhaps confronts a crisis of meaning outside the history of Europe. The autonomy of the individual, his inviolable difference is not possible within the traditional framework of Indian thought. The accumulated network of communal, religious, familial and
other inherited affiliations outweigh a person’s supposed individual priorities. As it has been already said, the individual consciousness, the self, that is aware of its own individual priorities and obligations is a foreign tissue transplanted into the writing of Ezekiel. It is an accumulation, a development in a mind exposed for too long to the expectations, reading habits, attitudes, demeanors, views and vocabulary of the colonizer. The colonizer introduced a network of schools, markets, industries, jobs, technologies and laws in its colonies, which led to the colonization of the centre’s worldview in these areas.

The respective condition of existence in India and the west reveals the incompatibility of tradition and modernity. In one, tradition represents a continuous whole and in the other tradition is subjected and appropriated by the forces of modernism. The post-colonial space, it can be said here, represents the various temporary encounters between tradition and modernism. Post-colonial writings build themselves by ceaselessly eroding the supposed wholeness as well as the disparity of both these cultures. It seeks to view existence in the context of the cultural hybridity that has consumed the identity of both traditional and modern societies and is a more appropriate term to describe the condition of existence in the erstwhile colonies.
It must be said here, that post-colonial writing does not describe a strict dichotomy between the colonizer’s worldview and native discourses. The colonizer’s worldview does not come to the post-colonial poet as a unified whole. It represented a dubious battleground of several theories and it was only obvious that the ideological battles fought at the centre reverberated to the periphery. Further, poets like Ezekiel saw before them a new reality, which was disrupting the traditional values and establishments of his own region.

In ‘In India’, the celebration at “the year’s end”, foreign mannerisms and styles, however slightly, intrude the atmosphere of the party:

The men are quite at home
among the foreign styles
(What fun the flirting is!)  
I myself, decorously,
press a thigh or two in sly innocence.
The party is a great success.
(Collected Poems, p.133)

At the same time, the transformation is not quite complete:

The wives of India sit apart.
They do not drink,
they do not talk,
Of course, they do not kiss.
(Collected Poems, p.133)
Here two different cultures are engaged in a strange company. The linguistic corruption is beautifully expressed in 'Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.:'

Friends
our dear sister
is departing for foreign
in two three days
and
we are meeting today
to wish her bon voyage. (p.190)

Even in 'Background Casually' where Ezekiel states his decision to remain in his backward place, the 'foreign' intervenes his consciousness and the foreign audience is taken for granted: "To be observed by foreigners". (181)

It was not only a change in perspectives and literary style but also a change in the socio-economic reality of India. In his works the given tradition and culture of his native civilization are not simply taken for granted. They are being subjected to a vigorous process of reassessment and review. Around him the existing institutions, knowledge, technology, values and beliefs revealed if not the facets of modernism itself, at least, its effects in a new dispersion of conformity and change, which was neither exactly modern nor traditional but could be more appropriately indicated by the word modernization which signifies a process of change, a
compromise between the forces of modernism and the traditional institutions. M.N. Srinivas in *Social Change in Modern India* defines modernization as:

A popular term for the changes brought about in a non-western country by contact, direct or indirect, with a western country is "modernization"... "modernization" includes a "disquieting positive spirit" touching "public institutions as well as private aspirations". But the positivist spirit is not enough, a revolution in communications is essential. Modernization is also marked by increasing urbanization which has, in turn, resulted in the spread of literacy. The latter again has tended to enhance "media exposure" and finally enhanced media exposure is associated with wider economic participation (voting). Modernization also implies social mobility: "A mobile society has to encourage rationality for the calculus of choice shapes individual behaviour and conditions its rewards. People come to see the social future as manipulated rather than ordained and their personal prospects in terms of achievement rather than heritage".17

This did not amount to an obliteration of the old ways of survival, it only represented one of the many facets of the new reality which consisted not in the institutionalization of one value or system but a dispersion of several colours, several views, several customs, several traditions, several changes. In such a diffusion of facts and theories there can be no simple binaries or opposites: the past-present, tradition-modernity, east-west, centre-periphery, non-native-native antitheses are endlessly disturbed and distorted by shifting temporary relations. Reality is subverted by realities and unity by plurality. Father, this phenomenon is confined not to the
centre or periphery as culturally, politically, economically discrete conditions but exhibit a multi-dimensional reality that engages the centre and periphery, culture and cultures, economy and economies, country and countries, state and states, people and peoples in one common global condition.

The stasis described in ‘A Poem of Dedication’, ‘Urban’, ‘A Morning Walk’ is of a nature which cannot be attributed to a specific city. It is the system of a new global phenomenon. One can find such description in many western texts:

You tossed a blanket from the bed,  
You lay upon your back, and waited;  
You dosed, and watched the night revealing  
The thousand sordid images  
Of which your soul was constituted  

The diversity, the incoherence, the temporariness regroups, however diffusely, in one hybridity, in one dispersion, in one difference, in a new world system that is in its own uniform. David Murdoch describes this as follows:

We must also pay attention to the cultural hybridity that is the natural feature of post-colonial writing and that has become one of the most-characteristic features of the modern world itself.
The barriers of culture and country collapse only to reintroduce a new culture that includes the dispersion of culture and history in a new uniformity that transfuses particulars into a new universal relation. At the back of this phenomenon is what Adorno calls the “massification of culture”, the “progressively conscious participation of the masses in public life”, the “technical development of machinery” and the “shallowing of intellectual life”, which leads to a reduction of the “I”, the cause of individuality. A decisive event in this development were the two world wars. According to Milan Kundara:

Suddenly in our century, the world is closing around us. The decisive event in that transformation of the world into a trap was surely the 1914 war, called (for the first time in history) a world war, wrongly ‘world’. It involved only Europe and not all of Europe at that. But the adjective ‘world’ expresses all the more eloquently the sense of horror before the fact that henceforward, nothing that occurs on the planet will be a merely local matter, that all catastrophes concern the entire world, and that consequently we are becoming more and more determined by external conditions, by situations that no one escape and that more and more make us resemble each other.

This is where geographical, political and cultural diversity ceases to have meaning.

In a fast unifying world, Bombay, perhaps as a centre of hectic economic activity was already, increasingly, becoming a part of this reductive, generalizing process during the time in which these works were
produced. In Rushdie’s words, “Bombay was central. In Bombay, as the old, founding myth of the nation faded, the new god-and-mammon India was being born.” The social and economic condition here, unlike in the rest of the country was perhaps complex enough to approximate the urban decay of the West without much incongruity.

The writings of Ezekiel are to a considerable extent the peculiar product of the urban matrix that was Bombay. As economic and commercial development has a way of diminishing difference and collapsing barriers, the attribution of urbanity and its problems to Bombay, serves to emphasize the universalizing and unifying state of “contemporaneity” or modernity, to which industry and commerce can lead. This is accompanied by a necessary reduction of man’s role and perhaps his exclusion from the process of change and development. This leads to the effacement of the essential characteristics of man from the story of existence. The structure of existence is fast reconstructed along lines laid down by the commercial and industrial system. And it can be stated that this condition was becoming global, common and universal in an alarming rate.

So, while including existence as an integral aspect of his concept of the self, Ezekiel had to consider all these changing conditions which
determined the position, nature and value of the self in his immediate environment.
NOTES


