

Irony and Satire in the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel

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ABSTRACT

Nissim Ezekiel is one of the best known writers of modern period. Awarded with the prestigious Padmashri in 1988 and Sahitya Akademi in 1983, he is also referred to as the "Godfather of Indo Anglican poetry" and is unarguably the pioneer of Indian-English poetry, father of post-independence and modern poetry of India. With the use of common themes, easy diction and realistic sensibility, Ezekiel paints the struggles of Indian society with modern innovations and techniques laying enormous influence throughout the sub-continent. His work is often seen in similar light of R.K. Narayan. Wide population relates and identifies with his works as he deals with themes based on daily life of India with central concerns on familial issues, individual human condition, poverty and skeptical societal norms, all emphasized with use of irony and satire. Beginning with A Time to Change, his other collection of poetry, numbering to ten, portrays concern for human aspects of life.

Keywords- Irony, Satire, modern, post-independence India, society, people, hypocrisy

In poetry of Nissim Ezekiel, he presents the Indian life, its people and society with vivid and realistic description of every dimension in order to bring in focus the untouched and unmodified picture of the society. He employs irony and satire so as to highlight the critical issues in the country and bring awakening and enlightenment in the readers. Ezekiel writes about the real situation not with a distant observation but with his personal experience. Widely acclaimed as the Father of Post Independence Indian Verse in English is ironically questioned about being a Hindu. In his 1976 essay "Naipaul's India and Mine," he states-

"While 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. When I was eighteen, a friend asked me what my ambition was. I said with the naive modesty of youth, 'To do something for India.'"¹

The mentioned words of Ezekiel are evident that his aim is to bring paint the picture of society and people in a satirical way, for the love of his desire to do something as a country person. He further says,

"India is simply my environment. A man can do something for and in his environment by being fully what he is, by not withdrawing from it. I have not withdrawn from India."²

Nissim Ezekiel has thus been able to give the picture of post independence India, along with the long followed traditions, and realities of life. Bruce King studies him in comparison with A.K. Ramanujan. Themes in the work of Ezekiel deal with "urban experience, social reality, philosophical meditations..."³ Ezekiel's personal experience in the urban times by looking at and analyzing the state of society and people, their struggle's and dilemma invokes use of irony and satire. To quote Gajendra Kumar, Ezekiel "looks at India with a more focus on its contemporary social and political life."⁴ "His poetry is not about personal choices, moral relationships, and the active self on society; it records 'sentiment, pity and social ironies.'"⁵ With the projection of reality, Ezekiel sets the objective of the poems in ironic mode. He presents things as they are, without any subtraction or any additional fabrication. The absence of comedy and tragedy enforces irony and satire with representation of reality with large perspective. He uses normal everyday instances and adds with them a tinge of ironic contrast. The 1952 collection of poems *A Time to Change* runs in the ironic mode, as projected by the name itself which indicates his turn from thinking philosophy to bringing reality into vision through poetry. Though he does not strictly confirm to or adhere to any dogma of

religion and politics, his poetry is still seen to have references taken from spiritual beliefs. He refers to interests and traditions like Judaism, Hinduism, Christianity, but for only employing intellectual aspect and concept. He believed that poetry could prove a beneficial source of discovering, innovating and organizing life and that poetry could spare all the confusions, superficialities, and similar sufferings and devastating conditions. So, *A Time to Change* has Biblical allusions which can be felt rooted in ironical use of words like “time” and “change.” It centers on the irony of life where time is not stable, but demands a change to be associative with an instance of it. It denotes the disillusionment and exhausted soul of the modern man who is caught torn between time and change.

“We who leave the house in April, Lord,

How shall we return?”(Collected poems)

Inder Nath Kher remarks on “A Time to Change”-“A Time to Change” focuses on the modern man's continuous quest for meaning and identity in the material world here and now of existence, while at the same time it highlights the human conditions which frustrate such an attempt”.⁶

His representation of the human aspects with realistic sensibility shows his influence from T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, James Joyce, W.B. Yeats and W.H. Auden. The way Eliot portrays the devastated, disillusioned and traumatic state of London in his *The Wasteland*, Ezekiel, too, shows concerns for decadence of modern life. Iyengar says, “The recurring note in Ezekiel’s recent poems is the hurt that urban civilization inflicts on modern man, dehumanizing him, and subjecting his verities to pollution and devaluation.”⁷ Ezekiel proposes the bleak and squalid state of the time and muddled sensibilities of the society, its people and the citizens. The shifting perspective from tradition to modernity results in chaos and stench. The modern day city and country of Ezekiel has a similar image like that of Eliot’s destructed wasteland. However when the modern poets have a critical view of the misbalance and filth, Ezekiel does not shy away from showing the cruel image of the scenes and thus succeeds in triggering the satire on modern time, post independence India. He represents the city as “...the squalid, crude/ city of my birth and rebirth.”

⁸It is more ironic to see how the poet has been blooming with words and expression amid the squalor. He presents how on the one hand the world is advancing in leaps and bounds, the matter around are still in the static stench. He writes in his “A Morning Walk”-

“Barbaric city sick with slums,
Deprived of seasons, blessed with rains,
Its hawkers, beggars, iron-lunged,
Processions led by frantic drums...”(A Morning Walk)

The poem “Urban” is also replete with the satirical note depicting the struggles and quest for truth and identity. However, the struggles, failures and frustrations lead not only the collapse of man but also the modern city fiasco.

“The hills are always far away.

He knows the broken roads,

The river which he claims he loves

Is dry, and all the winds lie dead.

...The city like a passion burns.”⁹

He has a concern for showing the reality without polishing or eroding the natural aspects. His concern for humanity and for common man stands upright in his painting the picture of poverty in India. His “The Railway Clerk” very well shows his direct ironical and satirical statement of Indian system and its relationship with money and greed. The ironic mode of the poem gives an insight into the poor lives of clergy in Indian government offices and their indulging in wrong methods of seeking and obtaining money. Ezekiel poses satire not just on the people working in administration, the bureaucrats and the clerks in the Indian government, but also the family construct based on financial contracts. He gives a repulsive image of women who have an affinity for money. In addition to this, he also points satire towards malpractices of bribes in the system:

“My wife always asking for money,

Money, money, where to get money?

My job is such, no one is giving bribe” ¹⁰

In this way, he showcases the social problems like greed, corruption, poverty with ironic overtones running through them. “The Double Horror” satirizes on the corruption that tears the modern man with fear and trouble of infecting the world with corruption. The tone of exaggerated pride in profession is found the satirical poem “The Professor.” The poem has a satirical and ironic tone where the poet exposes and satirizes the boastful attitude of the established and educated classes, which comes of money and stature in the society.

Ezekiel takes interests in human relationships as well. His poetry deals with the familial events, human interaction, relation between man and woman. In *Edinburgh Interlude* he satirizes the age old norm of relationship between a daughter-in-law and her mother-in-law. The tradition has been screaming for the odd terms between the two women and the status of man who is husband of one and son of another. The poem satirizes the role of women which is claimed by people about majority of mothers-in-law. The ironical tome shows the double character played by the mother-in-law, where she assumes to be supporting and concerned lady but has a different face in front her son, where she criticizes his wife, who was ironically a choice of her (mother-in-law’s) own. Ezekiel presents such typical events in Indian household. The satire underlying these words also poses a criticism on condition of women in Indian society. While the woman in her father’s home is claimed as alienated entity, the husband home is no less an alien accommodation. The poem “Ganga” is another piece where the poverty and human condition and suffering in life of a woman is shown with ironical satire. It is an irony of the Indian society that lacks no amount of generosity for their servants by offering them the stale, even perished food. Another irony of fact is that despite being “suspected for prostitution” she “is not dismissed.” This is a critique of the treatment of domestic help. It poses satire on lack of dignity of labor as well as bias in genders. Another dimension of human relationships that Ezekiel tries to expose is through the Indian culture and ethos. He expresses about the experiences in lives of people dealing with relationship between man and woman, love and sex. His poem “The Couple” satirizes the hypocrisy involved in the sexual behaviors of the man and woman. It ironically represents the dearth of love in the act of love-making. Some poetry of Ezekiel is filled with ironical tones of skeptical societal introspection. In the poem “The Great” the speaker looks at the past and the present with an ironical sight for comparison between the two. He tells that the great from the past are seen with utmost respect and models for workings in the present. The poem begins with admiration of the poet about his love for the great. However, gradually, the ironical twist depicts the dilemma in the present life where the speaker and the fellow men are rendered alone in their quest to being like great. The constant juxtaposition of the present with those of the old models and stories, with employment of antithetical expressions, have been impacting in an ironical form where the speaker strives to be the same like great, but is disillusioned to see all the fellow beings left alone and disheartened, depicting great as “the paradoxes of the real.” “The Egoist’s Prayer” from *Hymns in Darkness* also shows the skeptical attitude of speaker who shows no worth of significance for either “wisdom” or “folly.” This post independence man is ready for bribing or influencing the God for his comfort and says, “Strike a bargain with me Lord/ I’m not a man of ample means.” “Night of the Scorpion” is a poetry that satirizes the exaggeration over superstitions followed in post-independence India. Mother thanking God for saving her children is laid with comical irony, satirizing the trend that has not left India despite with new advances and modern thought. The distinguishing aspect of Ezekiel with his use of innovative modern technique also emphasizes his satirizing the hypocrisy in the way of use of English language in India and by post independence Indian people. He ironically acknowledges the desire of Indian to speak the foreign language fluently, but with wrong grammar and defective pronunciation. So, this “Big Daddy of Indian English Poetry” employs use of extra “-ing” i.e. using present continuous tense instead of present simple tense to highlight the inaccuracy of grammar used in Indian English. Besides this, he also brings into use some Hindi vocabulary like goonga, guru, burkha, behn, et al, to give an essence of Indianness in his poetry. “Goodbye Party to Miss Pushpa T.S.” is a “very Indian poem in Indian English” where Ezekiel comically satires the use of English by the Indian blood while speaking. The poem “The Patriot” is an avid example of this satirical content of Ezekiel

“Other day I am reading in newspaper

(everyday I’ m reading times of India

to improve my English language)

how one goonda fellow
threw stone at Indira behn”¹¹

S.K. Kumar writes, “His irony comes through more incisively in his poems written in Indian English, which is a mix of Indian vernacular and half-baked English.” Mallikarjun Patil writes, “Ezekiel is not only a good poet in the post-Independence India, but he is also a cause of good poetry in others.... What Thomas Hardy was to England in the early twentieth century, Ezekiel is to India in the post-Independence era.”¹²

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