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## **Ironic and Satiric vein in Nissim Ezekiel**

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**Abstract:** Nissim Ezekiel is one of the greatest poets of modern India. His achievement as an Indian English poet is highlighted when we find out that he has liberated Indian poetry in English from the bondage of the British Romantic and Victorian poets who had magnetized a widespread influence on the choice of themes and styles by the pre-independence Indian English poets. He uses common themes, simple language, and real picture of society. Struggle of Indian society with modern innovation can be seen in his works. He uses irony and satire in his poetry. He deals with themes based on daily life of his country with central concerns on familial issues individual human condition, poverty, superstitions, norms etc. His poetry never reveals the theme of tragedy or comedy but rather a kind of social consciousness, message through his tool of irony and satire.

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Nissim Ezekiel is an Indian poet who is famous for writing his poetry in English. He had a long career spanning more than forty years, during which he drastically influenced the literary scene in India. Many scholars see his first collection of poetry “A time to change”, published when he was only twenty-eight years old, as a turning point in past colonial Indian literature towards modernism. Ezekiel infused new life into Indian English poetry after it had become effete and listless under the impact of the Georgian and Edwardian poetry of Britain. His poetry appeared on a barren scenario of Indian English poetry in the early fifties of the twentieth century. Since then, he has been writing and publishing poetry. On one hand, he liberated Indian English poetry from the tenor of effete indeterminate pastiche frequently smacking of romantic nausea and nostalgia. On the other hand, he made Indian English poetry more Indian than English in content, attitude, and form. Ezekiel has been able to wield a potent impact on the past independence of Indian English poetic scenario. He is a progenitor of a host of Indian English poets who have followed him in achieving the dual objectives of poetic creativity namely Thematic and Stylistic liberation and rootedness in the varied and complex milieu and ethos of the Indian situation.

Ezekiel employs and irony and satire as a tool to highlight the critical issues in the country and brings awakening and enlightenment among the readers. He writes about the real situation, not with the distant observation, but with his personal experience. Widely acclaimed as the father of post-independence Indian verse in English he 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*

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was eighteen, friends asked me what my ambition was, I said with a naïve modesty of youth, 'To do something for India'."

By the mentioned words of Ezekiel, it is evident that his aim is to paint the picture of society and people in a satirical way. 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."*

Nissim Ezekiel has thus been able to give the picture of post-independence India with its long-followed traditions and realities of life. Thus, he has painted the picture of India after independence, and he has achieved the unburdening of India English poetry of the heritage of the colonial past. **H.L.V. Derozio(1807-1831)**, a Eurasian, was a fiery iconoclast, and a patriotic poet of India, writing the first English verse in India as one who loves India deeply. Below is quoted the first quatrain from his poem, **"The Harp of India."**:

*"Why hang'st thou lonely on yon withered bough?*

*Unstrung for ever, must thou there remain;*

*Thy music once was sweet – who hears it now?*

*Why doth the breeze sigh over thee in vain?"*

In the historical perspective the poem is an important one, but it cannot escape the stigma of imitativeness. Mostly, the poems of Ezekiel deal with Urban experience, social reality, philosophical meditations.

We find Ezekiel's personal experience in urban lives where he comes in touch with people struggling with their lives. He uses irony and satire to convey the real situation in Society.

To quote Gajendra Kumar, Ezekiel "looks at India with more focus on contemporary social and political life. His poetry is not about personal choices, moral relationships, and the active self on society, it records sentiment, pity, and social irony." With the project of reality, Ezekiel sets the objective of the poem 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 to them a tinge of ironic contrast.

Ezekiel is pioneer of textual criticism in Indian English literature. He is detached, frank and straight forward in his observations. He is true to his convictions and does not toe the line of established and authoritative judgement. He has also passed magisterial comments on English and American poets. A detached and keen observer of both life and literature. He passes his critical judgement after cool and sustained deliberation and in a lucid and succinct manner sums up the distinctive qualities and shortcomings of poet or writer. As he says about David Wagoner, an American poet:

*"In his early verse, as in his novels, Wagoner creates a few characters who are as real as those in the drama of Chekhov or the friction of Tolstoy, though the idiom in which they exist is far from realistic."*

A close study of Ezekiel's poetry reveals two kinds of irony: *"one closely allied to satire where the poet starts at a distance from the where the poet starts at a distance from the object looked at, the other, closely allied to compassion where the poet experiences the experience as if from within."*

The first type of irony can be seen in early poems and second kind of irony can be seen in the later period. Both types of irony are intermingled in Ezekiel's middle period. In fact, the ironical method can be visible everywhere in his poetry.

'A Time to Change' (1952) is a memorable achievement. It reveals Ezekiel's concern for existence and search for identity. It 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 still seems 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 he 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 find the representation of human aspects with realistic sensibility in his poetic works. It 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."

The modern-day city and country of the poet, has same image as that of Eliot's destructed wasteland. The poet does not feel shy from showing the cruel image of the scenes. He succeeds in triggering the satiric vein on modern time past India's independence. He represents the city as "the squalid, crude city of my birth and rebirth." It 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 is still in the static stench. He writes in his "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)

Being an urban poet, Ezekiel knows the pulse of city life and has dealt with the different dimensions of life in the city in his poetry. His poem "Urban" tells us about the story of a man living in a big city such as Bombay in India and this man is caught up in the dream of sex and power and for whom there is no recovery. The poem describes the struggle of a man between the Bombay search for the nourished dream of a free and peaceful existence and his persistent inability to get to that level because of the city influence on him.

The poem 'Urban' is 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."*  
(Urban)

Ezekiel 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”* (The Railway Clerk)

In the way, he showcases the social problems like greed, corruption, poverty with ironic overtones running through them. Ezekiel’s enterprise is a beautiful narration of the spiritual journey of our greater saints and sages whose mission of life for the people of the country was like a pilgrimage for the enlightening of knowledge. During this journey, a situation is examined with an ironic detachment with a hope that solution would emerge in due course. That is why pilgrimage surfaced as they faced difficulties on the way. The difference among the members of the group going on pilgrimage surfaced as they faced difficulties on the way. As quoted lines below arrest our attention:

*“But when the difference arose  
On how to cross a desert patch  
We lost a friend whose stylish prose  
Was quite the best of all our batch.  
A shadow falls on us and grows”* (The Patriot)

The narrator is a patriot and claims that he stands for peace and non-violence. He questions why the world is fighting and why we are not following Mahatma Gandhi and his wisdom. The poem ‘Ganga’ shows a typical Indian situation of the servant in typical Indian families in which the servants are dealt with the act of generosity. The poet records the ironic situation in this manner:

*“She always gets  
A cup of tea  
Preserved for her  
From the previous evening  
And a Chapatti, sale  
But in good condition.  
Once a year, an old  
Sari and a blouse  
For which we could easily exchange a plate  
Or a cup and saucer”* (Ganga)

Ezekiel is full of emotion and feels pity and sad for every surrounding problem. He shows his concern for Indian women as they are subdued, oppressed, subjugated, and marginalized in patriarchal society. ‘Background Casually’ is an excellent example of his use of irony to achieve comic effects and to hit his targets of criticism. In this poem Ezekiel ironically describes himself as a poet rascal-clown. The irony becomes more marked as the poem proceeds. As it can be seen in the following lines:

*“They told me I had killed the Christ,  
That year I won the scripture prize  
I have made my commitment now  
This is one to stay where I am  
As others choose to give themselves  
In some remote and backward place,  
My backward places where I am.”* (Background Casually)

Ezekiel in his poetry shows the young generation in a humorous way. He mocks them to show them their actual position which they must rectify, and here he also takes one weapon of irony.

Ezekiel makes a fine use of satire in the poem 'The Visitor'. The poem shows the folk-belief that of a crow caws three times, the superstition proves itself true in the form of the arrival of a visitor. The poet prepared himself to deal effectively with the visitor who would come to see him and whose information of arrival had been conveyed to him in advance by the cawing of the crow. This poem exposes the hollowness and absurdism in the form of the visit. Through his poem Ezekiel wants to make Indians perfect by which they can perform their works in specific time. As he says:

*“Three times the crow has cawed  
At the window, baleful eyes fixed  
On mine, wings slightly raised  
In sinister poise, body tense  
His hands were empty, his need:  
Only kill a little time.  
Between his good intentions  
And my sympathy, the cigarette smoke  
Was more substantial than our talk”* (The Visitor)

*“A relief party came at last  
Five students with a transistor  
A tin of biscuits, a Camera.”* (The Truth About the Floods)

The above lines are an irony on the relief party consisting of five students who distribute biscuits among floods affected people. Their main motive is getting popularity by photography rather than the true sense of social service.

In “Marriage” irony has been employed to expose the fleeting nature of the love which had brought the lovers together in marriage.

In “Night of the Scorpion” the poet records those exact situation of the night when his mother was stung by a scorpion. The concluding ironical lines cancel out all earlier responses to Scorpion sting. The mother remains in bearable pain till twenty hours. She was not much oppressed by own suffering, but the idea of her children’s suffering tormented her more.

The mother’s final speech shows Indian mother’s love for their children and all her previous pains have gone. Here lies the irony with a typical Indian motherly attitude:

*“My mother only said  
Thank God the scorpion picked me  
And spared my children”* (Night of the Scorpion)

This irony shows itself in the way in which the poet has described the efforts been made by all those who have gathered at the spot to relieve the woman’s pain.

R. Parthasarathy comments on the poem: “Night of the Scorpion evokes superstitious practices we haven’t still outgrown. It enacts an impressive ritual in which the mother’s reaction, towards the end to her own sufferings ironically cancels out earlier responses both primitive and sophisticated. The relationship between the domestic tragedy and the surrounding community is unobtrusively established.”

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.”

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