Re reading Nissim Ezekiel: A Postmodern Critic
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Abstract: Postmodern Indian English Literature is one of the many new literatures that emerged after 1980. And Indian English Poetry flourished with the writing of Nissim Ezekiel, the father of modernism in Indian English Poetry. His poetry has a unique style that also marks his poetic art. As a poet of sensibilities, he wants to show in his poetry a sense of discipline, critical approaches, satire, irony in order to show the follies, foibles and problems that lie in the then India. Actually, he wants to show apprehending reality, enigmatic, ambiguous, complex and unknowable truth through his poetry. His poetry does not evoke tragedy or comedy but rather a kind of social consciousness, message through his mode of satire, humour and irony. In this paper I have attempted to show Ezekiel as a postmodern critic with special reference to some of his eternal verse.

Keywords: Satire, Irony, Postmodern, Humour, Concern, Critic

I. Introduction

With the publication of Nissim Ezekiel’s ‘A Time to Change’, a new period started in Indian English Poetry. Ezekiel’s poetry shows a new way to use English in Indian way. With his use of idiom, phrases, devices and structures, he uplifts Indian English Poetry to a new level and emerges it with Commonwealth literature. His poetry confessional in tone reflects the anxities, contradictions, surrounding social structure, desires, emotions, feelings and aspirations of the individuals. Actually he is a trend setter and father of law giver of the new poetry in English. And in order to do something extra ordinary that would be helpful to make poetry extra ordinary by making the distance between the writer and his craft, he choose a new way to show his maturity as a discriminate and distinguish writer of his age.

A close reading of Ezekiel’s poetry shows that he uses pun, satire and verbal irony, and subtle irony, irony of life, situation and characters. His irony and satire are also mixed with Indianess, Indian sensibility, Indian vernacular and half-baked English. It also helps him to show the social problem in an utterly modern shape. His poetry is a mixture of humanism, idealism, materialism, liberalism, socialism, deep human concern and sense of social justice. In his ‘A Morning Walk’, he ironically shows that though we are going to be a economically developed country, but still the slum dwellers are in a wretched condition. As he says:

“Barbaric city sick with slumps,
Deprived of seasons, blessed with rains,
Its hawkers, beggars, iron-lunged,
A million purgatorial lanes
And child like masses, many tongued
Whose wages are in words and crumbs?”  (A Morning Walk)

Ezekiel wants to show his concern with upper class educated people as they are merely educated and when the time comes to show their knowledge, they pass it with mere gossip and boastfulness. His ‘The Professor’, is a satirical poem where the professor is attacked with an ironic touch and is also ridiculed by the poet. Through the professor, the poet has satirized the educated class and their boastful nature of expressing their good condition and material wealth. Also, the poet wants to satire Indian way of talking in English as they mistake a lot in grammar, tense and syntax but still speak in English to show aristocracy. As the poet says:

“By God’s grace, all my children
Are well settled in life
One is Sales Manager,
One is Bank Manager,
Both have cars.
Sarala and Tarala are married
Their husbands are very nice boys.” (The Professor)

Indian’s apathy, indifference and fatalism are attacked and satirized by Ezekiel. In his ‘Entertainment’, he shows how a monkey showman wanders here and there to entertain people in spite of their negligence. He has to do it to earn money as he lives on other’s sympathy, empathy, apathy and negligence. And yet he is an entertainer. As the poet says:

“They are very nice boys.” (Entertainment)

Ezekiel is also conscious about religious journey and spiritual quest. In his ‘Enterprise’, he shows how the journey which started with a happy note ended in vain and nothingness as there were so many confusions, conflicts, difficulties and differences among members. A deconstructive reading shows that perhaps he wants to show the differences between ideas, rites and rituals between the Hindu and Muslims before the partition. As he says:

“But when the differences arose
on how to cross a desert patch,
When, finally, we reached the place,
We hardly knew why we were there,
The trip had darkened every face,
Our deeds were neither great nor rare
Home is where we have to gather grace.” (Enterprise)

Indian people’s superstition, ignorance are shown in ‘Night of the Scorpion’. Here when the mother is stung by a scorpion, peasants pray and speak of incarnation and the narrator’s father being a skeptic, rationalist tried many superstitious things. But 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:

“She didn’t know beggars in India
Smile only at white foreigners.
Indians are a friendly people, anyway,’
She said,’ so they are’, I agree.” (Night of the Scorpion)

Ezekiel as a postmodern critic shows semi-educated Indian’s way of speaking and writing in ‘Goodbye Party For Miss Pushpa T.S’. The poet ridicules the errors of grammar, syntax, idiom which many Indians commit while speaking the English Language. Actually he wants to correct it by pointing it out before Indians. The occasion is a party which is given by Miss Pushpa’s friends and colleagues as she is about to leave for a foreign country. And he shows how people used wrong tense while delivering their speech. As the opening lines show:

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Ezekiel is famous for the harmony, subtle change of emotion, touches of irony and satire in his poems. In his ‘Urban’, he feels sad for the horrible landscape of urban scene and it makes him repulsive. Here he shows how modern civilization reduced life to a mechanical circle and the poet has to live in it. As he says:

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Ezekiel is full of emotion and feels pity and sad for every surrounding problems. He shows his concern for Indian woman as they are subdued, oppressed, subjugated and marginalized in patriarchal society. He feels it wrong and wants to show the reader and world their pitiful condition. The also are human and self-respect. In his ‘In India’, he shows every problem:

“Here among the beggars
Hawkers, pavements, sleepers,
Hutment dwellers, slums,
Dead souls of men and gods,
Burnt out mothers, frightened
Virgins, wasted child
And tortured animal,
All in noisy silence
Suffering the place and time.”  (In India)

As a postmodern critic, he targets a every vices and classes dealing with it in order to critice and rectify them. In ‘Background Casually’, he ironically describes himself as a poet rascal clown. The irony becomes more clear when he got prize, his journey in English ship and when he is compelled to take up a mental job in order to pay for his passage back to India. Actually he wants to express his concerns about the society. As it appears in these lines:

“They told me I had killed the Christ,
that year I won the scripture prize
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 Casually)

Ezekiel is his poetry shows the young generation in a humorous way. He mocks at them to show them their actual position which they have to rectify. And here he also takes the weapon of irony. In his ‘The Truth About the Floods’, he shows his concern for the flood victims and at the same time criticizes the relief party. The relief party consists of five students who just distribute biscuits among flood victims and want publicity by getting photographed. Social service is not the prime object for them. As he says:

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

Ezekiel is such a conscious artist and critic that even in his poems of love and marriage, his irony and satire go hand in hand. In his ‘The Couple’, the poet ironically exposes the deceitfulness and hypocrisy in sexual relation as men and women both do it with their specific reason and purpose. He also satirizes women as they commit sex even not loving their men. In ‘Marriage’, he uses irony to show the actual nature of the love which brings the lovers together in marriage. As he shows in the concluding lines:

“Why should I rain the mystery?
by harping on the suffering rest,
Myself a frequent wedding guest?”  (Marriage)

Ezekiel in his ‘The Visitor’ shows the protagonist’s visit in a satirical way as it only shows the insubstantiality of human intercourse. It also shows a hollowness and absurdism in the form of visit. The poet describes ironically his enter of visit and also shows the visitor’s inability to convey the reason for visit. Actually he wants to make Indians more prompt, perfect, and professional and performer of deeds 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 to kill a little time.
Between his good intentions
And my sympathy, the cigarette smoke
was more substantial than our talk.” (The Visitor)

II. Conclusion

In a nutshell it can be said that Ezekiel throughout his poetic career tries to show social problems, issues, differences between many things and subjects in a subtle way. And in order to do show he takes the medium irony, satire and humour as his prime goal is to rectify Indians and their problems. As a conscious artist he wants to uplift India before the world as a perfect country. He also finds it best medium to show Indians about their drawbacks. His voice becomes more firm when he talks about Indian oddities and failures. Actually he wants to capture the mood and aura of post independence India and to some extent he is successful.

References