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IRONY IN THE POEMS OF NISSIM EZEKIEL

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Irony in the Poems of Nissim Ezekiel

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Abstract – Irony is a figure of speech in which words are used in such a way that their intended meaning is different from the actual meaning of the words. It may also be a situation that may end up in quite a different way than what is generally anticipated. In simple words, it is a difference between the appearance and the reality. Irony works with great force and acquires a new meaning in post-modern literature. Ironic mode imparts a dignity and magnitude to the writer's creative writing technique in handling the social themes. Shiv K. Kumar, K.N. Daruwalla, Nissim Ezekiel, R. Parthasarthy etc. are the greatest ironists in modern poetry. He was always conscious of the various social problems existing in India and wanted to remove them by highlighting them through his poems. The present paper analyses the use of irony in the poems of Nissim Ezekiel.

Key words: India, Irony, Nissim Ezekiel, Modern, Poetry.

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According to Merriam-Webster (2011) dictionary irony is the use of words that mean the opposite of what you really think especially in order to be funny or a situation that is strange or funny because things happen in a way that seems to be the opposite of what you expected. It is a figure of speech in which words are used in such a way that their intended meaning is different from the actual meaning of the words. It may also be a situation that may end up in quite a different way than what is generally anticipated. In simple words, it is a difference between the appearance and the reality.

Like all other figures of speech, Irony brings about some added meanings to a situation. Ironical statements and situations in literature develop readers' interest. Irony makes a work of literature more intriguing and forces the readers to use their imagination and comprehend the underlying meanings of the texts. Moreover, real life is full of ironical expressions and situations. Therefore, the use of irony brings a work of literature closer to the life. Irony works with great force and acquires a new meaning in post-modern literature. Ironic mode imparts a dignity and magnitude to the writer's creative writing technique in handling the social themes. Shiv K. Kumar, K.N. Daruwalla, Nissim Ezekiel, R. Parthasarthy etc. are the greatest ironists in modern poetry. Kumar (1991-92) writes, "Irony, therefore, is a multifaceted weapon, a kind of poetic strategy which can be put to very effective use."

The essential feature of irony is the indirect presentation of a contradiction between an action or expression and the context in which it occurs. In the

figure of speech, emphasis is placed on the opposition between the literal and intended meaning of a statement. Ironic literature exploits, in addition to the rhetorical figure, such devices as character development, situation, and plot to stress the paradoxical nature of reality or the contrast between an ideal and actual condition, set of circumstances, etc., frequently in such a way as to stress the absurdity present in the contradiction between substance and form (Retrieved, 1).

In 'Background Casually', he ironically describes himself as a poet- rascal- clown. The irony becomes more marked as he describes himself as a student in a Roman Catholic school, accused of having killed the Christ and won the scripture prize the same year.

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)

The irony progresses with his return to India in an English cargo-ship, carrying French guns to be

delivered to Indo-Chinese authorities. Further he has to take up a menial job in order to pay for his fare. We come across more irony in the following lines:

I prepared for the worst. Married,
Changed jobs, and saw myself a fool.

The song of my experience sung,

I knew that all was yet to sing.

Ezekiel in his 'The Visitor' shows the protagonist's visit in a satirical way. It also shows a hollowness and absurdum in the form of visit. The poet makes fun of a superstition. Having heard the crow's cawing three times, he prepares himself to deal effectively with the visitor, whose arrival had been conveyed in advance by the crow's cawing. 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)

In the poem, *The Truth About the Floods* Ezekiel mocks at the students whose idea of social service is limited to getting themselves photographed while distributing biscuits among the flood affected villagers.

'Don't make a noise'
said the students
'sit down in a circle'.
The villagers sat down in a circle.
They did not say another word.
The transistor was on,
the biscuits were distributed,

the camera clicked,

Then the students left

Humming the tune

Of a popular Hindi film song...

(The Truth About the Floods)

In *Night of the Scorpion* 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 the irony with a typical Indian motherly attitude:

My mother only said
Thank God the scorpion picked on me
And spared my children.

(Night of the Scorpion)

In this poem too, Nissim Ezekiel, poked fun at the superstitions prevalent among the peasants and even at his father's skepticism.

Parthasarthy (2002) 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. The poem also demonstrates the effective use of parallelism.

The poem *A Morning Walk* ironically shows that though India is going to be a developed country, but still the slum dwellers are in a wretched condition.

Barbaric city sick with slumps,
Deprived of seasons, blessed with rains,
Its hawkers, beggars, iron-lunged,
A million purgatorial lanes
And childlike masses, many tongued
Whose wages are in words and crumbs?

(A Morning Walk)

As a postmodern Indian English Poet, the poor and downtrodden people are also in his area of concern. He feels sad for them as what they receive from Indian house is really pathetic. He shows it to change their condition. In 'Ganga', he ironically shows their condition.

She always gets
a cup of tea
preserved for her
from the previous evening
and a chapatti, stale
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)

The Professor is a satirical poem where the professor is attacked with an ironic touch. Through the professor, the poet has satirized the educated class and their boastful nature of expressing their good condition and material wealth. The poet also ridicules the Indian way of using English for conversation as they mistake a lot in grammar, tense and syntax but still use it to show aristocracy.

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)

Most of the Ezekiel's love poems are also written in an ironical vein. *The Couple* ironically exposes the deceitfulness and hypocrisy of both men and women engaged in the sexual act. He also satirizes women as they commit sex even not loving their men. In *Two Nights of Love* the speaker craves to make love to his beloved of the moment soon after having already made love to her. 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)

A monkey showman in *Entertainment* wanders here and there to entertain people. He is an entertainer, 'the master' living on other's sympathy to earn 'applause' and 'coins'.

"Naked to the waist,
The Master of ceremonies
Drums frenzy, cracks whip,
Calls the tricks
To earn applause and copper coins."
(Entertainment)

Goodbye Party to Miss Pushpa T.S. is one of the Ezekiel's 'very Indian poems in Indian English'. It is a hilarious parody of and a biting satire on the idiolectal features of English spoken by some people from India. Besides underlining the common Indian use of the present progressive for the simple present and a variety of other Indianisms, the poem vividly reflects the rambling style invariably associated with Indian speakers (Damodar et al., 2012).

Another common mistake pointed by him is the use of the word 'foreign'. Apart from these frequent mistakes, the habit of the Indians to praise extravagantly at farewell parties has also been ridiculed through the device of irony.

Kumar (1991-92) rightly writes, "His (Ezekiel's) irony comes through more incisively in his poems written in Indian English, which is a mix of Indian vernacular and half-baked English."

Friends,
our dear sister
is departing for foreign
in two three days,

and
we are meeting today
to wish her bon voyage.

(Goodbye Party to Miss Pushpa T.S.)

The same error in the use of the tense and the word 'foreign' is highlighted in *The Railway Clerk* when the railway clerk says, "I am never neglecting my responsibility", "I am discharging it properly". "I am doing my duty", "but who is appreciating?" "nobody, I am telling you". At another point he says "Some are thinking of foreign". The articles 'a' and 'the' are often omitted by Indians; and the railway clerk commits this error in his monologue. Further, his poems like *Very Indian poems in Indian English*, *The Patriot*, *The Professor* and many other such poems are a comment on the way English is used for communication in Indian society. In the words of Karnani (1974) "No other poet has successfully exploited the nuances of Indian English as Ezekiel has done".

To sum up, the use of irony in the poems by Nissim Ezekiel makes his poems more interesting. He was always conscious of the various social problems existing in India and wanted to remove them by highlighting them through his poems. The use of irony and satire perfectly helped him to achieve his aim to rectify the Indian society of its drawbacks and problems.

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