

UNIQUE POETIC TECHNIQUE OF NISSIM EZEKIEL

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Nissim Ezekiel's position as a poet is well marked in the post independence times of Indian English writings. He becomes a unique poet in himself for becoming a modern voice in every field of Indo-Anglian poetry. As a craftsman, he occupies a very great place as his poetry is the product of a very skillful artist who knows how to produce maximum effect of the words. According to his own declaration **one cannot write good poetry in a language which is not alive.**¹ Nissim Ezekiel has patience enough to wait for the most effective words to come to his mind. He believes that the poet must be fully familiar with the nature of words, their semantic bearing, phonetic character and inner potency. It will be worthwhile to remember his own words thus:-

Tone, vocabulary, diction, sound all need precision in a poem, if the form as a whole is to be strong and not an approximation of some casual sense of it in the poet.²

Nissim Ezekiel occupies a greater strength of his poetry by concentrations on the use of words and their related environment. He pays his attention on particular ideas and tries to convey it with the help of all kinds of semantic importance. In this manner, Nissim Ezekiel achieves great significance as a poet not only of his ideas but also of his linguistic tools.

The most important tool of linguistic devices that is available in the hands of Nissim Ezekiel is that of irony of language and imagery. It is in this critical tool that he excels all his contemporaries. He views the ordinariness of most of the events with sense of detachment. He develops his irony and ironical contrasts frequently from the superstition and folk beliefs that exist in the society and gives them an utterly modern shape. He handles serious themes with superb irony and superb mockery.

The verbal irony of Nissim Ezekiel is the most important tool in him. He uses the traditional items with utmost modernity through this device of irony. On the one hand, he talks of Indianness and Indian concept. But, on the other hand, he makes the use of utmost sophisticated items of western civilization which insist on frankness, openness and a particular kind of candidness. He frequently uses certain words which are common in Indian English in order to echo in the sense of Indianness. Let us mark the following lines from **Very Indian Poem in Indian English:**

**Everything is coming –
Regeneration, Remuneration, Contraception
Be patiently, brothers and sisters,
.....
.....
One day Ram Rajya is surely coming.³**

The poet is very much cautious of the slogans of freedom among young ladies and gentlemen. Words like regeneration and remuneration are used for certain acts of freedom among the young guys regarding their individual meetings. The idea is made clear by keeping the word contraception side by side. The mention of Ram Rajya produces the tone of Indianness. Such a serious concept as Ram Rajya is employed in relation to an ordinary situation of individual freedom regarding lover's meetings. In his poem, **Ganga** the poet mocks at the so called generosity of the masters to the servants by bringing a typical Indian situation in record. It is customary among the Indian families to treat the servants with generosity by providing them the remaining food of the last night. The poet mentions the ironical situation in this manner :

**..... The women
who washes up, suspected
of prostitution,
is not dismissed.
She always gets
a cup of tea
preserved for her
from the previous evening,**

**and chapati, stale
but in good condition.
Once a year, an old
Sari and a blouse.⁴**

Another ironical situation is developed in his poem **How The English Lessons Ended**. The poet narrates an episode in a very simple manner and produces ironic effect between superstitious outlook on the one hand and craze for new learning on the other. A Muslim girl, who could not pass the examinations in English for three successive years was sent to the poet for coaching in English. The parents were hopeful about her learning the lessons but they did not know that the girl's interest was lying somewhere else. After sometime she stopped coming as the poet was suspected of making advances. As a next step, the girl was married off. The force of irony is present in the following lines :

**. and suddenly
She knows I know. The English lesson
end abruptly. I have learnt enough, she claims.
She's learnt enough to say she's learnt enough".⁵**

The irony of the last lines is explicit enough. The force of contrast between the superstitious outlook and craze for new learning in English is present here.

Nissim Ezekiel takes every care in building his poems. He considers his poem an edifice in which care at every step is necessary. He pays his attention on the idea that totality of semantic importance of a poem is conveyed by its body. He is very careful even about the use of titles. In his criticism of certain poems, where the poets did not care for titles, we may discover his basic idea in this regard. He advised the poets about the use of the titles in this manner.

**Take your time giving the poem a title. Don't use the first that
occurs to you. If, for example, the poem is about a cat, don't
entitle in A Cat or The Cat or My Cat. Entitle in Cleopatra."⁶**

Nissim Ezekiel wants to extract semantic significance of the poem by using appropriate and effective titles. He makes use of his imaginative insights in choosing his titles. He poems like **Declaration, The Worm, Poetry, Day, My Cat, I Wore a Mask, The Child, The Female Image, I Told the Thames, The**

Problem, Song, Psalms, History, For William Carlos Williams, The Great Tribute, The Prophet and A Short Story are significant for the effective use of titles which lead to the total semantic effect of the poem.

Nissim Ezekiel was conscious about the total body of the poem also. The form of the poem is as important as anything else. In a letter to Anisur Rahman, Nissim Ezekiel expresses his opinion in this regard thus:

I cannot think of poetry without at the same time thinking of its form. Both in reading and writing it, the form belongs to the spirit and substances of experience. To find the form inadequate is to question the inadequacy of poetry, to doubt its full authenticity and significance. Right from the beginning into its inchoate sources, form is as much the aim of the poet as meaning in all its modes.⁷

He can use traditional form of poetry for creating better effect of modernity. That is why, he is not opposed to the idea of using traditional form in poetry. He knows the importance of poetic idiom. His views are explicitly present in the following lines of his article:

To use traditional form is not to be outdated or old fashioned. It is the idiom that becomes outdated and not the form. I try to use the contemporary idiom in whatever form it comes at the time of writing.”⁸

In this manner, Nissim Ezekiel is of the opinion that every stage of the poem is significant. A poet should not treat any element in the structure of the poem as unimportant. He should find opportunities for the action of his imagination in reading the poem from its title to the main body and then the element of surprise at the end.

Nissim Ezekiel exhibits his peculiarity in the use of language also. The sentences used in his poems are not of uniform lengths. Sometimes they are enough to help one word each. The poet forces his entire idea by the use of a single word. The total concentration of the poet falls on the intensity of the poetic feeling in the use of such a word. Let us mark the use of words in making sentences in his poem

The Prophet:

**Ideas,
Plans,
Vigils,
Decisions,
With the heavy drag of dreams,
Incubations
Odour of some strange vocation,
solitude is marred by preparations for
the setting forth, but festivals and gift
or girls were greatly prized.⁹**

The use of the words **ideas, plans, vigils** and **incubation** has a particular significance in the total poetic scheme prepared by the poet. The last sentence in the above quoted lines has the length of becoming almost a serious prose sentence. It appears that Nissim Ezekiel places a long sentence soon after a short one. He has in his mind a particular scheme of drawing the attention of the reader in his peculiar manner. The following comment of Nissim Ezekiel himself is significant to be noted here:

This does not mean that they need to merely truncated or fragmented. Their shortness is a function of their form: They are compressed and complete. I have tried to make them simple and clear without compromising the fullness of their meaning”.¹⁰

For example, we may note the following two sentences from his poem

Encounter:

**How? I asked. And realized suddenly that it is
necessary not to ask certain question.¹¹**

He reverses the technique at the other place. In his poem, **The First Theme and Variation**, he writes a long sentence first and then it is followed by a short sentence.

**My blood, in flowing up and down the earth
and round and round, called his name,
obeyed the impulse of his will.¹²**

It may be said that the juxtaposition of sentences of changing length is a fine technique with few free verse writers. Wait Whitman, the great American poet, who is also known as the creator of the free verse, has also used this technique for creating the desired poetic effect. Nissim Ezekiel is the first Indian poet in English who has harvested the better poetic dimensions of free verse. His attempts are quite opposite to what R. Parthasarathy thought about the modern Indian English poets. The latter commented that the Indian poets in English seem to prefer the short poetic lines as the basic unit of their composition. But this does not apply to Nissim Ezekiel as he has his own formulae in composing free verse lines. The free verse of Nissim Ezekiel derives much of its strength from his ability to manipulate line and length. The poet allows a long line to be succeeded by a series of short lines or sandwiches a long line in the midst of short lines as it is evident in the two separate examples mentioned below:

**And when the grass becomes too long
you only
cut it
short.**

and

**The district authorities
at Balasore
admitted they had failed,
but they claimed they could not have done better.
Nature, they said,
had conspired against them.¹³**

It depends upon the poetic need of Nissim Ezekiel if he allows variation of length in his poetic lines. The free verse of Nissim Ezekiel has drawn the attention of several serious thinkers and commentators. While making observations about the free verse of **The Entertainment**, R. Parathasarathy makes the following comment which has great critical importance:

The movement of the poem is throughout linear, but towards the end it curves abruptly, almost turning a somersault.¹⁴

The movement of the poetic lines in My Cat, An Atheist Speaks, On Ballasis Road and Guru are noteworthy in themselves. The poetry of Nissim Ezekiel, thus, captures the nuances of the English language as well as the fine touch of colloquialism in Indian English.

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