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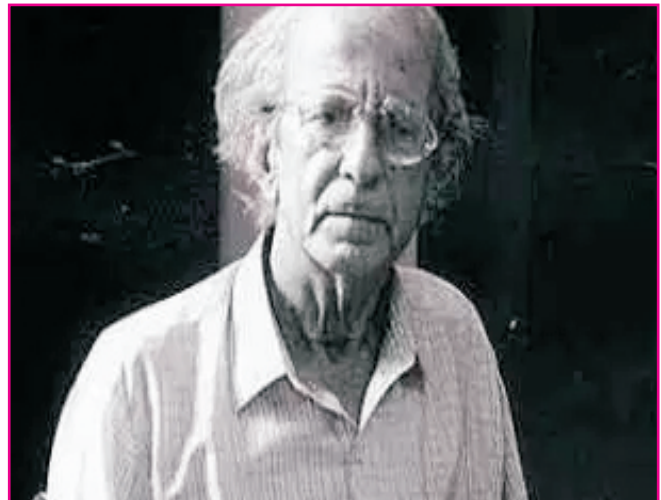
IRONY AND SATIRE IN NISSIM EZEKIEL AND A.K. RAMANUJAN'S POETRY

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ABSTRACT

Irony and satire are very important literary devices which are commonly employed in all kinds of literary genres. The abundant use of these devices can be seen even in the oldest of English poetry. The father of English poetry, Geoffrey Chaucer, has also made extensive use of these two devices in his famous work, *The Canterbury Tales*. Not just in Chaucer and few English poets but the use of irony and satire can be traced in the literatures of all languages of the world. Poets and writers use these two devices for various purposes. But, generally, they tend to use irony and satire to make the realistic depictions with minute



details of the prevailing contemporary society, people and their culture. The same is the case with the Indian English poetry. Some Indian poets have used these devices very skillfully to explore the real mindset and culture of India and ridiculed it artistically. This paper is an attempt at exploring and decoding the use of irony and satire in poems of Nissim Ezekiel and A.K. Ramanujan.

KEY WORDS: Irony, Satire, Culture, Society etc.

INTRODUCTION

It is a well known fact that the study of literary devices like irony and satire does not come under heading of figurative language of poetry. But for common readers of poetry irony and satire seem quite difficult terms to understand or comprehend and also to notice while reading a poem or any other work of literature. Here, I try to explain these two terms with the help of their definitions and explanations given in M.H. Abrams' book, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. In this reference book for literary terms he defines irony as "...a difference between what is asserted and what is actually the case". It means irony in a work of literature has two fold meaning. The first one is generally called the surface level meaning while the second one is called the hidden or underlying meaning. In the same book Abrams defines satire as "...the literary art of diminishing a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking towards it attitudes of amusement and contempt, indignation or scorn". So, it can be said that satire has a purpose beyond merely heightening the comic effect. The use of iron and satire generally goes hand in hand in work of literature.

As far as the use of irony and satire in the realm of Indian English poetry is concerned, almost every Indian English poet uses it very skillfully in his or her poetry. Similarly, the select poets for the present study have amply employed these two devices with varied ends in their poetry. The poetry of Nissim Ezekiel and A.K. Ramanujan reveals their Indian sensibility, social concerns, personal sufferings and misfortunes. The effect of

these thematic concerns is heightened by these poets with remarkable use of irony and satire in their poetry. The atmosphere of the poems of these two poets often contains social surroundings which are very straightforwardly depicted through artistic use of irony and satire. In consideration with the above discussion this paper throws light on the poems of Nissim Ezekiel and A.K. Ramanujan

III. IRONY AND SATIRE IN THE POETRY OF NISSIM EZEKIEL AND A.K. RAMANUJAN:

Nissim Ezekiel and A.K. Ramanujan are both very well known as the modern Indian English poets. From individual perspective each one of them has his own typical cult or uniqueness of writing poetry. But that is not the concern of the present study. However, a very common thread or similarity that can be traced in their poetry is the abundant use of irony and satire. They make use of these two devices very prominently for the ironic and satirical representation of typical India with all of its characteristics.

Nissim Ezekiel is very bold and direct when it comes to ironic and satirical representation of Indian people and society. For example, his poem, *'The Railway Clerk'* is thoroughly an ironic monologue. Reading of the poem leads us into the typical mind of a clerk in an Indian government office. In this poem he satirises the greedy and corrupt nature of Indian bureaucrats through an example of the 'Clerk'. It is quite common in the nature of Indian government workers and officers to engage in malpractices and unfair means to earn more and more black money. He comments on it through this poem like follows:

"My wife always asking for money,
Money, money, where to get money?
My job is such, no one is giving bribe"
(The Railway Clerk)

The above lines are very satirical as far as people in Indian government offices are concerned. In these government offices almost every staff takes bribe. In the book, *Modern Indian English Poetry*, a well known critic, Bruce King has made a comment on Ezekiel's poetry pointing to similar aspect of his poems. He writes: "his poetry is not about personal choices, moral relationships and the active self in society; it records sentiment, pity and social ironies". Every aspect of Indian society finds its due place in Ezekiel's poetry. His poetry presents social problems like poverty, sickness corruption etc. in India with utmost ironic overtones.

The theme of human relationships in India also finds an ironic and satirical treatment in Ezekiel's poetry. The following lines from one of his poems illustrate this fact:

"Typical Indian mother-in-law
to the bride
returning from her honeymoon,
"Don't worry dear
I need no help in the kitchen
Leave it me please".
Then she complained
To her husband and son
"that girl is no help to me
In the kitchen, is she?
(Edinburgh Interlude-lightly section-18)

In the above lines Ezekiel satirises the typical Indian relationship between a daughter-in-law and a mother-in-law. It throws light on age-old traditional nature of relationship wherein almost every mother-in-law tortures her daughter-in-law in whatever ways possible. Here, in this instance the mother-in-law tells in seemingly loving tone to her daughter-in-law not to help her in the kitchen and at the same time complains of her not helping in the kitchen to her husband and son. This is very true representation of typical Indian households.

Ezekiel takes every opportunity to satirise the mistakes that are committed by Indian people. For example, many Indians are crazy after knowing and speaking in English. For some of them English is a prestigious language. They think the ability to write and speak in English is the first and far most important feature of a scholarly person. Therefore, many educated Indians working either in private or government offices keep struggling to speak in English. But many a times it results in their speaking incorrect English in terms of its pronunciation, rules of grammar and misuse of words. This incorrect use of English is often very ironic. This aspect of English is dominantly present in Indian writings in English. Ezekiel has intentionally presented this Indianness through many of his poems. The intention is, of course, the hypocrisy of Indian people. Look at the following lines from his poem, 'The Patriot':

"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 Indirabehn"
(The Patriot)

Considering this kind of representation of India in Ezekiel's poetry, Bruce King opines that Ezekiel pioneered the social satire which was later nourished in the hands of modern Indian English poets like Shiv Kumar, Gieve Patel etc.

A. K. Ramanujan is yet another Indian English poet who finds very important place in the study of this topic. He is a poet who is very well known for his minimalism in Indian English Poetry. He can also be described as the poet of economic but ironic and satiric use of words. Ramanujan too is an Indian like Ezekiel but he has developed an artistic detachment in the writing of poetry. This artistic detachment in Ramanujan results in ironic and satirical attitude in his poetry. It also provides artistic validity to his poetry. Ramanujan's use of irony and satire is present in almost all of his poems. His poem, 'A River' has India as its background. In this poem he has satirized Indian culture in general and poets in particular with severe ironic statements in the poem. For example, at one point in this poem, there is ironic reference to the present day Tamil poets. He satirises them for still blindly following the older poets and fleeing from reality. He writes:

"The pregnant woman
drowned with perhaps twins in her"
(A River)

The above lines are bitter satire on Tamil poets in particular and Indian poets in general who sing praises of the great river and its powers and floods. But forget the reality that the floods of the great river must have killed many innocent people, perhaps a pregnant woman with twins in her. Ramanujan criticizes these poets who do not write about these realities and facts which is the actual job of a poet.

Ramanujan's most of the poems about his family are tinged with irony. Sometimes, he becomes nostalgic in his poems in which he remembers his past. But these memories are clouded with great irony. The treatment that his memories receive in his poems is quite often ironic and satirical. In his famous poem, 'Obituary' he writes:

"Father, when he passed on,
Left dust
On a table full of papers
Left debt and daughters"
('Obituary')

Along with use of witty words and ironic versification, Ramanujan colours it in irony and satire in a very genius manner. His irony becomes very static, sometimes very pungent and sardonic as well. His poem, 'Warning' illustrates all these features of his poetry. We can judge it ourselves by reading the following lines from the same poem:

"Poverty is not easy to bear
the body is not easy to wear
so beware I say to my children
unborn, lest they choose to be born"
(Warning)

In this poem poet warns the unborn children about their choice of whether to take birth or not. This is the typical irony and satire that only Ramanujan can produce. Here, the irony is that these lines actually warn the parents and not the children. But it is done very connotatively.

Another best example where in I find masterly use of irony and satire by Ramanujan is the poem, 'Self Portrait'. In this poem he has raised the question of his childhood identity crisis. Here, he represents the 'namelessness of childhood' or the lack of identity that he suffers. The comparison of his own self with a portrait that is signed in the corner by his father is very ironic and typical of Ramanujan. He writes:

'I remember everyone
but myself, and sometimes see
in shop windows
despite the well known laws
of topics
the portrait of a stranger
date unknown
often signed in a corner
by my father"
(Self Portrait)

CONCLUSION:

Thus, the above study reveals that Nissim Ezekiel and A.K. Ramanujan have very skillfully employed irony and satire to represent typical Indian culture, people and society. We can say that there is ample use of irony and satire in Indian English poetry. Therefore, the topic and its analysis in the above study can be extended to many other India English poets as well. In the end, it is possible to argue that use of irony and satire is the essential feature of Indian English poetry which helps these poets to peep into the depths of very Indianness of India.

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