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Characteristic Indian Attitudes in Nissim Ezekiel's Poetry

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Nissim Ezekiel's Call: Time to Change

Nissim Ezekiel occupies a unique position among Indo-Anglian poets of post-Independence era. His first book of poems is titled *Time to Change* (1952) and this is quite suggestive of Nissim Ezekiel's approach.

Lal wrote, "After the death of Sri Aurobindo, Nissim Ezekiel is the first major voice that represents, more or less, the change of an era" (P. Lal, 1969) in the *History of Indian English Poetry*.

Nissim opposed the idealism and romanticism of the earlier group of Indian writers in English, and tried to look at any typical Indian situation with an Indian attitude, with a novel and dynamic Indian insight. He cleverly manipulated Indian English to bring out the Indian worldview.

Focus of This Paper

This paper concentrates on Ezekiel's use of 'Indian English,' or 'Babu Angrezi' or 'Pidgin English' in his poetry to depict the characteristics of Indian attitude. He used irony as a weapon to depict the characteristic features of Indian attitude. He endeavored to demonstrate it mostly in his three poems - 'A Very Indian Poem in Indian English', 'Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.', and 'The Professor'.

Nissim's style is very refreshing, adding humor to irony. Before Nissim Ezekiel, there was no Indian poet writing in English, who took the risk of treating such topics using typical Indian English in poetry. High sounding learned words and phrases, metaphors from the British ways of thinking and writing, expressions of Victorian English, long and complex syntax, and perfect idiomatic usage, etc. usually mark formal Indian writing in English. From this high road, Nissim made some interesting detours which gave a special Indian aura to several of his poems.

An Early Attempt to Use Bazaar English in Indo-Anglian Poetry

Joseph Furtado tried to use Pidgin English in poetry. In this connection, R. Parthasarthy writes:

No one has, to the same extent, taken comparable risks in verse. And the first poet to try -- and this was in the 1920s -- was Joseph Furtado (1872-1947). He wrote some poems in pidgin or bazaar English, like 'The Fortune-teller' and 'Lakshmi'. But, Furtado himself did not use Pidgin English extensively, except in a few humorous poems. He was interested in it as a source of humour. He seemed to have been unaware of the

possibility of its developing into a creole. A pidgin, in any case, arises under the pressure of practical circumstances in a bilingual situation. (R. Parthasarathy, 1976.)

On the other hand, Nissim Ezekiel's use of "Indian English" gives life to the characters, episodes, and attitudes of individuals and communities, and goes well beyond creating humorous situations. Ezekiel excels not only in describing Indian situations, but also in using irony as a weapon of depicting characteristic Indian attitude by employing 'Babu Angrezi' or 'Pidgin English'.

Some Features Employed in Nissim Ezekiel's Poems

Creating a very Indian flavour, Ezekiel's devotion to Indian writing in English is unique. His three poems "A Very Indian Poem in Indian English", "A Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T. S." and "The Professor" describe the characteristic Indian attitude in so-called 'Swadeshi Angrezi'. These poems depict the syntactical oddities of English used by Indian speakers. R. Parthasarathy comments:

These poems imitate the idiolect features of English used by Gujarati speakers. Some of these features are also present in other Indian languages: the use of the present progressive tense for the simple present tense, un-English collocation of lexical items, and literal translation of phrases and idioms (R. Parthasarathy, 1976.)

A Very Indian Poem

Ezekiel exploits the commonly found Indian use of present progressive tense instead of the simple present tense to create an India aura. In his poem "A Very Indian Poem in Indian English", he uses the progressive tense, reduplication processes modeled after Indian languages, and typical expressions that we employ in our Indian English:

I am standing for peace and non-violence.
Why world is fighting fighting
Why all people of world
Are not following Mahatma Gandhi,
I am simply not understanding.
Ancient Indian Wisdom is 100% correct.
I should say even 200% correct.

The Effect of Transfer from One Level to Another

While the content easily relates to the concern of Gandhian/Indian attitudes in politically conscious, world-minded and peace-loving Indian intellectuals, the very same genuine concern brings in humor and parody when put in English words and constructions of Indian English. This underlying and subtle humor

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

9 : 6 June 2008

Sandeep K. Thorat, M.A., M.Phil.

Characteristic Indian Attitudes in Nissim Ezeziel's Poetry

brings out the author-statement on the subject, bordering on satire and irony. The poet does not make any explicit statement, but the technique and device that he employs reveal his position, even as the description truly reflects Indian attitudes.

It appears that transfer from one level (standard English) to another level (regional or ethnic English) brings with it a slew of connotations. When the reader is acquainted with the regional or ethnic English, there is no limit to the potential meanings and consequent enjoyment of the poem. In the absence of such knowledge, the poem offers only a laborious and tedious experience.

A Complete Indian Atmosphere

Indeed, Ezekiel's poetic genius creates a complete Indian atmosphere by capturing the very Indian attitude expressed through the use of Indian English. Here he describes the glory of Ancient India and deplores the fact that the new generation does not believe in the teaching of Mahatma Gandhi. Further, his masterful exploitation of a typical and widely current Indian expression of "100% correct," and "even "200% correct" adds to the reality of the context in which this self-search is conducted.

Thus, Nissim does not restrict himself to the use of selected lexical items and phrases, as we all do in making fun of our own brand of Indian English, but exploits a whole range of linguistic features and constructions including indefinite articles, use of "no" to enforce a point, the repetition of a word to stress the point. Indianness is instantly created!

Irony Is Revealed!

The poem also reveals the poet's use of irony. The reproduction of tone, idiom and voice, colloquialism like "goonda fellow" and "throwing stones at Indirabehn" create humour in us.

Indian use of English is one of the rare occasions in which Indians make fun of themselves, a less frequently used trait on other situations among the Indians.

To respect elders and masters is one of the excellent attitudes of Indians. Nissim makes use of this trait but twists it in a humorous and ironical way by linking it to a line from William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*.

"Friends, Romans, countrymen, I am saying
(to myself)
Lend me the ears".

Irony and satire lie in the pretentious way we all tend to deliver our public speech in Indian English.

Blind Cravings for Foreign Things

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

9 : 6 June 2008

Sandeep K. Thorat, M.A., M.Phil.

Characteristic Indian Attitudes in Nissim Ezeiel's Poetry

In the poem, the poet also throws light on fashion and foreign things. The Indian in this poem bemoans the fact that the new generation blindly follows foreign ways for the sake of fashion and modernity. He contrasts the drinking of lassi and wine:

You want one glass lassi?
Very good for digestion.
With little salt lovely drink,
Better than wine.

A typical Indian attitude towards drinking is presented here with telling effect in Indian English, directly translated from Indian language expressions, using Indian word order. The fact of the matter is that while such ideas may sound old fashioned, the word order and use of Indian English expressions among the younger generation have come to stay even to celebrate their new pursuits.

As an Indian, the poet brings out the attitude of Indians towards neighboring countries. In the same poem, he says:

Pakistan behaving like this,
China behaving like that,
It is making me very sad, I am telling you.

National Integration

Ezekiel very artistically reflects the Indian attitude towards Indian national integration. He reveals not only what many Indians think, but also the way they think in English in the lines from the same poem:

All men are brothers, no?
In India also
Gujaratis, Maharashtrians, Hindiwallahas
All brothers
Though some are having funny habits.
Still, you tolerate me,
I tolerate you,
One day, Ram Rajya is surely coming”.

Tolerance of diversity is an essential feature of Indianness, although unsuccessful attempts have been made to change this basic trait from time to time. At the same time, Indians are also given to making fun of others’ habits, including food, dress, manner of speaking, music, and so on. One notices this trend even in *Natya Sastra*, an important ancient treatise on Indian Drama.

And so, Nissim must make a statement: “Though some are having funny habits.” If this statement is not included, one can surely state that the poet’s assertions are not truthful.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

9 : 6 June 2008

Sandeep K. Thorat, M.A., M.Phil.

Characteristic Indian Attitudes in Nissim Ezeiel’s Poetry

Ezekiel's idea of Ram Rajya also reveals the common ideal held in the hearts of millions of Indians throughout the centuries. Brotherhood perhaps is more of an influence of modern political thought, ushered in by western education and the ideologies of the freedom struggle, interwoven easily into the mindset of modern Indian nation.

Ezekiel attempts to create Indian flavour by using common Hindi/Hindustani words in his poetry. Indirabehn, goonda fellow, lassi, Ram Rajya, Hindiwallahas, Guru, Ashram, Burka, Chapati pan, mantra are a few of the vernacular words the poet has used to make the content and context of his poems more real. He tries to reflect Indian attitude through the use of vernacular words and imagery drawn from the common situations in India.

The Professor

In 'The Professor', Ezekiel exploits the innovations we do not commonly notice, but take these innovations as natural to the context. His syntax is almost totally parallel to syntactic constructions in Indian languages:

If you are coming again this side by chance,
Visit please my humble residence also.
I am living just on opposite house's backside.

Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.

Ezekiel's poem 'Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T. S.' has a touch of social satire. A farewell speech is an occasion when we all praise the good nature, helpful and sacrificial attitude, leadership qualities, etc. of the person who is facilitated on his or her transfer to another post, retirement, and so on. In every society such speeches are culture-laden. Culture and use of Indian English characterize such occasions in India. Nissim uses this device in "Goodbye to Miss Pushpa T. S." He describes the internal as well as the external beauty of Miss Pushpa in 'Babu Angrezi'. He says:

You are all knowing, friends,
what sweetness is in Miss Pushpa.
I don't mean only external sweetness
but internal sweetness.
Miss Pushpa is smiling and smiling
even for no reason
but simply because she is feeling.

The lines, on the other hand, remind us of William Shakespeare's famous line from 'Hamlet':

"One may smile and smile and be a villain".

Indian Ways of Speech Delivery: The Role and Function of Digression

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

9 : 6 June 2008

Sandeep K. Thorat, M.A., M.Phil.

Characteristic Indian Attitudes in Nissim Ezeziel's Poetry

Ezekiel makes a digression from the main concern of the poem. He deals with the idea, which is not related to the main issue. This is another typical Indian way of thinking and speaking English. The poet speaks of himself and makes a digression, which is obvious in the lines:

I am not remembering now which place.
Surat? Ah, yes,
once only I stayed in Surat
with family members
of my uncle's very old friend-
his wife was cooking nicely . . .
that was long time ago.

The digression is entirely unconnected with the main concern of the poem. It seems that the speech is rambling and even the logical connectives between ideas are missing. But typical is the Indian way of thinking and speaking.

After the digression, the poet continues to describe various good things in the behavior of Miss Pushpa. The poet says:

Pushpa Miss is never saying no.
Whatever I or anybody is asking
she is always saying yes,
and today she is going
to improve her prospects
and we are wishing her bon voyage.

The poet expresses that Miss Pushpa is always eager to help anybody at anytime. It is not in her attitude to say 'no'. It is left to us to decide whether this speaks good of Miss Pushpa, or does it refer to the tentative or flippant nature of Miss Pushpa. He praises her good nature, in any case outwardly. Apart from the use of progressive tense forms, the use of the words "prospects" and "bon voyage" signify some peculiarities of Indian English.

Another important feature of the poem is the use of capital letters for the first words of each line. Thus, the poet introduces some technical innovation. The language is colloquial and so are the rhythms. Instead of conventional versification, the poet has used free verse.

Is Indian English a Fit Vehicle for Creative Writing?

Thus we notice certain special functions attributed to the use of Indian English lexical items, syntactic constructions and semantic processes in the selected poems of Nissim Ezekiel. The poems provide humor within us, and we easily identify ourselves with the language used and the characters portrayed.

Then, the question arises, why other writers do not take advantage of the veritable treasures of Indian English?

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

9 : 6 June 2008

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If creativity is not inextricably blended with the use of Indian English, as in the case of Nissim Ezekiel's poems, use of ethnic English may become a barrier for understanding and enjoying the story narrated.

And if an author is not able to see and develop a talent to exploit Indian English in his or her creative works in a manner enjoyment of the story is enhanced, attempts at using Indian English as a primary medium will become a burden both for the author and the reader.

In the case of Nissim Ezekiel, we see that he is immensely successful in not only portraying the characteristic Indian attitude but he also derives greater freedom by using Indian English.

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