

Indianism in Nissim Ezekiel:

A Study of Night of Scorpion, The Professor and The Patriot

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Abstract

Nissim Ezekiel, the Indian born Jewish poet is a renowned representative of Post Independent Indo-Anglian Literature. Though he was a Professor career wise, he established himself as a literary man. Nissim's popularity rests upon his collections of poems. He is appreciated the most for the naturalness with which he depicted Indian themes in the foreign tongue. Even an average Indian could enjoy his poems with ease. The irony, sarcasm and the Indianism of his poems were quite amusing for the readers. The credit for this appreciation was due to the Indian English with which Nissim described his themes and the Indian backdrop and the Indianism that were specific to his poems. The paper "Indianism in Nissim Ezekiel: A Study of Night of Scorpion, The Professor and The Patriot" is an attempt to analyse the Indianism in Nissim through the study of selected poems.

Nissim Ezekiel, the representative poet of Post Colonial India has a unique position in Indo-Anglian Literature. Though born in a Jewish family, Bombay, and educated abroad, he was a pure Indian in thinking and expression. The highly renowned collections of poems of Nissim are noticed for their unique qualities. The dominating features of Ezekiel poems are the quest for identity, Indianism, spirituality and the reality of Indian life. In all his creative works he was very keen to select Indian situations and present them with a purely Indian attitude. He was not for idealism and romanticism, the soft and beautiful aspects of life. He highlighted the reality of Indian life with its bitterness, hypocrisy and bits of sweetness through the lives of common people. The characters of his poems are from different walks of life but without a bit of exaggeration. We feel and experience the

Indianness through each and every character and situation in the poems.

Villages are the backbone of India. Ezekiel's *The Night of the Scorpion* depicts a typical Indian village in flesh and blood. The poem is with a simple theme of a mother getting stung by a scorpion on a rainy day and the consequent reactions and responses of the family members and the peasant neighbours of a true village. The background, the characters and the actions of this poem are real life like. In fact Ezekiel has breathed life to each and every line of this poem to make us feel and smell and experience the essence of Indianism. The poem starts with the mother getting stung by a scorpion and the scorpion rushing out to the safety of rain through the sacks of grains. This itself gives the picture of a typical village house with the stored sacks of rice or wheat or cereals. The concern and care with which the neighbours and the household people are involved in helping the family is a remarkable feature of humanity typical to the innocent people of villages. Irrespective of the time, weather and inconveniences, each one was ready to do whatever was possible by them to help the mother get out of the so called evil effect of the scorpion sting. It was a voluntary act from each to rush to get hot water, to chant

mantras and to do the other superstitious acts to rescue the mother.

The relationship, especially the human relationship is the strongest among the villagers. This is the most ideal humanitarian aspect of village life. The feelings of oneness and belongingness are specific to the rustic people. Indian villagers are the model for the thick fellow feelings with sympathy and empathy. It is unconditional and without expecting any reward. Ezekiel emphasizes this when he says:

*“ The peasants came like swarms of flies
and buzzed the name of God a hundred
times
to paralyse the Evil One.”
... and they sat around
on the floor with my mother in the centre,
the peace of understanding on each face.”*

The sincerity and true concern reflected in the above mentioned lines are specific to the rustic people. For them relationship is the most cherished treasure. They are not rich financially but they are the richest in their mind with human love and readiness to help. There is no discrimination in the name of status, creed or caste. The peasant community that represents the village is devoid of the inhuman traits like selfishness, greed and narrow mindedness. Forgetting the time, the rain and all other inconveniences they rushed to the house where the mother was suffering. They

rushed there not to be the passive viewers or gossip mongers, but to partake the sufferings of their fellow being as best as they can. They involved physically, mentally and spiritually for the well being of the victim who belongs to a better status than that of theirs. They never tried to show off. With a genuine interest and concern they prayed and wished the immediate recovery of the mother. Each one contributed to console the mother. It was with empathy they sat around the mother. This genuine fellow feeling can be seen only in the rustic background of India. Urbanization has made man selfish, greedy and narrow-minded. The pleasure of human bonds is alien to those urbanized people. For them visiting a suffering person is an inconvenience, spending something for the needy is an unwanted obligation and spending time with the needy is a big wastage. The same poet in his poem "*The Truth about Floods*" describes the response of a group of urban students who visited a flood affected village for social service. They were more eager to get photographed while distributing biscuits for the hungry victims of flood. According to Nissim, an individual loses root as he/she gets cut off from the village, the cradle of tradition, values, morals and conventions. Ezekiel's depiction of the true Indian from the village is an incredible and envious experience.

Nissim's description of the superstitious beliefs of the villagers is such a realistic one as though the poet himself was one of the witnesses. The frantic search to locate the scorpion and to stop it in order to stop the movement of its poison in the mother's body is a superstitious belief without any scientific proof. But it is the innocence of these villagers that made them chant mantras and clip their tongues to stop the evil one. Ignorance is the root cause of superstitious beliefs, yet it is the same ignorance that retains the innocence of this peasant community. The more educated they are, the more selfish and narrow-minded they become. Thus loses the innocence of rustic life. Even the educated people slip into the influence of superstition in exigencies. This natural trend is highlighted when the educated father himself poured paraffin and lit it as a desperate act to destroy the evil effect of the scorpion poison.

Villagers are strictly god fearing folk. They submit themselves to the will of God Almighty and believe that everything about them is decided and executed by that supreme power. The priest is the representative of God for them. In case of an adversity or happiness this representative of God will be there as one among them. In *Night of the Scorpion* also, Nissim brings the priest to execute the divine act of destroying the evil

through rituals. Indian tradition is rich in spiritual myths and ideologies. The belief in the previous birth and the next birth, and the relevance of the 'karma' and the consequent sufferings in the present life forms the basic concept of Hindu mythology in Indian background. It is this belief that warns humans to abstain from evil. And this belief in its full strength is practiced among the villagers.

*May he sit still, they said
May the sins of your previous birth
be burned away tonight, they said.
May your suffering decrease
the misfortunes of your next birth, they said.
May the sum of all evil
balanced in this unreal world*

*against the sum of good
become diminished by your pain.
May the poison purify your flesh*

*of desire, and your spirit of ambition,
they said, and they sat around
on the floor with my mother in the centre,
the peace of understanding on each face.
More candles, more lanterns, more
neighbours,
more insects, and the endless rain.*

An ideal Indian mother is an embodiment of love, sacrifice and patience. She will place her life, pleasures and desires in exchange of the life health and welfare of her children. The Indian concept of motherhood is very vividly expressed by

the poet through just two lines that come as the concluding part of the poem:

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

Her 10 hours sufferings, fear and anxiety just vanished to the air at the thought that it was she who fell the victim whereas her child was safe. With a heart full of gratitude, she thanks God Almighty. It is the sacrificial love of a mother! The Indian motherhood is the embodiment of selfless love and sacrifice. Here the mother thanks God Almighty for giving the sufferings to her sparing her child. It is a consistent prayer of a mother to spare her children from all dangers offering her own life in exchange. The famous poetess Kamala Das who was very fond of jewellery and luxury promised to abstain from all those gaudiness in exchange of her son's health. In Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things*, Ammu remained at home and underwent all tortures and humiliations because of her children. She couldn't leave them and go to make her own life with the person whom she likes even if she stood a better chance. The maternal tie holds her back to be victimized more and more despite the promised comfortable life within her reach. Just by a moment's effort to ignore her children would have enabled her to break the maternal tie. But she was a mother, an Indian mother. She can never be

indifferent or negligent or ignorant towards her children unless and otherwise she is abnormal.

Night of the Scorpion stands as the best example and the most appreciated work of Nissim for its life like depiction of ordinary realities of Indian village life. Along with the intensity of Indian flavour it blends the poet's ironical attitude also while he ends the poem by the mother thanking God after the whole complexities of superstitious ritualism and sceptic rationalism. However Nissim's another poem *The Professor* is more noted for its expression of Indian attitude in the Bazaar English ie. in the pure Indian English. Indians are proud of their proficiency in the use of English, but they never bother about the fact that their English called Indian English is farther away from the Native English. The poem is a simple conversation of a retired professor with one of his former students whom he happened to meet on the way. The retired professor was eager to inform the outsider about his comfortable family status with the well-settled children, reasonably good health without the luxuries of old age like diabetis, blood pressure, cholesterol and so on. He expresses his pride on the increase in the population of his family by the addition of eleven grandchildren. While sharing all achievements and happiness, with a throng of pain he shares the

departure of his wife suggestive of his loneliness in the old age. With a vein of irony he comments at family planning programme and how effectively people practice it, the confined life of a retired person who hardly goes out. Hence his wife is no more, he must be doing the role of babysitter for his grandchildren in the family, another burden of the retired parents. One can visualize a very ordinary reality of a retired person's life style, aspirations and routine in the Professor. To an aged man the things that matter are the children who are doing well and settled down well, grandchildren and the personal health. Here the professor is excited while boasting on his achievements as:

Are well settled in life.

One is Sales Manager,

One is Bank Manager,

Both have cars

Though the poet is highlighting the exaggerated style in the talking of an Indian, he also becomes satirical about the social attitude towards the family status, marriage etc. The status of a family very much depends upon the number of cars the family has. Similarly the parents consider themselves fully relieved of their responsibilities towards their daughters once when they are sent in marriage. Whatever the future or consequence, marriage is the end of a girl's ties with her family. It is a style and matter of hollow

pride to introduce the sons and daughters with their designations because that tells about their position in the society. The poet here mocks at the practices and ideals of the society that showcases their children with their status.

In addition to this Nissim also brings the topics like generation gap and the blending of the new and the old. A touch of humour and satire can be sensed when the Professor boasts on the number of cars, daughters got married, no ailments of old age and so on which is quite an Indian mentality of a man of that age.

Though the poem depicts the picture of a bereaved retired professor meeting a former student on his way to a milk booth or to a grocery, the conversational language exhibits the remarkable talent of Nissim to Indianise this poem. The professor neither proves to be strong one academically, nor a morally supportive one, as he is an egocentric, bothered with his own matters. The tendency of Indians to exaggerate in order to get more attention or to impress is very apparent in the following usages:

-Now you are man of weight and consequence.

-Everything is happening with leaps and bounds.

-Our progress is progressing. -This year I am sixty-nine."

-You were so thin, like stick.

He resorts to the Indian mania of comparing people to objects:

You were so thin, like stick,

Now you are man of weight and consequence.

That is good joke.

If you are coming again this side by chance,

Visit please my humble residence also.

I am living just on opposite house's backside.

The many phrases, words and usages in the poem show the syntactical oddities of English used by Indian speakers. A glance into the poem gives many examples like:

You won't believe but I have eleven grandchildren.

How many issues you have? Three?

He makes a string of mistakes in grammar and usage as he states:

Other also doing well, though not so well.

Every family must have black sheep.

Though he advocates family planning, he does not seem to adopt it.

Indians are also obsessed with the use of the present continuous tense instead of simple present tense:

We are keeping up. Our progress is progressing.

Old values are going, new values are coming.

Everything is happening with leaps and bounds.

I am going out rarely, now and then

The poet yet again mocks at the academic weakness of the professor at Indian English when he says:

You won't believe but I have eleven grandchildren.

How many issues you have? Three?

He makes a string of mistakes in grammar and usage as he states:

Other also doing well, though not so well.

Every family must have black sheep.

Though he advocates family planning, he does not seem to adopt it.

Though each line sounds to be humorous, they are the mere translation of the native tongue into English with the same tone and structure. Here the language is ineffectual, ungrammatical and unidiomatic. 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'.

If you are coming again this side by chance,

Visit please my humble residence also.

I am living just on opposite house's backside.

In addition to the humour, the grammatical incorrectness is also a dominant factor. But the reader enjoys the fun and reads the poem with excitement due to the flow of the Indian thought. Hence the underlying humor of the Indian conditions is understood thoroughly by even an average Indian and comment on them. Ezekiel is therefore more than an Indian poet with quaint language.

Nissim's *The Patriot* is another marvelous example of Indianess. The content of the poem is the genuine interest of the poet to instill a true concern for Gandhian attitude among the politically minded intellectuals of India. Though the theme is with genuine concern, it is with an apt blend of patriotism and satire on the political attitude of Indians. We celebrate Gandhijayanti and preach a lot on Gandhian principles but never practice any of the ideas which we preach a lot. Though we swear on nonviolence and peace, there is not even a single day passes on without violence. The hypocrisy that is highlighted with true concern is that Gandhiji is a person of action where as the speaker in this poem is a man of only talks. Hence this poem is an eye-opener to the generation that indulge only in preaching when action is the need of the hour. This genuine concern is depicted by Nissim in pure Indian English. The structure and tone of the phrases and words used in it gives a

humorous effect to the poem, But they reflect the easiness with which Nissim employs Indian English to describe the Indian attitude.

In the poem *The Patriot* we find the ample instances of the excessive use of present participle. This becomes evident in the second line of the second stanza:

*“Everyday I’m reading Times of India
To improve my English Language”*

Instead of using “I read” he uses “I am reading”. Another example of this feature we find in the fifth line of this first stanza;

“I am simply not understanding”.

We find the omission of linking verbs in this poem. In the second line and third line of the fourth stanza we find that linking verb has been omitted:

*“Pakistan behaving like this
China behaving like that”*

In both the lines ‘is’ (to be verb) is missing. Another example of this feature we find in the fifth line of the same paragraph:

“Really, most harassing me”

In the second line of the first paragraph we find the use of reduplication:

“Why world is fighting fighting”

Here the word ‘fighting’ has been used twice. It is used perhaps to emphasize the intensity of the problem.

Except these features, there are many other features adopted by Ezekiel in this poem. In this poem pidgins are very skilfully used

by the poet. Words like ‘goonda’, ‘Indirabehn’, ‘lassi...are examples for pidgins.

The Patriot is a typical poem of Nissim where he presents the contemporary political situations by the reference of Indira Gandhi and the Emergency as a political strategy used by the then Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi to suppress her political rivals. The contemporary political unrest was well projected through the lines

Lend me the ears.

Everything is coming -

*Regeneration, Remuneration,
Contraception.*

Be patiently, brothers and sisters.

With a perfect blend of patriotism and satire on the then political set up, Nissim reveals his genuine concern for the Gandhian principles and attitude.

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,

But modern generation is neglecting-

Too much going for fashion and foreign thing.

Though the entire conversation is assumed to be by an ongoing pedestrian, the discussion points to the essence of Indianism like Unity in Diversity, the political unrest, Indo-China-Pak friction and so on. India is a land of several religions, culture, language and races – a huge mix of so many components, - most of which speak different languages, wear different clothes ...The easy expression of the common man's opinion about the contemporary political turmoil is brought out by Nissim through Indian English which is described as the Babu's aggrezi. As in the case of *The Professor*, there is a direct translation of the ideas and views and attitude from mother tongue to English with the same structure and tone.

I am simply not understanding.

Ancient Indian Wisdom is 100% correct,

I should say even 200% correct,

But modern generation is neglecting-

Too much going for fashion and foreign thing.

The direct translation of ideas, episodes, characters and attitude results a lot of grammatical errors as follow:

1. "I am simply not understanding" - the misuse of the continuous tense

2. "modern generation is neglecting" - another common mistake, the omission of the object of a transitive verb.

3. "Too much going for fashion" - 'too much' is by way of being a universal modifier in Indian English;

4. "Other day I'm reading newspaper" - Hindi doesn't have articles; hence either their complete omission as in this sentence,

5. "You want one glass lassi?". the replacement of article by numbers

6. "To improve my English Language" - the use of the phrase 'English Language', where just 'English' will do.

7. "One goonda fellow" - Nouns are often used as adjectives, as also in "student unrest fellow".

8. "Lend me the ears" - when articles are used, they should be used correctly, as also in "Not that I am ever tasting the wine".

9. "All men are brothers, no?" - The interrogative 'no?' at the end of the sentence

is common to many non-native speakers of English.

Ezekiel's greatness is at his brilliance with which he could blend the essence of language with the humour and to present the purely Indian episodes and situations with a strong Indian flavour.

Nissim Ezekiel stands apart from other contemporaries due to his easiness with which he wrote poems on

very ordinary situations in India in a very comfortable Indian English blending the essence of the language with fun, irony and satire. The new use of English was as the use of their everyday speech. This enabled an average Indian enjoy an English poem with the satisfaction of enjoying a poem in the mother tongue. They could look at each folly of the Indian as a harmless joke though there was a sting of sarcasm. The above analysis holds an index to the fact that the high popularity of Nissim Ezekiel's poems is due to its closeness to Indian life and its expression in Indian English which even an average Indian can enjoy with full satisfaction. Here lies the true merit of Nissim Ezekiel.

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