

'The Night of the Scorpion' - Interpretation on Society

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Abstract

Night of the Scorpion explores the benign love of mother. Images are the interpretation of good and bad, rationalism and superstition, intelligence and ignorance. Humane is seen through the words of mother the very image of love. Development in the mind of child is seen with the development of society. Father's helplessness is the helplessness of the people in the society. Indian philosophy of birth and death is presented here. Reference of ten hours and twenty hours again depicts the culture of Indians who rely on time for all the acts and deeds on life. The poem starts with a dialogic act of the scorpion which is the Christian faith of the author where the necessary for redemption of Jesus starts with the committed sin of Adam and Eve who ate the forbidden fruit. Villagers' chants which had no effect on the author's mother are like the words of prophets and messiah which has no effect on the human being the sinners of the earth. Suffering in this world are like the wax applied on the author's mother that burns her along with the pain of the sting in her body.

Key words: love, image, rationalism, thank God, scorpion

“ Indian poetry in English has a longer and more distinguished tradition than Indian fiction in English—*Pankaj Mishra "Times Literary Supplement". International Books of the Year, 3 December 2004:10* “Nissim Ezekiel's poem *The Night of The Scorpion* 'is used as study material in Indian and Columbian schools. His poems are used in NCERT and ICSE English textbooks. The poem belongs to Nissim Ezekiel's collection entitled *The Exact Name* that was published in 1965. It is one of the first poems of Ezekiel and presents a scary picture of the superstition-ridden India where an insect is given monstrous dimensions. It carries Ezekiel's stringiest of satires against the many maladies that affect the Indian society. Not to mention it also explores the ever benign love of a mother for her child, which in itself is a conspicuous feature of Indianness. He was honoured with the Padmashri award by the President of India in 1988 and the Sahitya Akademi cultural award in 1983.

Nissim Ezekiel's 'Night of the Scorpion' creates a profound impact with an interplay of images relating to good and evil, light and darkness, rationalism and blind faith. Ezekiel's perusal of Hindu philosophy has helped him to reinterpret his own religious convictions of the Psalms and project the universality of all philosophy through his

indomitable experience of the self. The poem is in form of a monologue - first person narrative of the agony that a son had to undergo watching his mother suffer due to a scorpion sting. The lines are not all the same length and do not rhyme. The lines run on to the next line (this is sometimes called enjambement). The structure of the poem is quite modern since it doesn't really have much of a regular structure to talk of. Stanzas do not follow any set type or format. *This displays a variety of moods ranging from frustration to resignation but even in his bleakest mood the realization of the underlying glimmer of truth breaks through enlightening and strengthening his poetic vision. His detached observations present the concept of evil and suffering from three points of view namely, the Hindu, Christian and Jewish. The synthesis is achieved with perfect ease. The poem is highly readable and evocative. Ezekiel showed that it possible to write about oneself without being self-consciously Indian. Words were effectively used and turned into metaphor, evocative image or meaningful symbols as the situation demands and conveyed his vision of life ably through a varied and rich pattern of fresh experience or ideas exactly, effectively and artistically. This poetry is an imaginative reconstruction of reality. Dramatizes a battle of ideas fought at night in lamplight. This reminds of the simplistic prayer of Leo Tolstoy's three hermits: "Three are ye, three are we, have mercy upon us."* is a strong yet simple statement on the power of self effacing love. Full to the brim with Indianness, it captures a well-detached black and white snapshot of Indian village life with all its superstitious simplicity. And out of this confusion, there arises an unexpected winner – the selfless love of a mother. *The beauty of the poem lies in the mother's comment that lands abruptly on simple, humane grounds with an ironic punch.* This ironic twist in the poem comes in the end when the mother who suffered in silence opens her mouth and says, "Thank God the scorpion picked on me and spared my children." She is an inch taller than the others in that- she did not perceive how empty the glass was; she only observed how full it is. Ezekiel is a detached observer of the Indian scenario and this stance often has the power of a double-edged sword that cuts both ways. It is highlighted with the obvious features of the poem, such as its rural theme and its irony, specially in the attitudes of the villagers and his father.

The author Nissim Ezekiel recounts the night, a scorpion driven by continuous rain hidden beneath a rice sack stung the poet's mother and ran off after the attack. The villagers tried to search for the insect in order to immobilize it so that the poison doesn't spread since according to their belief the more the insect moves the more the poison spreads inside the body. Unable to find the creature the villagers prayed that the scorpion be still and invoked the Gods. According to the villagers the sting of the scorpion would purge the impurities of the flesh and would make the mother spiritually healthy. Nobody did anything for the benefit of the mother other than make these kinds of nonsensical remarks except the father who tried all his quack techniques to heal the lady but it took around twenty hours for the poison to lose its sting and until then the mother writhed in pain and finally thanked God for the punishment that was meted to her instead of her children being victimized. The choice of simple words suggest the simplicity of the emotion conveyed but the simple words do signify greater attitudes of a good poetry. The words like 'clicked their tongues', 'mud baked walls' etc add an exotic Indian touch to the poem. In fact all the words are simple and any number of words will suffice. The words do convey the double edgedness of the satire where the descriptive-narrative flavor of the poem is intensified. Building on that the poem's diction is very well suited to the occasion of poem which seeks to describe a situation.

The poem opens with the poet's reminiscence of a childhood experience. The poem opens in a way that suggests reflection—the speaker remembers (and, is so, older now) the night his mother was stung by a scorpion, it bit the mother because of its predatory impulse, that hid beneath a bag of rice to escape from the rain. The speaker specifically remembers this night because there was a reason it was memorable. The speaker manages to suggest that the scorpion is demonic with its "diabolic" tail. The scorpion then flees the scene and has to risk the rain again. A picture of a religious village is created by what the neighbours do ("buzz the name of God"). It is also implied that they live in a caring, close-knit village by the fact that the neighbours feel welcome at all. It starts in a house at night where it is raining and a scorpion, in order to take some shelter, comes to the house. Ten hours of steady rain had driven the scorpion to hiding beneath a sack of rice. After inflicting unbearable pain upon the mother with a flash of its diabolic tail, the scorpion risked the rain again. This poem is about how the scorpion stung the poet's mother and how she escaped and the mother's love for her children. Images of the dark forces of evil abound in *Night of the Scorpion*; the diabolic tail of the scorpion, giant scorpion shadows on the sun-baked walls and the night itself point to evil. In fact, the poem is about the pertinent question as to what can conquer evil. Where superstition, rationalism and religion proved futile, the self-effacing love of a mother had its say. Once again it is "Amor vincit omnia." Love conquers all, and that is all that is needed. The poem is not really about the scorpion or its sting. It contrasts the reactions of family, neighbours and his father with the dignity and courage of his mother. He sympathetically describes the scorpion as it shelters from ten hours of rain but it is so frightened that it "risk(s) the rain again" when it has stung his mother.

The theme of the poem is well reflected in the diction where it is dexterously used to describe a typical village with 'sack of rice' and 'mud baked walls' and of course 'peasants'. Again, the mention of the names of the various quack items like – 'powder, mixture, herb and hybrid' used by the father of the poet to cure the mother are dipped in the colour of India. It is interesting to find that the poet uses numerical details to focus perhaps his sharp memory or to make the pretension of the sharpness of memory. The poet mentions ten hours and again twenty hours. Ezekiel perhaps also sets off his precise calculative approach against the vagueness of the villagers. Ezekiel's use of the Indian English as usual is loaded with all the ironic insinuations that make the poem rich in its suggestive content. The structure of the poem is quite modern since it doesn't really have much of a regular structure to talk of. Stanzas do not follow any set type or format. The poem seems to be a remembrance as the word 'remember' suggests. The details mentioned are also vague (though the details of the duration and the names of the herbs are very precisely mentioned). The poem starts with the climax where the diabolic act is already done and the entire poem is a follow up of whatever goes on after the sting. The mother is not the mother of the author but the body politic of the society. The poem seems to tell an age old story.

The story that how an ailment ails a society and how the people inside the society instead of working for the benefit of the society works against it bound by their dark ignorance. It is the story of India where any problem is directly related to one's earlier and latter life of the victim. The same happens with the mother whose getting stung is regarded as the litmus test of her bodily and spiritual sanctity. If instead of a scorpion it would have been a snake, the lady might have had died, yet the villagers who cast 'scorpion shadows' on the wall clicked their tongues and would have sat doing nothing with their 'peace of understanding on their faces'. The second part of the structure of the poem

deals with the patriarch, the father and the healer, who appears to be as ineffectual as the villagers with his bogus charms and herbs. He even applies wax on the toe of the mother and burnt it. Therefore instead of doing any scientific and rational thing the patriarch prayed and yet he is ironically called a skeptic, rationalist. The irony is rather too apparent here. Finally the poem ends with the all accepting calmness of the mother who is ever ready to be picked on by any kind of calamity instead of her children. The images are commensurate with the theme and tone of the poem. Every irony is supported by an image equally potent. Night is something obvious as of an archetypal symbol of ignorance. Image of the scorpion shadows of the villagers being cast on the walls haunts us. An analogy seems to run between the swarms of insect and the swarms of the villagers. The clicking of the tongues is no different than the flash of the scorpion's appendage. Another significant image of the poem is the image of the flame preying on the mother. The image invokes the several horrible incidents where the greedy husband often burns the hapless wife for dowry, in jealousy or in inebriation. The subtle horror and not so subtle anger in the poem is obviously conveyed by the blank verse which is a suitable vehicle for suggesting agony and anxiety.

Indian situations form a vital part of the poetry. The superstitions and folk beliefs that exist in Indian society became favourite themes of new poets. Nissim Ezekiel handles such a theme with superb irony and subdued mockery in the poem. The speaker is displeased by their arrival, comparing them to flies (unwanted and irritating). They tried to provide reasons and many relied on superstition to guess what the problem was. The villagers tried to find the scorpion but they couldn't. By saying, "With candles and with lanterns throwing giant scorpion shadows on the sun-baked walls." the speaker is implying there is still evil haunting the house, even after the scorpion had left the house. This could also be implying that the shadows of the various house hold utensils and other items are converted by the brain of the searchers into the shadow of a scorpion- as that is what they are looking for a psychological approach of the author is seen here. Many things were tried to help the mother's pain but none worked. The speaker watches, helpless. the speaker is displeased by their arrival, comparing them to flies (unwanted and irritating) as they veritably buzzed around the mother.

The speaker's father who was sceptic and rationalist, tried to save his wife by using powder, mixture, herbs, hybrid and even by pouring a little paraffin upon the bitten toe and put a match to it, this reflects to one of the village peasant saying, "May the sins of your previous birth be burned away tonight." Which the father tries to do; Not for burning her sins but to burn away the poison residing inside the mother. The speaker watches the vain holy man performing his deceptive incantations but he cannot do anything to stop it. The peasant-folk of the village came like swarms of flies and expressed their sympathy. They believed that with every movement the scorpion made, the poison would move in mother's blood. So, with lighted candles and lanterns they began to search for him, but in vain. *The effect is heightened once again with the chanting of the people and its magical, incantatory effect. There is a contrast between the world of irrationality represented by the villagers and the world of rationalism represented by the father who tries all rational means to save his wife from suffering. Religion too plays its role with the holy man saying his prayers. But all three become futile. To put it very literally, "Night of the Scorpion" describes how a village woman, having been bitten in her mud hut by a scorpion on a rainy night, lies writhing in agony on the ground, while the villagers who sit surrounding her do precious little save shake their heads and make sagacious remarks often verging on the bizarre. Even her husband's so-called knowledge of medicine is of little use. In the end, the pain subsides*

naturally and the woman thanks god that the scorpion had bitten her and not her children.

Ezekiel, has opened up poetic possibilities along three different avenues: the modes of affirmation of myth and history and the quest for self in and through love and if this is frustrated, the resultant longing for dissolution and death. The poem shows the peoples' superstitious reactions: the peasants try to "paralyse the Evil One" (the devil, ie the scorpion) the peasants believe that when the scorpion moves the poison in the mother's blood will move they hope that the pain is cleaning the mother from a sin in the past ("your previous birth") or a sin in the future ("your next birth") "May the poison purify your flesh/of desire and the spirit of ambition/they said" shows that they think that the poison will make the mother better. The poet's father normally does not believe these superstitions (he is "sceptic, rationalist" – he doubts superstitions and believes in scientific reason). But he is now worse than the other peasants, as he tries "every curse and blessing" and every antidote that he can think of. The "holy man" performs "rites" but the relief comes with time: "After twenty hours it lost its sting" To console the mother they opened the bundle of their superstitions. They told mother that the suffering and pain will burn away the sins of her previous birth. "May the suffering decrease the misfortunes of your next birth too", they said. Mother twisted and groaned in mortifying pain. Her husband, who was sceptic and rationalist, tried every curse and blessing; powder, herb and hybrid. As a last resort he even poured a little paraffin on the bitten part and put a match to it. The painful night was long and the holy man came and played his part. He performed his rites and tried to tame the poison with an incantation. After twenty hours the poison lost its sting.

The poem is not really about the scorpion or its sting. It contrasts the reactions of family, neighbours and his father with the dignity and courage of his mother. The sting of superstition seems to be more dangerous and harmful than the sting of the scorpion. The scorpion's poison runs parallel with the poison of superstition that had killed people of his time. The scorpion is poisonous, so is the ignorance of the village. The peasants, finally accepting the fate of the mother, try to put a positive spin on the situation by saying that even if the mother died, her next life (An Indian Belief) would be less painful, as she atoning for her future sins by enduring this pain. This poem makes us realize that times have changed drastically in our society since his childhood experience and his youth experience varies in his narration and that such changes are happening at an alarmingly fast rate. Those days they had time to chant the name of God. Magnifying small issues is still prevailing in our culture with all the developments around us. In today's world even the basic communication is missing in our life. Scorpion stinging his mother in retrospect brings forth the poet's gall of criticism against the irrationality of the average uneducated person. The poet brings out the unavoidable circumstance in which the insect had come into contact with the mother. Today we are so called educated with highly developed technological and scientific instruments but people are still suffering with the problem of insects. It came from a religious background and Nissim wrote this poem trying to give the impression of anger, but also an underlying message of motherly love, along with a hint of culture and superstition.

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