



Portrayal of superstition and Mother's sacrifice in Nissim Ezekiel's "night of the scorpion"

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Abstract

Nissim Ezekiel's 'Night of the Scorpion' develops a deep impact with an interplay of scenes relating to fair and foul, intelligence and ignorance, science and belief. Ezekiel's depiction of Hindu philosophy has assisted him to evaluate his own religious faith of the Psalms and project the universality of philosophy through his indomitable realization of the self. The poem is in form of a monologue - first person narrative of the sadness that a son had to undergo observing his mother's pain due to a scorpion sting. The lines do not have the same length and do not rhyme. The lines run on to the next line (this is sometimes called enjambment). The structure of the poem is quite new since it does not actually have much of a regular pattern. There is not any set format in the stanza pattern. This shows a variety of emotions ranging from frustration to resignation but even in his depressed situation the acknowledgement of the hidden glimmer of reality breaks through strengthening his poetic mission. His evaluations highlight the idea of evil and bearing from three points of view, the Hindu, Christian and Jewish. The combination is gained with solid ease. The poem is extremely inspiring and interesting to read.

Keywords: village, rainy night, mother, scorpion, father, holy men

Introduction

Nissim Ezekiel's poem "Night of The Scorpion" is very popular in Indian and Columbian schools. The Night of the Scorpion published in his collection of the poems entitled *The Exact Name* in 1965. It shows a rural scene of the superstition ridden society where an insect is provided giant dimensions. It depicts Ezekiel's stringiest of satires against the numerous evil practices that grip the Indian society. Not to say it also delineates the ever genuine love of a mother for her children which in itself is a special presentation of Indianness. He was esteemed with the Padmashri award by the President of India in 1988 and the Sahitya Akademi cultural award in 1983. Nissim Ezekiel is a prolific writer who has strongly rejected charges of obscurity in his poems. Ezekiel displayed that it is simple to compose about oneself without being self-consciously Indian. Diction was perfectly used and presented metaphor, evocative scenes or purposeful symbols as the scene requires and depicts his idea of life aptly through a varied and perfect pattern of new feelings or thoughts. This poem is an imaginative recreation of truth. Representation of ideas is suited to the mood of characters in lamplight at night. This is similar to the idea of the prayer of Lev Tolstoy's Three Hermit Three are your, three are we, have mercy upon us., (Tolstoy VI 7, 8) It a powerful yet common idea on the force of self-effacing affection. Complete with Indianness, it covers a well-detached grey pictures of Indian rural life with all its superstitious images. And out of this state there arises a great champion – the selfless affection of a mother. The poetic beauty of the poem lies in the mother's statement that lands swiftly on natural, real base with an ironic twist. This ironic idea in the poem results in the end when the mother groans in pain and states

Thank God the scorpion picked on me and spared my children. (Ezekiel 2)

She is a more mature than others in this poem; she has positive approach. Ezekiel is a detached observer of the Indian pictures and this example often has the force of a magnetic power. It is shown with the natural pictures of the poem, such as its village scenes and its irony, particularly in the behaviour of the peasants and his father. Nissim Ezekiel remembers the night, a scorpion driven by steady rain hidden beneath a sack of rice stung the poet's mother and ran away. The villagers attempted to find out it in order to immobilize it so that the poison does not circulate in the blood of mother; since according to their faith the more the insect crawl, the more the poison moves inside the body. Unable to search the scorpion the villagers prayed that the scorpion be sit still and call for the mercy of God. According to the belief of the villagers the sting of the scorpion would purify the sin of the mother and would create the mother spiritually pure. Nobody did anything for the treatment of the mother other than create these types of nonsensical techniques except the father who attempted all his tricks to mitigate pain of the woman but it took around twenty hours for the poison to lose its sting and until then the mother twisted in pain and eventually thanked God for the pain that was meted to her instead of her children being

victimized. The selection of simple words signifies the lucidity of the emotion presented but the simple words do show greater approach of a fine poetry. The choice of words like clicked their tongues', mud baked walls link an exotic Indian appeal to the poem. In fact all the words are natural and any number of actions will sufficient. Some words represent the double eagerness of the satire where the descriptive narrative touch of the poem is highlighted. Designing on that the poem's words are suited to the temperament of poem which tries to delineate the picture of the village.

The poem has been subjected to numerous analysis, some erroneous, some partially justified some natural, and many "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing". Most of them have been gender-based, owing to the main role of the woman as the mother in the poem and her pious mother like concern for children in the end. Most critics have contented themselves with the simple and exact interpretation as provided in the previous stanza, and have remarked accordingly: Many critics have been affected by the "self-denying role" of the mother in the poem (Lall 78). Rajeev Taranath, in his Short Introduction to Nissim Ezekiel for Saleem Peeradina's description Indian-English Poetry, gave analysis on the poem's structure pointing the irony: '

The (sic) Night of the Scorpion" [he even gets the name of the poem Wrong, there is no 'the'] absorbed irony into the poem structure—the Second stanza is related to the first in terms of an ironic contrast.

(Peeradina 1)

The concluding couplet of "Night of the Scorpion", like in the sonnets of Shakespeare, is so effective to attract the attention on the last three lines of the poem and explained on the basis of these three lines alone and the speaker who expresses the feelings in these lines. These three lines are very important and memorable, comes in the guise of an ironic twist (the conclusion of a Jeffrey Archer short story) on the reader and is of such magnitude that it gets stored in his memory.

We thus find that in the title and first seven lines of the poem there are enough clues to afford a radically different interpretation. The poem gets more interesting from the eighth line onwards, as the action becomes more complex. The cries of the woman bring the peasants running to her. The lanterns and the candles that they carry throw giant scorpion shadows/on the sun-baked walls (2) which is hardly surprising because each peasant, who enjoys the whore whenever he has the money, is a scorpion himself. This idea is repeated a little later in the following very significant words used by the poet More candles, more lanterns, more neighbours, / *more insects*, and the endless rain (2) and the villagers' subsequent search for the offending scorpion proves futile; it was only to be expected because the scorpion that had bitten the woman that particular night (the male who had enjoyed the whore that night) had become a homogeneous part of the crowd of peasants in the room. The irony is not lost on the readers.

At this point the poet is clearly enjoying himself for there is a continuation of the ironical and mocking tone. The villagers, instead of trying to fetch help or do something useful, merely sit idly in a circle surrounding the patient, clicking their tongues, nodding their heads and making sagacious comments. The woman's suffering and ordeal is given a philosophical colour and interpreted on a cosmic scale encompassing birth and death, sin and redemption. Notwithstanding the fact that it is none but the males of the village who enjoyed her body and who had driven her to sin, the villagers are quick to isolate her, denigrate her as the sinner.

The poet specially remembers this night because there was a memorable incident. The narrator arranges to advice that the scorpion is devilish with its "diabolic" tail. The scorpion then flees the picture and has to risk the rain again. A scene of a religious village is made by what the neighbours perform buzz the name of God .(1) It is also common that they live in near to village by the fact that the neighbours welcome at all. It starts in a house at night where it is raining and a scorpion, in order to search some shelter, comes to the hut. Ten hours of steady rain had driven him to hide beneath a sack of rice. After inflicting 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 speaker's mother and how she concerns for her children. Pictures of the bad 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 indicate to evil. "Night of the Scorpion" is about the question as to what can win evil? Where superstition, rationalism and religion proved worthless, the self-effacing affection of a mother had its point. Once again it is —Amor Vincit Omnia. Love wins all, and that is all required. The poem is not actually about the scorpion or its sting. It is the responses of family, neighbours and his father with the dare of his mother. He sympathetically portrays the scorpion as it shelters from ten hours of rain but it is so horrible that it —risk(s) the rain again when it has stung his mother.

The story of the poem is well presented in the diction where it is perfectly used to delineate a typical rural village with sack of rice' and, mud baked walls' and of course, peasants'. Again, the description of the names of the numerous medicines like – powder, mixture, herb and hybrid' used by the rational father of the speaker to alleviate the pain of the mother are painted in the picture of India. It is thrilling to see that the narrator uses numerous descriptions to highlight his good memory or to create the pretension of the goodness of memory. The speaker describes ten hours and again twenty hours. Ezekiel perhaps also sets off his brief calculative treatment against the pray of the villagers. Ezekiel's use of the Indian English as usual is covered with all the ironic twists that create the poem rich in its suggestive meaning. The design of the poem is completely new since it does not actually have much of a regular pattern. Stanzas are in regular pattern. The poem gives the record of

remembrance as the word 'remember' indicates. The details of the medicine in the poem are also not clear though the description of the duration and the names of the herbs are very acutely described. The poem begins with the peak point where the diabolic deed is already performed and the entire poem is a follow up of whatever completed on after the sting. The mother is not the mother of the poet but the body politic of the community. The poem appears to narrate an age old tale told by the poet himself.

The theme that how an ailment ails a community and how the people inside the society instead of labouring for the advantage of the society perform against it bound by their lack of knowledge. It is the tale of India where any problem is openly connected to one's life. The same happens with the lady whose getting stung is linked as the litmus test of her bodily and spiritual purity. If instead of a scorpion it would have been a snake, the mother might have had ceased, yet the peasants who cast scorpion shadows' on the sun-baked wall clicked their tongues and would have reposed performing nothing with their peace and sense of understanding reflected on their faces. The second portion of the poem depicts the patriarch, the father and the doctor who seems to be as worried as the villagers with his tantrums and powder. He even poured paraffin on the toe of the mother and burnt it. Therefore instead of performing any rational thing the patriarch wished and yet he is ironically spelled as rationalist and sceptic. The irony is rather too visible here. Eventually, the poem ends with the all acknowledging peace of the mother who is always willing to sacrifice to be picked on by any kind of catastrophe instead of her children. The pictures are matching with the theme of the poem. Every irony is assisted by a picture equally powerful. Night is something natural as of an archetypal image of darkness. Symbol of the scorpion shadows being cast on the walls haunts us. An analogy appears to see between the swarms of peasants and the swarms of the insects. The clicking of the tongues is similar to the flash of the scorpion's appendage. Another important picture of the poem is the picture of the flame preying on the lady. The scene invokes the numerous dangerous incidents where the greedy husband often burns the hapless wife for dowry. The subtle fear and not so subtle anger in the poem is clearly presented by the blank verse which is perfect medium for showing frustration.

Indian conditions form a vital portion of the poetry. The superstitious faiths that prevails in Indian society became interesting topics of new poets. Nissim Ezekiel deals such a theme with excellent irony in the poem. The poet is dissatisfied by their entry, comparing them to flies. They attempted to give valid points and many believed on superstition to assess what the problem was. The villagers attempted to search the scorpion but they could not find him. They states:

With candles and with lanterns throwing giant scorpion
Shadows on the sun-baked walls. (2)

The poet's father who was rationalist, attempted to secure his spouse by mixing 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 peasants stating May the sins of your previous birth be burned away tonight.(2)Which the father tries to perform; Not for burning her wrong deeds but to burn away the poison inside the mother. The poet witnesses the holy man chanting his mantras but he cannot operate anything to cease it. The peasant-folk of the village came like swarms of flies and presented their concern for the mother They know that with every movement the scorpion made, the poison would move in mother's blood. So, with lighted candles and lanterns they started to search for him, but in vain. The effect is highlighted once again with the performance of incantations of the people and its incantatory spell. There is comparison between the world of superstition represented by the villagers and the world of science and reason represented by the father who attempts all rational means to protect his spouse from pain. Religion is linked with the holy man chanting his incantations. But all three become worthless. "Night of the Scorpion" delineates how a village lady having been bitten in her mud hut by a scorpion on a rainy night, lies groaning in agony on a mat. While the villagers who sit surrounding her perform precious little tricks shake their heads and create important comments often verging on the bizarre. Even the father has little knowledge of medicine. In the end, the pain decreases and the mother thanks god that the scorpion had bitten her and spare her children. May the sins of your previous birth be burned away tonight, they said. (2)

It can be seen that in the title and first seven lines of the poem there are enough clues to afford a radically different interpretation. The poem gets more interesting from the eighth line onwards, as the action becomes more complex. The cries of the woman bring the peasants running to her. The lanterns and the candles that they carry throw giant scorpion shadows/on the sun-baked walls (2) which is hardly surprising because each peasant, who enjoys the whore whenever he has the money, is a scorpion himself. This idea is repeated a little later in the following very significant words used by the poet More candles, more lanterns, more neighbours,/ more insects, and the endless rain (2). No wonder then that the villagers' subsequent search for the offending scorpion proves futile; it was only to be expected because the scorpion that had bitten the woman that particular night (the male who had enjoyed the whore that night) had become a homogeneous part of the crowd of peasants in the room. The irony is not lost on the readers.

At this point the poet is clearly enjoying himself for there is a continuation of the ironical, mocking tone. The villagers, instead of trying to fetch help or do something useful, merely sit idly in a circle surrounding the patient, clicking their tongues, nodding their heads and making sagacious comments that range from the arcane to the downright fatuous. The woman's suffering and ordeal is given a philosophical colour and interpreted on a cosmic scale encompassing birth and death, sin, redemption and beatitude. Notwithstanding the fact that it is

none but the males of the village who enjoyed her body and who had driven her to sin, the villagers are quick to isolate her, denigrate her and arraign her as the sinner

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 (1)

It is the man who is responsible for pain of the woman when he dominates her for sexual pleasure; and in the poem, he turns out by far to be the more diplomatic for, with deft lawyer-like debates, he wins in pinning the feeling of lechery on the female sex, hinting thereby that it is fleshly wish and associated monetary reasons of the female that lead her to indulge in the profession of prostitution, and not the common authoritative behaviour of the man :May the poison purify your flesh / of desire, and your spirit of ambition, they said ...(2) It is, as any gynocritic will highlight reversal of roles, gained through phallogocentric casuistry. Having thus gained a sacrificial lamb and released themselves from a sticky condition, the peasants sit settled in self- contentment the peace of understanding on every face (2).They are very natural in their demeanour and deed that a critic, M.K. Naik considers their actions in the poem to be that of ...invest[ing] the poem with deep significance by trying to understand the Indian ethos and its view of evil and suffering (194-195).

It is now time for the poet's father to enter the scene. He is shown as a rationalist and with valid reason too, for he is the only one who attempts to alleviate the pain of mother with medicines. He acts like a doctor, he uses his posse of powders, herbs and mixtures to mitigate the pain. But it is a frugal rather than a filial purpose that affects him to this act of piety. He is nothing but a pimp who had been fast to experience the sex-appeal of his beautiful spouse, and had over the years used her as a sort of cash machine for monetary benefits after having completed his own lust. Realizing that a constant medium of advantage may be extinguished soon, he is reduced to trying every curse and blessing (2) to goad her to be up and performing again.

After twenty hours, states the poet, the poison loses its sting — it's all over. Death is neither swift nor painless: the twenty hours of pain seem twenty years of sexual servitude. Ironically, it is the husband who cremates her — burns her body would be a more appropriate term (“he even poured a little paraffin/ upon the bitten toe and put a match to it”) — for what use does a pimp have for a prostitute who is no longer economically useful? It is the son who is the silent spectator to his mother's funeral; watched the flame feeding on my mother (2) The last words of his mother, a sort of prayer to God that probably occurs as an epiphanic flash in her mind before she dies, seems to reverberate as an echo Thank God the scorpion picked on me/and spared my children (2).

Idea of the meaning of womanhood and its depiction in poetry has always been a adventurous observation for Ezekiel, and his delineation of sex and the sexual performance has been a part of the practice. As K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar points out

He was painfully and poignantly aware of the flesh (Iyengar5)

Ezekiel, has opened up poetic probabilities along three different avenues: the ways of confirmation of myth and history and the search for self in and through affection and if this is frustrated the resultant desire for demise. The poem presents the peoples' superstitious responses: the peasants attempts to paralyze the scorpion the villagers acknowledge that when the scorpion moves the poison in the mother's blood will circulate they hope that the suffering is purifying the mother from a sin committed in the previous birth or a sin in the 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. (2).The speaker's father usually does not accept these superstitious beliefs. But he is now worse than the other villagers, as he does 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.(2) 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 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 he 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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