

Critical Analysis of the Poem Night of the Scorpion By Nissim Ezekiel

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Abstract

Nissim Ezekiel is the outstanding writer of the post-independence India. He is an Indian Jewish poet, actor, playwright, editor and art-critic. He was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1983 for his Poetry collection, "Latter-Day Psalms", and honoured with the 'Padmashri' award by the President of India in 1988. He tried to describe the characteristic Indian attitude in his poems.

He enriched and established Indian English language poetry through his modernist innovations and techniques, which enlarged Indian English literature, moving it beyond purely spiritual and orientalist themes, to include a wider range of concerns and interests, including familial events, individual angst and skeptical societal introspection. He observes the social world and his own behavior with detachment. Many of his poems deal with private experiences

His poem 'Night of the scorpion' is a narrative and the poem starts with the reminiscence of an event in the childhood of the poet when his mother was stung by a scorpion. Here the poet recollects the night his mother was stung by a scorpion .

'I remember the night my mother
was stung by a scorpion. Ten hours
of steady rain had driven him
to crawl beneath a sack of rice.'

This incident 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. He describes the reactions of villagers, father, holy man and the mother to the incident. The poet remembers the night his mother was stung by a scorpion. It rained for ten hours. a scorpion entered the poet's house to escape the rain. The scorpion hid beneath a sack of rice. The poet's mother went there on some work. Then the scorpion stung her on the toe and went out risking the rain.

The peasants heard of this and came like swarms of flies. They began to express 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 peasants came like swarms of flies-----

-----With every movement that the scorpion made his poison moved in Mother's blood,
they said.’

They were anxious to bring hr quick relief. . Since they were superstitious they buzzed the name of god a hundred times to paralyze the scorpion. They searched for the scorpion with the help of candles and lanterns but in vain. They believed that as the scorpion moved the poison in mother’s blood also moved. So they wished he did not move.

They thought that her suffering was the result of her sins committed in her previous birth. Her pains would make her pure and decrease the misfortunes of her next birth. She would be free from desire and ambition.

‘May your suffering decrease
the misfortunes of your next birth, they said.’

More and more neighbours came with candles and lanterns to express their concern about mother’s condition. However the mother continued to groan and twist her body because of pain. The poet’s father was very much a rational man who instead of taking the mother to a hospital actually tried various herbs and superstitious medicines to get rid of the poison. In course of his treatment , he burnt the toe of the mother. He poured a little paraffin and put a match to it by thinking that the flame would consume the poison in mother’s blood. But it also failed tame the poison.

‘My father, septic, rationalist,
trying every curse and blessing,
powder, mixture, herb and hybrid.
He even poured a little paraffin
upon the bitten toe and put a match to it.’

As the mother continued to suffer, the holy man tried to bring relief to the mother with incantation. But he too did not succeed. After twenty hours of intense agony the mother was free from pain. She thanked god because the scorpion stung her and not her children. The ironic twist in the poem comes when in the end the mother who suffered in silence opens her mouth. She says,

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

Ezekiel is known to be a keen observer of the Indian scenario and this stance often has the power of a double-edged sword that cuts both ways. On the one side Night of the Scorpion presents an Indian village through the eyes of an outsider and finds the deep-rooted strains of superstition and blind faith which may seem foolish to the western eye. The villagers are superstitious irrational and have blind faith. They have unflinching faith in god. So they offer faith-healings but they did not succeed the father's superstitious science also failed to tame the poison. The holy man's faith in incantation also could do nothing. Here the mother's reactions can be treated as the noblest because it reveals self-effacing love of an Indian mother and concern for her children.

This poem we can observe the world of superstitions and the world of science are juxtaposed. But the poem never fails to highlight the positive side of Indian village life. The poet does not turn a blind eye to the fellow-feeling, sympathy and cooperation shown by the villagers. And in a poem that deals with the all-conquering power of love, the reader too should be well aware of it.

References

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