

NISSIM EZEKIEL'S "NIGHT OF THE SCORPION": A REINTERPRETATION

¹Neelu Dhiman
²U.S.Bhardwaj

Abstract

Nissim Ezekiel's famous narrative poem "Night of the Scorpion" is a typical Indian poem in which the poet has cramped the Sanatanist philosophy of the karmas against the background of the spirit of feudalism in India. The poem contains some superstitions of India and a glimpse of the theory of karmas. It also gives to the reader a dose of scepticism. But, ultimately the belief of an Indian mother gets the better of everything. It is the best illustration of Ezekiel as a poet of Indianness.

"Night of the Scorpion" is a narrative poem which is the best illustration of Nissim Ezekiel as a poet of Indianness. In this poem, the poet draws the attention of the readers towards Indian superstitions, particularly Hindu and Israelite superstitions, customs of people, their concern for the suffering individuals, their fatalism, and their ultimate belief and faith in the will of God. All these Indian concerns are underlined through the narration of an incident in which the narrator's or the poet's mother was stung by a scorpion. The poem is also a picturesque transmutation of the spirit of feudalism which even after the end of "Feudalism as a social system"¹ in the history of India was still present as a spirit in the mind and heart of rural people. In the post independent India to which this poem belongs, the rural areas were still dominated by rich landlords, though they were not feudal lords. The working class peasants in the villages still served their rich landlord masters like the serfs of the gone-by days. The father of the narrator is a rich landlord of the village; the narrator's mother being the wife of a rich landlord is a godmother of the working class peasants.

The narrator says that he remembers the night when his "mother was stung by a scorpion"². Ten hours of steady rain had driven the scorpion "to crawl beneath a sack of rice" to wait thereunder. At night it came out stealthily, stung the godmother and parted with the 'poison' which the poet calls "flash of diabolic tail in the dark room", and the devil "risked the rain again".

Since, the poet is a Jew by birth, the comparison of the scorpion with his "diabolic tail" is obvious. Since, the devil delights in darkness, the diabolic scorpion parted with his sting into the blood of the mother in the darkness of the night³. This all is comparable to the satanic attack of the evil forces on the good and benevolent forces of life.

In the background of feudalism, it was not the mother of the narrator who was stung it was the godmother of working class serfs of the village who was stung. Since, the peasants are a non - entity in the background of rich landlordism, they have been compared to the "swarms of flies". The shadows of

1. Research Scholar, CMJ University, Shilong, Meghalaya.

2. Professor Emeritus of English, J.J.T.U, Jhunjhunu Rajasthan.

these peasants are "giant scorpion shadows". However, these workers are shown as blind followers of the religion of their masters. That is why, they buzz the Name of God a hundred times to paralyze the devilish effect of the Evil One. The poet says: "they searched for him; he was not found".

This all is the feudalistic element in the poem. The poet intermixes the scriptural concept of sin and devil with Hindu Sanatan superstitions and beliefs. It is commonplace among the Hindus that when a scorpion stings someone, the more it moves, the more pain does the victim feel. This superstition of the Hindus is conveyed through the expression:

"With every movement that the scorpion made
His poison moved in Mother's blood,
May he sit still, they said." (CP, p.130)

It is a belief among the Hindus that whatever the happiness or sorrow a man goes through in this life, is the result of the karmas of the previous birth. This idea is conveyed through the lines:

"May the sins of your previous birth be
burned away tonight, they said. May your sufferings
decrease the misfortunes of your next birth, they
said." (CP, p.130)

It is also a belief among the Hindus that whatever the pain one feels in this life, it purifies the mind and the soul in this life and therefore poison of the scorpion is a means to the purification of desires. The poet says:

"May the sum of 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." (CP, p.130)

While these peasants prayed differently for the recovery of the god mother, they sat around on the floor with the Mother in the center. With the passage of time more and more neighbouring people with the lanterns and candles in their hands arrived on the scene where the Mother was sitting in the center. All these new arrivals are compared by the feudalistic narrator with "more insects". The narrator's mother

was writhing with pain as she "twisted through and through groaning on a mat."

The poem also contains a dose of skepticism against the superstitious beliefs of the people. The narrator's father represents the 20th century skepticism. He doesn't believe in the superstitions and the prayers of the illiterate crowd of the village. He is a man of scientific temper and as such he tries every kind of modern medicine including "powder, mixture, herb, hybrid", and he even pours "a little paraffin upon the bitten toe" and puts a match to it, so that the poison of his spouse is alleviated.

Then there is a treatment of the holy man performing his religious rights with the incantation of mantras to nullify the poison of the scorpion.

After twenty hours when the sting of the scorpion was nullified, everything became normal. The mother who is out and out an Indian mother who is either Jewish, Muslim or a Hindu mother, is basically an Indian mother who says:

"Thank God the scorpion picked on me and spared my children." (CP, p.131)

Thus, "Night of the Scorpion" is typically an Indian poem and Ezekiel has cramped into it the Sanatanist philosophy of the karmas and has underlined some popular superstitions of the people of India. The Indianness that dwells in the heart and soul of Ezekiel is in the form of Indian people's belief in superstitions of India. These superstitions do not belong to any particular city or village of India, but are common to the Indian folk, rural or urban, of any place and religion, and are therefore universal in the Indian context. In this sense the poem cannot be considered 'regional' but 'universal'.

"Night of the Scorpion" appears to be a "dramatic monologue". Guru Prasad looks at the dramatic element of the poem and considers this poem as a "dramatic monologue".⁴ But discerning academic readers will not like to compare this poem with a typical dramatic monologue as the invisible speaker herein does not put any question to the poet, as is essential to the dramatic monologues of Browning.

Thus, Ezekiel is out and out a poet of Indian consciousness. He is right when he states that: "I am not a Hindu and my background makes me a natural outsider; circumstances and decisions relate me to India. In other countries I am a foreigner, in India I am an Indian.....India is simply an environment..... I have not withdrawn from India...."5 And "Night of the Scorpion" is the poem of Indian environment.

References

1. According to "Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary" feudalism is the social system that existed during the middle ages in Europe in which people were given land and protection by a noble man and people had to work and fight for him in return. See; Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English, ed by A.S. Hornby, Oxford; Oxford University Press, 2010, p.567.
2. Quotations from the text of "Night of the Scorpion" in this article are from the book Nissim Ezekiel, *Collected Poems*, Delhi; Oxford University Press, 1989, pp.130-131.
3. In "The Old Testament" which is the book of Jews, the devil is regarded as the Prince of Darkness. It is a Christian belief that the devil comes out of hell at night to execute his evil plans on the life of human beings - ND.
4. Guru Prasad, "Reflections on Ezekiel's - Night of the Scorpion" in *Perspectives on Nissim Ezekiel*, ed by S.C.Dwivedi, New Delhi; Kitab Mahal Distributors, 1989, p.77.
5. Cited in Nissim Ezekiel, *Collected Poems*, "Introduction", ed by Gieve Patel, Delhi; Oxford University Press, 1989, p.XXII.