



‘MANIFESTATION OF MOTHERHOOD OF INDIAN MOTHER IN NISSIM EZEKIEL’S *NIGHT OF THE SCORPION*’

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I

The Indo - Anglian poetry is said to be essentially Indian and everything else afterwards. It expresses the essence of Indian personality and is also very sensitive to the changes of its national climate and it voices the aspirations and the joys and sorrows of Indians. With the publication of *A Time to Change* (1952), Nissim Ezekiel began history of modern Indian poetry in English. He is among the very best of contemporary Indian English poets. He handles the language with care and sensitivity; as says in ‘Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher’, ‘The best poets wait for words’. Ezekiel has his own distinctive personality, character and themes which he expressed within the perspective of a modern intellectual. He brought to Indian English poetry the skepticism, restlessness, feeling of alienation, openness to experience and quest for some meaning to life. He makes use of Indian situations and beliefs in his poetry. He possesses a thinking mind and his poetry embraces a wide range of themes.

Nissim Ezekiel occupies an important place in post-Independence Indian English literature. He has wielded a great influence as a leading poet, editor and an occasional playwright. Besides, he is a well-known critic. Sometimes he also emerges as a politician in the guise of a fighter for cultural freedom in India. Ezekiel held many important positions. For him poetry-writing was a lofty vocation, a way of life. He treated life as a journey where poetry would be the main source of discovering and organizing one's own self. In a sense, poetry to Ezekiel became a way for self-realization. He calls life a texture of poetry. He identifies himself with poetry. So all of his volumes of verse are well-knit and they are in the poet's view, a continuation of each other. Ezekiel's experiments in prose rhythms and his fine sense of structure and metrical ability. The verse rhythms of T.S. Eliot might have haunted his mind.

II

Night of the Scorpion, published in *The Exact Name* (1965), is one of Nissim Ezekiel's well known poems. It has been highly admired as a flawless piece of poetic creation. This poem shows that Ezekiel is a typical Indian poet whose interest in the Indian soil and in ordinary events of day-to-day Indian life is superb. It is a brilliant narrative poem. The narrator remembers the night when the scorpion had bitten his mother. The heavy rain had driven the scorpion to crawl under a sack of rice and unexpectedly had bitten his mother's toe; flashing its devilish tail and parting with its poison. The mother occupies a prominent place in Indian home. Everyone loves and respects her. The peasants or villagers came into their hut "like swarms of flies" to sympathize with the family. The neighbours buzzed the name of god hoping to paralyze the scorpion as they believed that if the mother moved the poison would spread. They searched for the scorpion with candles and lanterns. They clicked their tongues that the mother's sufferings may decrease "the misfortunes of her next birth". So all members of the family and neighbours are very anxious to bring her quick relief:

The peasants came like swarms of flies
and buzzed the name of God a hundred times
to paralyze the Evil One. (8-10)

They are so simple and well-intended people who believe in the effect of the prayer. The prayer can ward off the evil influence. The peasants sit around her on the floor and compassionate with her. The mother suffers the agony of the sting; she twists and turns her body. They become sad because of her sufferings. The landscape goes parallel to the emotions. The rain continues and the mother also continues to suffer. Everyone tries to decrease the suffering in their own ways and the narrator's father, who was normally a rationalist and a practical man, also gave in to the superstitious beliefs of the villages and joined them in their cursing and praying then putting a mixture of powders and herbs on her toe, a little paraffin on the bite and lit it with a match - hoping to burn the poison away.

He even poured a little paraffin
Upon the bitten toe and put a match to it. (40-41)

The narrator saw his mother's toe on fire and must have felt afraid. Only after twenty hours did the poison subside the mother was relieved of the pain, and thanked god that the scorpion bit her and spared her children.

My mother only said
Thank God the scorpion picked on me



And spared my children. (46-48)

The last part of the poem upholds the dignity of the Indian motherhood. The mother's comment: "Thank God the scorpion picked on me and spread my children" is typical of an Indian mother. She is relieved to find that the scorpion let her children alone and thanks God for it. The entire poem may be taken as a tribute to the selfless love of a mother. The mother's malady causes considerable disturbance not only to the members of the family but to the whole neighborhood. All are anxious to alleviate her pain. Various attempts are made by different people. All these go to prove that the poem is woven around the theme of reverence to the mother.

"Night of the scorpion" is a typical Indian poem by a very Indian poet in English whose interest in the Indian soil and its ordinary human events of day-to-day Indian life is superb. A good many Indians are illiterate and are blindly superstitious. But they are simple, loving and lovable. They attempt to save the victim by doing whatever they can. But they do not succeed. The father who is not superstitious and is educated tries his own scientific ways; he too, does not succeed. There is the holy man who performs his rites with incantation. He also fails to find a cure. Finally, the cure comes by itself. This can be taken as a proof for the belief in 'fate'; everything in a man's life is pre-destined and man has no role in changing it.

This is in general motherhood of any Indian mother who always thinks of her children. She knows the sting was extreme and if the scorpion had stung her children, it was much difficult to bear. She can bear the sting of the scorpion but she cannot bear the sufferings of her children. The poem shows when a critical situation arises, human beings are always willing to help one another. Common villagers show their simplicity and sympathy; though they are not of much help, and give in to superstitions and false beliefs, they try to help out. The father, though a skeptic and rationalist in normal circumstances, yet in this moment of crisis, he gives in to the villagers' advice. The mother bears the pain and suffering for twenty hours, writhing in pain and when she recovers, she is thankful that she was bitten and not her children, bringing out the maternal love of a mother for her children.

III

The man who has not understood what motherhood is might be taken in by such expression of motherly love. But I convincingly feel that any woman would have exclaimed the same thing as the mother in this poem did. The "skeptical rationalist" father trying 'powder, mixture, herb and hybrid' bears upon human primitivism and when he experiments with 'a little paraffin upon a bitten toe and put a match to it he becomes a symbol of perversion in the



modern man's psyche. The poem "Night of the Scorpion" can be classified as poetry of situation – an art in which Robert Browning and Robert Frost excelled. It presents a critical situation in which a mother is bitten by a scorpion. It involves a typical Indian situation in which an entire village community identifies itself with a sad domestic happening. It pictures the traditional Indian society steeped in ignorance and superstition. The poem is set against the backdrop of Indian rural setting. The rural habit of storing rice in gunny bags is referred to in the phrase, " a sack of rice". The rural practice of building huts with mud walls is captured in the phrase "mud baked walls". The absence of rural electrification in Indian villages before independence is hinted at in a string of images, "dark room" and "candles and lanterns". "Darkness" has the extended meaning of Indian villages being steeped in ignorance.

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