

In Flesh and Blood: Reinterpreting Ezekiel's "Night of the Scorpion"

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Abstract

The article proposes a new interpretation of Nissim Ezekiel's well-known poem "The Night of the Scorpion".

[Keywords: Ezekiel, Night of the Scorpion; prostitute, female, mother, phallus]

Ezekiel is a poet who has always stood for lucidity of language in poetry and has strongly opposed charges of obscurity in his poetry. This has often misguided critics into studying only the literal meanings of his poems, considering them to be hermetic cultural objects. Seldom have critics bothered to go deep into the poems or to take a closer look at the symbols, ignoring thereby the embedded meanings in the texts and the heterogeneous and polysemic network of references and influences. The apparent lucidity of the poems coupled with a frequent discursive style has succeeded in camouflaging the latent symbolic interpretations of the poems, with the result that the undiscerning or casual reader has merely glossed the poems at the surface and has come up with frivolous and fallacious theories and comments about his poetry.

It is exactly such a misconception that has hindered a proper analysis of Ezekiel's well-known poem "Night of the Scorpion", from his anthology *The Exact Name* (1965)¹. The poem could hardly be simpler and if anyone has read one solitary poem from Ezekiel's oeuvre, it is usually this. The fact that "Night of the Scorpion" is often included in school texts has further encouraged many to take its simplicity for granted and bypass its inner meaning; such readers have burnt their fingers, for the simplicity of the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel, like the poetry of William Blake, is only skin-deep and hides profound meanings within, visible only to the discerning eye.

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.

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The poem has been subjected to various interpretations, some erroneous, some partially correct, some obvious, and many "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing". Most of them have been gender-based, owing to the central role of the mother in the poem and her pious Nirupa Roy-like utterance in the end. Most critics have contented themselves with the ordinary, literal meaning as given in the previous paragraph, and have commented accordingly². Many critics have been moved by the "self-denying role" of the mother in the poem (Lall 78) to viewing the role of the mother in the light of the archetypal Indian mother in the Indian epics. Christopher Wiseman has made a stylistic analysis of the poem, trying to discern a connection between the sustenance of dramatic tension vis-à-vis the prosodic regulation of syntax (qtd in Lall 78). E. N. Lall considers "Night of the Scorpion" to mark a change in Ezekiel's feminist discourse in that it "points to later poems that project a positive image of woman in the complex man-woman relationship" (78), thereby assuming that the anthologies of Ezekiel before this one gave a negative image of woman, which is not entirely correct³. Apart from these, critics have also highlighted the obvious features of the poem, such as its rural theme (in contradiction to the motif of the 'city' usually found in Ezekiel's poetry) and its irony, specially in the attitudes of the villagers and the narrator's father. Rajeev Taranath, in his short introduction to Nissim Ezekiel for Saleem Peeradina's well-known anthology of Indian-English poetry, comments on the poem's structure referring specially to 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 conclusion of "Night of the Scorpion", like the concluding couplet in the sonnets of Shakespeare, is so striking that critics have riveted their attention on the last three lines of the poem and interpreted the entire piece on the basis of these three lines alone and the person who speaks them. These lines, poignant and memorable no doubt, comes in the guise of a surprising twist (like the ending of a Jeffrey Archer short story) on the unsuspecting reader and is of such magnitude that it gets embedded in his mind. As a result, many images and markers in the poem, placed at important and strategic points by the poet, are completely ignored by the reader, with the result that he fails to grasp what the poet wants to convey and ends up clutching at straws.

My interpretation of this poem, gender-centric like many other analyses, is this. The woman dealt with in the poem is a prostitute, a village prostitute. The scorpion in that case may be symbolic of the males who enjoy her. The sting of the scorpion that injects the poison in the victim's body is shaped like a phallus and thus the stinging of the scorpion in the poem is symbolic of physical contact between the male and the female. That this contact is unnatural and exploitative is indicated by the pain which lays the woman low. Both the title and the opening line of the poem foreground the significant fact that it is night, and the darkness in

which the sexual act is carried out is reinforced by the words “dark room” a few lines later. The scorpion crawls into the woman’s hut to seek respite from the incessant rain outside and having bitten the woman “risked the rain again”. One does not need to read the novel or watch the movie *Devdas* to know that many men indulge in harlot-chasing to seek temporary relief from the vagaries of a cruel, pitiless world. Importantly, the scorpion that enters the room takes shelter under a sack of rice, indicating that prostitution is the major occupation of the woman, enabling her to eke out a measly income for herself and her children.

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” 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” (italics mine). 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

It is the male who perpetrates physical and emotional suffering on the woman when he exploits her sexually; and in the poem, he turns out by far to be the more diplomatic for, with deft lawyer-like arguments, he succeeds in pinning the guilt of lechery on the female sex, insinuating thereby that it is fleshly desire and concomitant pecuniary motives of the woman that lead her to indulge in prostitution, and not the general exploitative demeanour of the male: “May the

poison purify your flesh / of desire, and your spirit of ambition, they said ...". It is, as any gynocritic will point out, a potentially provocative reversal of roles, obtained through phallogocentric casuistry. Having thus found a sacrificial lamb and extricated themselves from a sticky situation, the villagers in the poem sit ensconced in smug contentment, "the peace of understanding on every face". In fact, so natural is their behaviour and act that a gullible M.K. Naik (otherwise a very discerning critic), considers their role 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 narrator's father to enter the scene. He is described as a "rationalist" and with good reason too, for he is the only one who tries to revive the sick woman with medicines. Quack-doctor that he is, he uses his posse of powders, herbs and mixtures to alleviate the pain. But it is an economic rather than a filial motive that moves him to this act of piety. He is nothing but a pimp who had been quick to realize the sex-appeal of his pretty wife, and had over the years used her as a sort of cash cow for monetary gains, after having satisfied his own personal lust. Realizing that a steady and substantial source of income may be extinguished soon, he is reduced to "trying every curse and blessing" to goad her to be up and working again.

After twenty hours, says the narrator, 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: "I watched the flame feeding on my mother". 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". The mother prays that the life of prostitution ends with her and her daughters never be forced into a life of sexual slavery like her, and that her sons never become scorpions like the other males and continue the obnoxious cycle. The prostitute's prayer seems to be for all mankind and thus the woman, who had lived in shame and dishonour, dies a redeemed soul.

Conception of the essence of womanhood and its representation in poetry has always been a fascinating experience for Ezekiel, and his interpretation of sex and the sexual act has been a part of the exercise. As K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar points out, "He was painfully and poignantly aware of the flesh, its insistent urges, its stark ecstasies, its disturbing filiations with the mind" (657). "Night of the Scorpion" is novel in the sense that it provides for the first, and only time, Ezekiel's view of unnatural sex, in that it is fraught with shame and pain and

forced upon the unwilling but helpless victim. The woman had been experiencing such 'nights' and such 'scorpion stings' ever since she had forced into flesh-trade by her pimp-husband; the particular night described in the poem is the final act in which helplessness, guilt and sheer sexual exhaustion get the better of her and she dies. The poem, like vintage Ezekiel, is simple and subtle and at the same time esoteric, but once comprehended, the poet's frustration is clear and unmistakable. It is, as Gieve Patel aptly characterizes it, "a cry issuing from a person who is totally involved in a situation which he feels also to be hopeless one"⁴. And like the boy towards the end of James Joyce's *Araby*, our eyes too burn with anguish and anger.

Notes

1. All quotations from this poem are from Ezekiel, Nissim. *Collected Poems*. New Delhi: Oxford UP, 1989.
2. see for example Taranath, Rajeev and Meena Belliappa. *The Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel*. Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1968.
3. "The Old Woman" from *A Time to Change* (1952) and "Situation" from *Sixty Poems* (1953), for example.
4. See Gieve Patel's introduction to (1) above, page xxii.

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