

Nissim Ezekiel's Night of the Scorpion: Superstition, Rationalism and Maternal Love

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Abstract:

This research paper presents a comprehensive study of Nissim Ezekiel's celebrated poem, *Night of the Scorpion*. It explores multi-layered depiction of post-colonial Indian societal dynamics. Widely known as the father of modern Indian English poetry, Ezekiel uses a highly localized modernist sensibility to capture the authentic, complex texture of rural Indian life. By examining a central domestic crisis, a mother being stung by a scorpion on a rainy night, the paper investigates how Ezekiel constructs a vivid sociological portrait out of a local accident. The study probes deeply into the theme of deep-rooted superstition, explaining how the rural community uses shared spiritual frameworks to rationalize physical suffering in the absence of modern medical infrastructure. Moreover, it analyses the sharp ideological clash between the collective spiritualism of the peasants, the desperate experimentation of the rationalist father, and the formal incantations of the local holy man. Rather than utilizing his trademark ironic detachment to mock these unscientific methods, Ezekiel highlights the profound humanity, empathy, and communal harmony in the village. Finally, the paper proves how the concluding lines of the poem elevate the entire narrative transforming a chaotic night into the instinctive, self-sacrificial nature of maternal love.

Keywords: Scorpion, Post-colonial Indian Poetry, Superstition, culture, rationalism, maternal love.

Introduction and Authorial Context

Nissim Ezekiel is widely considered as the father of Indian English poetry in post-colonial Indian literary history (Islam, 2016). Before Ezekiel's emergence on the literary scene, much of Indian English verse was heavily imitative, clinging closely to the romanticized images, archaic vocabularies, and stylistic models of the nineteenth-century British tradition. Ezekiel arranged a paradigm shift steering Indian poetry in English toward a sharp, localized modernist sensibility. He was a versatile man of letters known as a poet, actor, playwright, editor, and critic (Islam, 2016). His multi-faceted engagements with the arts allowed him to approach literature with a distinct dramatic and critical perspective. It displays in his verse through sharp narrative pacing and an acute eye for human behaviour.

Ezekiel was born in 1924 in Mumbai into a Jewish family (Roy, 2025). This ancestral background played a vital role in shaping his unique perception as a writer. His father was a professor of botany, and his mother was a school principal who ran her own institution. Growing up in a highly intellectual and progressive household, Ezekiel was exposed to scientific inquiry and pedagogical discipline from an early age. His family belonged to the Marathi-speaking Jewish community, known as the Bene Israel, an environment that deeply inculcated the future writer's sensibilities (Tiwari, 2019). This background placed him in a fascinating cultural position: he was an insider by virtue of his birth, language, and everyday experiences in India, yet an outsider due to his minority religious identity. This dual lens of marginality

granted him the emotional detachment necessary to observe Indian society with objective precision with a deep, empathetic connection to its people.

He obtained his degree in English literature in Mumbai and later taught the subject. To broaden his intellectual horizons, he also travelled to England to study philosophy at Birkbeck College, London. This exposure to Western philosophical inquiry polished his ability to view everyday human struggles through a broader lens. In 1952, he introduced a significant transformation to Indian poetry in post-colonial India with the publication of his first book, *A Time to Change* (Sinha, n.d.). This collection broke away from the overly sentimental styles of previous generations which established a new vernacular for Indian writers.

Later, he published several books of poetry containing hundreds of poems dealing with the modern Indian life. Over his prolific career, he wrote a number of famous poems, including *Enterprise*, *A Time to Change*, *Philosophy*, *Island*, *For Elkana*, *Soap*, *Marriage*, *In the Country Cottage*, *How the English Lessons Ended*, *The Paradise Flycatcher*, *Night of the Scorpion*, *The Professor*, *Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.*, *Entertainment*, *Background*, *Casually*, and *Poet, Lover and Birdwatcher* (Roy, 2025). His poetic style is consistently subtle, restrained, and well-crafted. Rather than indulging in grand, abstract epics, he dealt with the common themes that an ordinary man faces in his day-to-day life (Sinha, n.d.).

He enriched Indian English poetry with his modernist innovations and new techniques like colloquial speech patterns, ironic detachment, and precise imagery. He successfully took Indian poetry beyond Western imitation, refusing to merely echo British templates, and instead gave it the distinct flavour of its native soil. For his immense, pioneering contribution to Indian literature, he was awarded the prestigious *Sahitya Akademi Award* in 1983.

Overview of the Poem

Night of the Scorpion remains one of the most celebrated and frequently anthologized poems composed by Nissim Ezekiel. The poem was first included in his seminal volume *Collected Poems* (Balaga, 2015), where it stood out as a masterpiece of narrative verse. The piece is composed in the form of his childhood memories, which are set in a rural part of India where the speaker lived with his family. By anchoring the narrative in the perspective of an observant child, Ezekiel achieves an extraordinary level of narrative purity.

The poem is deceptive in its simplicity, narrating a straightforward incident of a scorpion biting his mother and its subsequent aftermath (Maharana, 2025). However, beneath this accessible narrative surface lies a dense exploration of human psychology and social dynamics. The poet narrates the situation in a very lucid manner, focusing on the complex mindset of the villagers. Rather than focusing solely on the medical emergency, the poem expands into a vivid sociological portrait.

The poet highlights the cultural aspects of the villagers, especially their ideas of divinity, incarnation, cosmic justice, and overall religious beliefs (Roy, 2025). The narrative acts as a micro-cosmic reflection of rural India, capturing the collective identity of a community that responds to trauma through shared spiritual rituals. Furthermore, the poet narrates a true picture of Indian villages where limited medical facilities and a lack of formal education misguided and misled ignorant people. In the mid-twentieth century, rural infrastructure was severely underdeveloped, leaving communities isolated. Consequently, it was quite common in Indian villages to attempt to cure snakebites or scorpion bites through the superstitious methods of mantra and tantra. The villagers blindly believed that the rhythmic chanting of mantras would pacify malicious cosmic forces, cure the victim, and heal the physical wounds (Balaga, 2015). The poet describes his observations of these characters in a very detailed, cinematic manner,

mapping out their gestures, words, and expressions. Finally, the poem may be studied from the multi-layered points of view of superstition, community dynamics, and the purity of motherhood.

Superstition

The setting of the poem is thoroughly rural, occurring within a dark, mud-brick house where the incident of the scorpion biting the speaker's mother takes place (Balaga, 2015). This isolated, domestic setting is crucial because it becomes an ideological battleground between ancient belief systems and modern rationality. The poem opens abruptly with this crisis when the scorpion stings his mother during an incessant rainy night. The weather acts as an active antagonist in the narrative; it had been continuously raining for ten hours that forced the scorpion to seek shelter and crawl beneath a heavy sack of rice. Driven by animal instinct and fear, the scorpion bites the mother and injects its toxic venom into her body.

The poet describes the strike with terrifying, cinematic accuracy: a “flash of diabolic tail in the dark room” (Balaga, 2015). The word "diabolic" immediately introduces the religious worldview of the setting, framing the natural event as an encounter with demonic, evil forces. Following this swift strike, the scorpion vanishes back into the pouring rain, leaving behind a domestic crisis that triggers an immediate communal response.

While the incident of a scorpion bite is quite common in rural parts, the unique way the situation unfolds afterward is brilliantly narrated by the poet. The villagers at that time were completely far removed from modern medical facilities and a scientific point of view. Cut off from hospitals, professional doctors, or anti-venoms, the community relies entirely on traditional ways of healing and curing patients. They completely believed that such a bite was not an accident of nature, but rather the deliberate result of one's sins. To them, a physical ailment could only be cured by spiritual chanting and other regular mumbo-jumbo.

Despite their lack of scientific understanding, these people are deeply considerate to others. They do not leave the family to suffer alone; instead, they arrive in vast numbers to visit the mother while she is suffering from the intense pain (Sinha, n.d.). The poet describes their massive, sudden arrival in the following lines:

The peasants came like swarms of flies,
and buzzed the name of God a hundred times
to paralyse the Evil One. (*Night of the Scorpion*)

The poet deliberately uses the raw simile “swarms of flies” to describe the arrival of the peasants (Sinha, n.d.). While some critics argue this comparison is derogatory, Ezekiel uses it to capture the urgency and buzzing noise of the crowd. The peasants arrive to help which creates a chaotic atmosphere. Lacking scientific knowledge to treat the venom, they fall back on their only path of comfort: their absolute faith in God (Roy, 2025). They repeatedly buzz the name of God, believing that vocal prayer can spiritually paralyze the movement of the scorpion and neutralize the poison. In fact, the poet does not explicitly criticize these rustics; he recognizes that their actions are born out of genuine concern and a desire to help, operating within the boundaries of the only worldview they have ever known (Maharana, 2025).

As the night deepens, the scene becomes more peculiar. The poet describes the peasants coming with lanterns and candles, casting giant shadows on the mud walls of the house. These shadows symbolize the larger-than-life presence of ancient myths and fears looming over the household. The villagers search for the scorpion intending to kill the creature. It might stop the spread of the poison, but their search is entirely in vain. Resigned to the situation, they click their tongues in sympathy and state: “With every movement

that the scorpion made his poison moved in mother's blood" (16). This statement perfectly illustrates the deep-rooted superstition of the villagers. They blindly believe in a sympathetic, magical connection between the physical insect and the internal biology of the victim.

The poet focuses heavily on these concepts of incarnation and rebirth which are deeply rooted in Indian culture. The villagers attempt to rationalize the mother's agony by giving it a profound cosmic purpose. They argue that the poison will burn away the sins of her previous birth. Furthermore, they believe that her current endurance of pain will actively reduce the misfortunes of her next birth. The villagers know they are physically helpless against the poison. Hence, they behave exactly the way they have been traditionally inculcated. Their unscientific angle of looking at the problem is the direct outcome of age-old superstitions carried down through generations by their forefathers. They comfort themselves and the family by asserting that the poison will ultimately purify the flesh of the patient, burning away worldly desires. In a sense, they interpret this terrifying incident as a rare opportunity for spiritual purification.

Ezekiel does not mock the villagers for this superstitious thinking; rather, he emphasizes the cultural context of their reasoning (Maharana, 2025). He highlights the beauty of their communal harmony. The peasants do not show indifference to their neighbours' problems; they sit collectively around the suffering mother, offering her their presence, prayers, and shared warmth throughout the long night (Balaga, 2015). In sharp contrast to this collective spiritualism, the poet introduces the figure of his father. The father is described as a sceptic and a rationalist who rejects the mystical explanations of the villagers. He approaches the crisis from an experimental standpoint, using "powder, mixture, herb and hybrid" to treat his wife's wound. He systematically applies whatever domestic chemicals and remedies are available to him. In a desperate bid to neutralize the venom, he goes so far as to pour paraffin directly onto the bitten toe and ignite it with a match.

While this aggressive treatment is highly dangerous and medically unacceptable by modern standards, the poet still labels his father a rationalist. He does so because the father's actions are driven by a belief in physical cause-and-effect rather than a reliance on the villagers' chants and prayers. The house becomes an active laboratory where two completely different worldviews—the ancient spiritualism of the community and the desperate experimentation of the individual—are practiced at once.

Adding another layer to this domestic drama, a holy man is invited to perform formal religious rites to tame the poison through incantations. Thus, the mother's body becomes the target of three simultaneous methods of care: the communal prayers of the peasants, the chemical experiments of the rationalist father, and the ritualistic performance of the priest. In all aspects, the treatment provided by the surrounding environment is unscientific and driven by desperation (Maharana, 2025).

This narrative presents a highly accurate historical picture of mid-twentieth-century Indian society, where rural spaces lacked basic medical infrastructure. In such instances of snakebites or scorpion stings, families rarely had access to hospitals, relying instead on the mantra-tantra of local holy men. Eventually, after twenty exhausting hours, the natural course of the venom runs its way out, and the mother's pain naturally subsides. However, within this setting, the villagers undoubtedly credit this recovery to the success of their chants and rituals.

This single episode exposes the complex psychology of rural communities who seek comfort in divine intervention during times of crisis. Ezekiel does not use his ironic detachment to diminish these rustic people; instead, he honours their deep kindness and readiness to support their neighbours—a profound sense of community that is often missing from modern, urban societies. Their methods are unscientific, but their spirits are deeply humane.

Mother's Selfless Love

The final section of the poem shifts the focus away from the community's socio-religious reactions to highlight the internal world of the victim. After twenty hours of intense physical agony, the mother finally recovers from the venom. The very first words she speaks upon regaining her strength are:

“Thank God the scorpion picked on me
And spared my children.” (*Night of the Scorpion*)

These simple lines create a powerful, lasting impact on the reader's mind, completely re-centring the moral focus of the poem (Balaga, 2015). Throughout the entire night, the mother has been a silent subject, enduring intense physical torment while surrounded by a storm of noise. Yet, the moment she regains her voice, she expresses no self-pity, resentment, or anger toward the creature. Instead, her immediate reaction is one of profound relief and gratitude that the suffering fell upon her rather than her vulnerable children (Maharana, 2025). She considers herself incredibly fortunate that the scorpion chose her as its target and spared her children from such torment.

These concluding lines illustrate the model of selfless maternal love. The mother stands as a natural protective shield for her children, willing to absorb any crisis or pain to ensure their safety. Throughout the poem, the mother's body serves as the silent anchor for the entire piece. For twenty hours, she undergoes physical torment, lying on a simple mat and groaning in agony while various adult factions project their views onto her. She endures the spiritual declarations of the villagers, the chemical experiments of her husband, and the complex *mantras* of the holy man. She is the passive victim of both the natural venom and the frantic human interventions surrounding her.

However, her final statement allows her to triumph over the entire ordeal. Her words redefine the narrative, lifting it above the villagers' cosmic theories of Karma and her husband's desperate scientific experiments. Her response introduces an elemental truth that outshines all intellectual debates: the instinctive, self-sacrificial nature of maternal love. She ignores the philosophical arguments about her past and future lives and focuses entirely on the safety of her children. By thanking God for directing the scorpion to her, she transforms a chaotic and superstitious night into a profound testament to human devotion and maternal protection.

Conclusion

Nissim Ezekiel's *Night of the Scorpion* remains a landmark achievement in post-colonial Indian literature. Through a simple narrative, Ezekiel captures the authentic texture of rural Indian rural life. He presents how communities come together in times of crisis through shared spiritual frameworks. While the poem reflects the limitations of an unscientific, superstitious society, it ultimately refuses to condemn these rural citizens. Instead, it highlights their profound humanity and capacity for empathy contrasting with the isolation of modern urban society. Finally, by concluding with the mother's selfless exclamation, the poem elevates a localized domestic accident into a universal celebration of maternal devotion, strengthening Ezekiel's status as a master craftsman of the human experience.

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