

Night of the Scorpion

Nissim Ezekiel

ABOUT POET

Nissim Ezekiel (16 December 1924 – 9 January 2004)

- ❖ Indian Jewish poet, actor, playwright, editor and art critic
- ❖ awarded with Sahitya Akademi Award in 1983 for his collection, "*Latter-Day Psalms*", by the [Sahitya Akademi](#), India's National Academy of Letters.

ABOUT POEM

- The poem "Night of the Scorpion" by Nissim Ezekiel depicts the selflessness and unconditional love of a mother who is stung by a scorpion. ...
- In the end, the poet depicts the selfless and unconditional love of a mother, who, even when she is in intense pain, first thinks of her children.

Explanation of the poem

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.

The poet says that he remembers well that night when her mother was ***stung by a scorpion***. The poet is of the views that the heavy rain which lasted for 10 hours made the scorpion ***crawl beneath a sack of rice***. The last phrase shows the poet's sympathy towards the scorpion.

Parting with his poison - flash
of diabolic tail in the dark room -
he risked the rain again.

The peasants came like swarms of flies
and buzzed the name of God a hundred times
to paralyse the Evil One.

- The poet says that after biting his mother with its diabolic (monstrous tail), the scorpion went back to rain outside again. The poet here shows sympathy as well as anger towards the scorpion. He is angry when he talks about its biting and sympathetic when he talks about its going to rain again.
- Hearing about the incident, the villagers rush to the poet's home. However, he is not happy with them and calls them *swarms of flies* who buzz *the name of God a hundred times to paralyse the Evil One*.

With candles and with lanterns
throwing giant scorpion shadows
on the mud-baked walls
they searched for him: he was not found.
They clicked their tongues.
With every movement that the scorpion made his
poison moved in Mother's blood, they said.

- The poet then explains how the villagers searched for the scorpion. According to him, the villagers began searching for the scorpion and their shadows themselves seemed to be like a ***giant scorpion on the mud-baked walls***.
- The villagers begin searching for the scorpion because they believe that the poison spreads across the body with the movement of scorpion so if the latter is stopped and paralysed, the poison effect can also be controlled.
- This is a superstition and Nissim knows that well. This is why he hates the coming of villagers to his home. The stanza also depicts the *Indianess* that prevails in a number of other poems as well.

May he sit still, they said
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.
May the sum of all evil
balanced in this unreal world

- Having failed in finding the scorpion, they begin giving their own interpretation to the biting of the scorpion. Some of them said that his mother's sins which she committed in her previous birth (as believed in Hinduism) have been forgiven.
- The others assumed that she is going to die and said that the pain that she is suffering from will decrease the troubles in her next birth. Some others put forward that her good deeds will be balanced against her bad deeds because of the bite of the scorpion.

- against the sum of good
become diminished by your pain.
May the poison purify your flesh

of desire, and your spirit of ambition,
they said, and they sat around
on the floor with my mother in the centre,
the peace of understanding on each face.
More candles, more lanterns, more neighbours,
more insects, and the endless rain.
My mother twisted through and through,
groaning on a mat.
My father, sceptic, 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.
I watched the flame feeding on my mother.
I watched the holy man perform his rites to tame the poison with
an incantation.
After twenty hours
it lost its sting.

Some others said that the poison will purify and refresh her ***flesh of desire*** and her ***spirit of ambition***. All of them seemed to be in peace because of their thoughts. More and more people come with ***candles & lanterns***. His mother is however crying and rolling on the mat with severe pain but nobody cares for her except for his father who is a ***sceptic, rationalist***. He leaves no stone unturned to cure her. He uses ***powder, mixture, herb and hybrid*** to help her recover from the pain. ***He even poured a little paraffin upon the bitten toe*** and then fires it up. The poet watches the flames of fire burning on the skin of his mother. He also watches ***the holy man perform his rites to tame the poison with an incantation***. The phrase again refers to superstitious people of his village who believe in irrational measures to cure a person. His mother ultimately recovers from the poison after 24 hours.

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

The last line is quite emotional and heart touching. It reflects the motherhood of a lady. The poet says that after recovering from the poison, his mother's words were ***Thank God the scorpion picked on me and spared my children.*** Even in such condition, his mother remains more concerned about the safety and health of her children.