

Indianism in Nissim Ezekiel's Poem 'The Night of the Scorpion'

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Abstract

Nissim Ezekiel was the Indian-born Jewish poet, a renowned representative of Post Independent Indo-Anglian Literature. His contribution as a poet in Indian writing in English is very noteworthy. He was a Jewish poet whose forefathers migrated to India and settled in Mumbai. Though a Jewish still being born and mentioned in India, his poetry contains some aspects of Indianness. The dominating features of Ezekiel's poems are the search for identity, Indianism, spirituality, and therefore the reality of Indian life. His earnest and sincere desire and love for the country helped to improve the conditions of life in India. He brings about the true picture of poverty with superstitions in India in most of the poems. The paper is an attempt to analyse Indianness in the poem 'The Night of the Scorpion'. It focuses on Indian village life, motherhood, and the language he has used in the poem.

Keywords: Indianness, Indo-Anglian, urbanization, mother, village life, karma

Nissim Ezekiel was the Indian-born Jewish poet, a renowned representative of Post Independent Indo-Anglian Literature. His contribution as a poet in Indian writing in English is very noteworthy. Most of the Indo-Anglian writers contributed to English literature through which they depicted Indianness in their work. By Indianness, we mean a subject that suits the Indian traditions, culture and sensibility. The works of Nissim Ezekiel are not an exception to it. His works bring a typical incense of Indian tradition, culture, and day-to-day life. He is totally aware of the degradation or perversion of the social, moral, and spiritual values in Indian society. He is equally attentive to all these things as they lead the society to the way of spiritual hypocrisy.

As far as Ezekiel is concerned, the concept of "Indianness" is quite controversial as he is of foreign origin. He has accepted the fact in his poetry that being a 'natural foreigner', he himself felt alienated from the Hindu culture. So he committed and dedicated himself to Indian society and culture.

Nissim Ezekiel's contribution as a poet in Indian writing in English is vulnerable. He was Jewish and his

forefathers migrated to India and settled down in Mumbai. He brought up in India and for this reason his poetry contains some aspects of Indianness. He expected to improve the state of mind of Indian people. For this reason, he brings about the true picture of poverty and superstitious nature of Indian people in his most of the poems. The noteworthy features of Ezekiel's poems are the quest for identity, Indianism, spirituality, and the reality of Indian life. In all his creative works he was very keen to pick Indian situations and present them as it is. He highlighted the truth of Indian life with its strengths and weaknesses through the lives of people. The characters of his poems are from different walks of life but without a touch of exaggeration. We feel and experience Indianness through each and every character and situation in his poems.

Ezekiel's 'The Night of the Scorpion' depicts a typical Indian village and its culture. The poem is with a simple theme of a mother getting stung by a scorpion on a rainy day. Therefore the consequent reactions and responses of the family members and the peasant neighbors of a village are described by the poet. All the characters and the actions of this poem are real-life-like. In fact, each and every line of this poem makes us feel and smell the experience with the essence of Indianism. The poem starts with the incident of the mother getting stung by a scorpion and then the scorpion rushing out to safety through the sacks of grains. The poem elaborates the picture of a typical village house with the stored sacks of rice or wheat or cereals. The neighbors and the household people are involved in helping the family is a remarkable feature of humanity. In this irrespective of time, weather, and inconveniences, each member of the family and neighbors were ready to do whatever was possible by them to help the mother get out of the so-called evil effect of the scorpion sting. It was a voluntary act from each to rush to get hot water, to chant mantras, and to do the other superstitious acts to rescue the mother. The feelings of oneness and belongingness are specific to the village people. It is an unconditional attachment among the villagers without expecting anything. Ezekiel emphasizes this when he says:

" The peasants came like swarms of flies
 and buzzed the name of God a hundred times
 to paralyse the Evil One."
 ... and they sat around
 on the floor with my mother in the centre,
 the peace of understanding on each face."

The sincerity and true concern reflected in the above-mentioned lines are specific to these village people. For them relationship is that the most cherished treasure. They're not rich financially but they're the richest in their mind with human love and readiness to assist. There's no discrimination within the name of status, creed, or caste. The peasant community represents the village with inhuman traits like selfishness, greed, and narrow-mindedness. Forgetting the time, the rain, and every inconvenience they rushed to the house where the mother was suffering. They rushed there to not be the passive viewers or gossip mongers, but to partake within the sufferings of their fellow beings as best as they will. They involved physically, mentally, and spiritually for the well-being of the victim who belongs to a far better status than that of theirs. With genuine interest and concern they prayed and wished the immediate recovery of the mother. All contributed to console the mother. They sympathetically sat round the mother. This genuine sympathy is often seen only within the rustic background of India.

Urbanization has made man selfish, greedy and narrow-minded. The pleasure of human bonds is alien to those urbanized people. For them visiting a suffering person is an inconvenience, spending something for the needy may be an unwanted obligation and spending time with the needy is a big wastage. Ezekiel's depiction of truth related to the village is a fantastic and envious experience. Nissim's description of the superstitious beliefs of the villagers is such a sensible one as if the poet himself was one among the witnesses. The frantic search to locate the scorpion and to prevent it so as to prevent the movement of its poison within the mother's body may be a superstitious belief with none scientific proof. But it's the innocence of those villagers that made them chant mantras and clip their tongues to prevent the evil one. Ignorance is that the root explanation for superstitious beliefs, yet it's an equivalent ignorance that retains the innocence of this peasant community. This natural trend is highlighted when the educated father himself poured paraffin and lit it as a desperate act to destroy the evil effect of the scorpion poison. The villagers submit themselves to the desire of God and believe that everything about them is set and executed by that supreme power. The priest is that the representative of God for them. In

such case of adversity or happiness, this representative of God is going to be there together among them. In 'The Night of the Scorpion', Nissim Ezekiel informs about the priest to execute the divine act of destroying the evil through rituals. The assumption of the previous birth and the next birth, show the relevance of 'karma' and the consequent sufferings within the present life forms the essential concept of Hindu mythology in Indian background. It's this belief that warns humans to abstain from evil and this belief in its full strength is practiced among the villagers. May the sins of the previous birth be burned away tonight, they said in the following lines..

May the sum of all 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,
 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.

An ideal Indian mother is an embodiment of love, sacrifice and patience. She will place her life, pleasures and desires in exchange of the life, health and welfare of her children. The Indian concept of motherhood is very vividly expressed by the poet through just two lines that come as the concluding part of the poem:

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

Her ten hours of suffering, fear, and anxiety just vanished into the air at the thought that it was she who fell the victim whereas her child was safe. With a heart full of gratitude, she thanks God Almighty. It is the sacrificial love of a mother! Indian mothers are famous for their selfless love and sacrifice. Here the mother thanks God Almighty for giving the sufferings to her sparing her child. It is a consistent prayer of a mother to spare her children from all dangers offering her own life in exchange. The famous poetess Kamala Das who was very fond of jewelry and luxury promised to abstain from all that gaudiness in exchange for her son's health. In Arundhati Roy's God of Small Things, Ammu remained at home and underwent all tortures and humiliations because of her children. She couldn't leave them and go to make her own life with the person whom she likes even if she stood a better chance. The maternal tie holds her back to be victimized more and

more despite the promised comfortable life within her reach. Just a moment's effort to ignore her children would have enabled her to break the maternal tie. But she was a mother! an Indian mother! She can never be indifferent or negligent or ignorant towards her children unless and otherwise, she is abnormal. 'Night of the Scorpion' stands as the best example and the most appreciated work of Nissim Ezekiel for its life-like depiction of ordinary realities of Indian village life. Along with the intensity of Indian flavor, it blends the poet's ironical attitude also while he ends the poem by the mother thanking God after the whole complexities of superstitious ritualism and skeptic rationalism. Dr. K Pramila in her article 'Indian Sense and Sensibility in Nissim Ezekiel's Poems' wrote Ezekiel Poem 'Night of the Scorpion', though a narrative poem, offers a positive image of Indian women and mainly mothers, She depicted woman as a creator, protector, and educator and as an integrating force. The poet recalls the painful night in the life of his mother when she was stung by a scorpion:

"The peasants came like swarms of flies
 And buzzed the Name of God
 a hundred times to paralyze
 the Evil one"

Analyzing his Indianness Dr.K.Pramila further wrote about the Unity of all religions in India. Peasants of varied faiths, Christians, Hindus, Muslims, and Jews came in large numbers to ascertain her and prayed for her. 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 correct.

The language also shows kind of Indianness in this poem. His poems contain a large amount of 'Indian' English. The colloquial language and the frequent use of present tense feature the use of 'Indian English' by the native Indians. These are the very prominent features of Indianness in Ezekiel's poetry. His poems like 'Very Indian Poems in Indian English', 'The Patriot', 'The Professor', and many other such poems work as a subtle discuss English and therefore the way it's used for communication in Indian society.

To conclude, though Ezekiel dwelled in India, but was apart from Indian culture, philosophy, spirituality, thought and tradition, Indianism did not lure him at all, but instead of it he was an Indian and he could not banish it. He has skillfully used most of the aspects of Indian life and cultures in his poetry. He sometimes adopts critical language for India. He criticizes Indian people because he wanted to change their way of thinking related to superstitions.

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