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Night of the Scorpion: A Mother's Silent Benediction

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Abstract

Nissim Ezekiel's "Night of the Scorpion" is a powerful narrative poem that captures a single traumatic event within a rural Indian household and turns it into a meditation on faith, maternal sacrifice, cultural dualities, and metaphysical meaning. The poem weaves together vivid imagery, free verse structure, and rich symbolism to portray the helplessness of human beings before nature, the collision between superstition and rationalism, and the transcendence of unconditional love. This research explores the poem through multiple lenses—literary aesthetics, structural analysis, philosophical inquiry, and scriptural references from the Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, Vachanamrut, and other sacred texts. Ultimately, the poem transcends its local setting to evoke universal themes of suffering, karma, purification, and spiritual endurance.

Preface

The purpose of this paper is to illuminate the deeper layers embedded within Nissim Ezekiel's *Night of the Scorpion*, a poem often celebrated for its vivid storytelling but equally profound in its philosophical and spiritual undertones. Though penned in modern English and emerging from a secular poetic tradition, the poem resonates unmistakably with the sacred teachings of the Indian scriptures—the Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, Shrimad Bhagavatam, and the Vachanamrut. These ancient texts speak of the impermanence of suffering, the inevitability of karma, and the redemptive power of selfless love—principles which find stunning embodiment in the poem's maternal figure and communal response. This paper seeks to bridge modern literary analysis with Indian philosophical traditions, offering readers a holistic view of how a simple domestic incident becomes a vehicle for exploring life's deeper truths.

It is an attempt to celebrate how poetry, like scripture, can simultaneously instruct, inspire, and transform.

1. Literary Devices and Figures of Speech

Ezekiel employs a wealth of poetic techniques:

- **Metaphor & Symbolism:** The scorpion, beyond being a literal threat, symbolizes fear, fate, and karmic burden. The "diabolic tail" suggests an archetype of evil.
- **Simile:** "The peasants came like swarms of flies" uses simile to show their collective intrusion and helpless concern.
- **Personification:** The flame "feeding on my mother" is an unsettling image, making fire seem sentient and cruel.
- **Imagery:** The poem evokes strong sensory imagery—"giant scorpion shadows on the mud-baked walls," "twisting," "groaning," "candles and lanterns"—creating a vivid and cinematic experience.
- **Alliteration & Assonance:** Sounds such as "More candles, more lanterns, more neighbours, more insects" reflect a rhythmic panic and chaos.
- **Irony:** The father, a "sceptic, rationalist," resorts to both science and superstition.
- **Oxymoron:** "Peace of understanding" amidst pain and chaos reflects the paradox of spiritual acceptance.

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- **Symbolism:** The scorpion, fire, rain, and the mother herself are all heavily symbolic, representing nature, karma, and sacrifice.

2. Structure and Form

- **Free Verse:** The poem is written in free verse, mirroring the unpredictable, chaotic flow of the scorpion's sting and the community's reaction.
- **Enjambment:** Sentences flow beyond line breaks, mimicking the continuity of pain and time.
- **No Regular Rhyme or Meter:** The irregular structure reflects the disorder of the event.
- **Stanza Breaks:** The division highlights the transition from communal response to paternal intervention and finally to maternal resilience.

3. Theme and Subject Matter

The poem navigates multiple themes:

- **Maternal Love and Sacrifice:** The mother's final utterance epitomizes unconditional love.
- **Superstition vs. Rationalism:** Villagers and the father represent the duality of traditional faith and modern skepticism.
- **Pain and Karma:** The villagers interpret pain as purifying, aligning it with Hindu ideas of karma and rebirth.
- **Spiritual Resilience and Human Compassion:** The responses to suffering reflect a collective yet diverse spectrum of human values.

4. Tone and Mood

- **Tone:** Initially tense and foreboding; becomes ironic and contemplative; ends with a tender, sacrificial tone.
- **Mood:** The reader experiences unease, suspense, and ultimately, admiration and sorrow. The mother's calm response induces a profound emotional climax.

5. Philosophical and Spiritual Interpretation

- **Karma and Rebirth:** The villagers' utterances—"May the sins of your previous birth be burned away"—align with ideas from the *Bhagavad Gita* (2.13)ⁱ, which discusses the continuity of life and consequences of past actions.
- **Purification Through Suffering:** This echoes the *Chāndogya Upanishad* (7.26.2)ⁱⁱ on self-realization through detachment and enduring pain.
- **Self-Sacrifice and Motherhood:** The mother's final line resonates with *Shrimad Bhagavatam* (Canto 10), where sacrifice for children is lauded as supreme dharma.
- **Detachment and Acceptance:** Her stoic remark reflects *Vachanamrut* Gadhada II-28, emphasizing endurance of suffering as part of divine will.
- **Spiritual Duality:** The father represents the modern mind, yet in crisis, he reverts to ritual—illustrating the complex interplay of rationality and spiritual tradition.

Nissim Ezekiel's *Night of the Scorpion*, though a modern English poem, resonates deeply with the ethical, spiritual, and philosophical insights found in **Vedantic and Upanishadic wisdom**, and is aligned with the **Indian**

scriptural worldview across the *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, *Bhagavad Gita*, *Vachanamrut*, and *Shrimad Bhagavatam*. Below is a thematic exploration and textual alignment:

1. The Mother's Self-Sacrifice: Echo of Divine Motherhood

Poem Reference:

"Thank God the scorpion picked on me / And spared my children."

Scriptural Alignment:

- **Bhagavad Gita (3.16, 18.66):**ⁱⁱⁱ Selfless action (*niṣkāma karma*) and renunciation of results is seen as the highest spiritual state. The mother willingly bears pain for her children, aligning with this ideal of action without attachment.
- **Taittirīya Upanishad (1.11.2):**^{iv} "*Mātr-devo bhava*" (Regard your mother as God). Her role here is divine, bearing agony without blame, embodying divine grace.
- **Vachanamrut, Gadhada I-10:** "The love of a mother is selfless and unconditional, yet even that love is transcended when one attains divine realization." Here, the poem reflects both worldly and transcendental motherhood.
- **Shrimad Bhagavatam (10.9.20):**^v Yashoda's maternal love for Krishna shows a similar pattern of selfless endurance. The poem's mother channels this bhakti-infused, *ātmanivedan* (self-offering) quality.

2. Karma, Suffering, and Purification

Poem Reference:

"May the sins of your previous birth / be burned away tonight, they said."

Scriptural Alignment:

- **Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanishad (3.2.13):**^{vi} Actions (karma) determine one's birth and suffering. Pain is interpreted as a cleansing of *prārabdha karma*.
- **Bhagavad Gita (6.41–45):**^{vii} Suffering in this life may be due to unfinished karmic results from previous births. The villagers' chants express a deep karmic intuition: pain = purification.
- **Vachanamrut, Gadhada I-27:** Swaminarayan explains that suffering helps burn away ego and fosters humility, drawing one closer to God.
- **Atharva Veda (4.15.6):** Refers to *pāpahanta* (destroyer of sins) through penance or divine intercession. The villagers' collective prayers echo this ethos.

3. Duality of Faith and Rationalism

Poem Reference:

"My father, sceptic, rationalist, / trying every curse and blessing..."

Scriptural Alignment:

- **Kena Upanishad (1.3):**^{viii} "That which cannot be known by the mind, but by which the mind is known..." highlights the limitation of rational inquiry when faced with the mysterious.

• **Bhagavad Gita (7.16–17):**^{ix} Four kinds of people approach the Divine—those in distress, those seeking knowledge, the curious, and the wise. The father falls into the seeker-of-knowledge category, but ironically submits to ritual in desperation.

• **Vachanamrut, Gadhada I-18:** “Even one who prides in his intellect should not dismiss the power of bhakti and divine grace.” Ezekiel’s depiction of the father reflects this tension.

4. The Role of Collective Faith and Community

Poem Reference:

“The peasants came like swarms of flies / and buzzed the name of God...”

Scriptural Alignment:

• **Rig Veda (10.191.2):**^x “*Samgacchadhvam samvadadhvam*” – “Move together, speak together.” Unity in ritual and intention is a source of spiritual strength. The villagers chanting together mirrors Vedic communal devotion.

• **Shrimad Bhagavatam (11.5.32):**^{xi} In Kali Yuga, chanting the name of God (*nāma saṅkīrtana*) is the highest path to purification. Their repeated chanting is instinctively aligned with this truth.

• **Bhagavad Gita (9.22):**^{xii} “To those who are constantly devoted, I carry what they lack and preserve what they have.” The communal prayers evoke this divine assurance.

5. Transience, Endurance, and Divine Will

Poem Reference:

“After twenty hours / it lost its sting.”

Scriptural Alignment:

• **Īśāvāsya Upanishad (1):**^{xiii} “*Īśāvāsyam idam sarvam...*” All is pervaded by the Divine. The outcome, whether good or bad, must be accepted as God’s will.

• **Bhagavad Gita (2.14):**^{xiv} “*Matrasparshas tu kaunteya...*” (Pleasure and pain are temporary. Endure them, O Arjuna!). The mother’s composure embodies this Vedantic endurance.

• **Vachanamrut, Gadhada I-37:** Swaminarayan emphasizes, “Suffering sent by God should be borne with joy, for it is for our spiritual betterment.”

6. Suffering as a Path to Spiritual Awakening

Poem Reference:

“May the poison purify your flesh / of desire, and your spirit of ambition...”

Scriptural Alignment:

• **Mundaka Upanishad (1.2.10)**^{xv}: Only through renunciation and purification can the Self be known. Pain here is framed as an *āgni* (fire) that purges desire and ego.

• **Bhagavad Gita (6.5):**^{xvi} “Let a man lift himself by his own Self.” Suffering becomes a catalyst for detachment and transformation.

• **Shrimad Bhagavatam (1.8.25):**^{xvii} Kunti prays for more suffering so that she may always remember Krishna.

Pain is not a curse but a path to constant divine remembrance.

7. The Ineffability of the Sacred and the Poetic

Though Ezekiel is often viewed as secular or modernist, his poetic vision captures what **Yajur Veda (32.3)** says: “*Na tasya pratimā asti*” – “There is no image of Him.”

Even without naming God directly, the sacred pervades this poem. The mother’s love, the villagers’ devotion, the rain, the scorpion—each becomes a vehicle of divine mystery and presence.

Conclusion:

Night of the Scorpion stands as a modern testimony to India’s **timeless spiritual ethos**. Though crafted in English and informed by contemporary irony, the poem reflects profound **Vedantic and Upanishadic ideals**—karma, self-sacrifice, divine will, collective faith, and the ultimate insignificance of rational control in the face of cosmic design. It is a living illustration of the Vedic wisdom that sees divinity in both suffering and surrender.

6. Historical and Cultural Context

• **Post-Independence India:** Written in mid-20th century Bombay, the poem reflects the socio-cultural milieu where faith, science, and superstition coexisted.

• **Village Life:** The setting, with mud walls, communal response, and a spiritual healer, depicts an authentic Indian rural ethos.

• **Indian English Poetry Movement:** Ezekiel, a key figure in modern Indian English poetry, often infused the local with the literary. His Jewish-Indian background adds a unique dimension of hybridity.

7. Poet’s Perspective and Emotional Mindset

• **Personal Reflection:** Ezekiel’s use of “I remember” indicates autobiographical authenticity. He might be recalling a childhood trauma with detachment and contemplation.

• **Empathy and Helplessness:** The poet, as a child, watches helplessly, portraying early exposure to pain, compassion, and cultural plurality.

• **Curiosity and Contradiction:** Ezekiel captures the ironic co-existence of blind faith and modern reason, not with judgment but with nuanced observation.

8. Target Audience and Purpose

• **Intended for Both Indians and Global Readers:** The poem educates, critiques, and bridges cultures—making Indian customs comprehensible to outsiders while prompting Indians to reflect on their traditions.

• **Purpose:** To evoke empathy, critique superstition, highlight maternal virtue, and showcase the spiritual endurance of Indian society. The poem blends the personal with the cultural to present a universal message.

9. Personal Interpretation

Ezekiel’s *Night of the Scorpion* is more than a tale of an insect bite—it is a study in contrasts: tradition vs. modernity, suffering vs. transcendence, science vs. superstition, and above all, the depth of maternal love. The poem’s final line, delivered by the mother, transforms the entire narrative from one of chaos to one of grace. It exemplifies *sattvic* acceptance found in the *Bhagavad Gita*

and the *Upanishads*. Personally, the poem stands as a testament to how poetry can transform pain into art, and domestic moments into universal epics of endurance, compassion, and philosophical insight.

Conclusion

Nissim Ezekiel's "Night of the Scorpion" is not merely a recollection of childhood trauma or an ethnographic snapshot of Indian village life. It is a multi-layered poem that, upon close reading, reveals itself to be a philosophical allegory of life, suffering, and spiritual endurance. The juxtaposition of science and superstition, faith and reason, chaos and peace, finds its resolution in the quiet yet powerful utterance of the mother—her statement transforming pain into prayer and adversity into grace. The poem echoes the Vedantic message that all experiences, even suffering, are ultimately tools for liberation when borne with detachment and devotion. In a world often divided between secular and sacred, *Night of the Scorpion* becomes a unifying text—where modern verse and ancient wisdom meet. Through this synthesis, Ezekiel elevates a personal memory into a profound commentary on the human condition, making the poem a timeless contribution to both literature and spiritual thought.

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Foot note

- I. देहिनीऽस्मिन्यथा देहे कौमारं यौवनं जरा ।
तथा देहान्तरप्राप्तिर्धीरस्तत्र न मुह्यति ॥ १३ ॥
- II. तदेष श्लोको न पश्यो मृत्युं पश्यति न रोगं नोत दुःखतां सर्वं ह पश्यः
पश्यति सर्वमाप्नोति सर्वश इति स एकधा भवति त्रिधा भवति पञ्चधा
सप्तधा नवधा चैव पुनश्चैकादशः स्मृतः शतं च दश चैकश्च सहस्राणि च
विंशतिराहारशुद्धौ सत्त्वशुद्धौ ध्रुवा स्मृतिः स्मृतिलम्भे सर्वग्रन्थीनां
विप्रमोक्षस्तस्मै मृदितकषायाय तमसस्परं दर्शयति भगवान्स-
नत्कुमारस्तं स्कन्द इत्याचक्षते तं स्कन्द इत्याचक्षते ॥ ७.२६.२ ॥
॥ इति षड्विंशः खण्डः ॥
॥ इति सप्तमोऽध्यायः ॥
- III. एवं प्रवर्तितं चक्रं नानुवर्तयतीह यः |
अघायुरिन्द्रियारामो मोघं पार्थ स जीवति ॥ 16॥
- IV. देवपितृकार्याभ्यां न प्रमदितव्यम् । मातृदेवो भव ।
पितृदेवो भव । आचार्यदेवो भव । अतिथिदेवो भव ।
यान्यनवद्यानि कर्माणि । तानि सेवितव्यानि । नो इतराणि ।
यान्यस्माकंसुचरितानि । तानि त्वयोपास्यानि । नो इतराणि ॥ २॥
- V. नेमं विरिञ्चो न भवो न श्रीरप्यङ्गसंश्रया ।
प्रसादं लेभिरे गोपी यत्तत्राप विमुक्तिदात् ॥ २० ॥

- VI. याज्ञवल्क्येति होवाच, यत्रास्य पुरुषस्य मृतस्याग्निं वागप्येति, वातं
प्राणः, चक्षुरादित्यम्, मनश्चन्द्रम्, दिशः श्रोत्रम्, पृथिवीं शरीरम्,
आकाशमात्म, ओषधीर्लोमानि, वनस्पतीन्केशाः, अप्सु लोहितं च रेतश्च
निधीयते, क्वायं तदा पुरुषो भवतीति; अहर सोम्य हस्तमार्तभा,
आवामेवैतस्य वेदिष्यावः, न नावेतत् सजन इति । तौ होक्म्य
मन्त्रयांचक्राते; तौ ह यदूचतुः कर्म हैव तदूचतुः, अथ यत्प्रशंसतुः कर्म
हैव तत् प्रशंसतुः; पुण्यो वै पुण्येन कर्मणा भवति, पापः पापेनेति ।
ततो ह जारत्कारव आर्तभाग उपरराम ॥ १३ ॥
इति द्वितीयं ब्राह्मणम् ॥
- VII. प्राप्य पुण्यकृतां लोकानुषित्वा शाश्वतीः समाः |
शुचीनां श्रीमतां गेहे योगभ्रष्टोऽभिजायते ॥ 41॥
अथवा योगिनामेव कुले भवति धीमताम् |
एतद्धि दुर्लभतरं लोके जन्म यदीदृशम् ॥ 42॥
- VIII. न तत्र चक्षुर्गच्छति न वाग्गच्छति नो मनः ।
न विद्वो न विजानीमो यथैतदनुशिष्यात् ॥ ३॥
- IX. चतुर्विधा भजन्ते मां जनाः सुकृतिनोऽर्जुन |
आर्तो जिज्ञासुरर्थार्थी ज्ञानी च भरतर्षभ ॥ 16॥
- X. सं गच्छध्वं सं वदध्वं सं वो मनांसि जानताम् । देवा भागं यथा पूर्वं
संजानाना उपासते ॥
सं गच्छध्वं सं वदध्वं सं वो मनांसि जानताम् । देवा भागं यथा पूर्वं
संजानाना उपासते ॥
- XI. कृष्णवर्णं त्विषाकृष्णं साङ्गोपाङ्गास्त्रपार्शदम् ।
यज्ञैः सङ्कीर्तनप्राथैर्यजन्ति हि सुमेधसः ॥ ३२ ॥
- XII. अनन्याश्चिन्तयन्तो मां ये जनाः पर्युपासते |
तेषां नित्याभियुक्तानां योगक्षेमं वहाम्यहम् ॥ 22॥
- XIII. ईशावास्यमिदं सर्वं यत्किञ्च जगत्यां जगत् ।
तेन त्यक्तेन भुञ्जीथा मा गृधः कस्य स्विद्धनम् ॥ १ ॥
- XIV. मात्रास्पर्शास्तु कौन्तेय शीतोष्णसुखदुःखदाः |
आगमापायिनोऽनित्यास्तांस्तितिक्षस्व भारत ॥ 14॥
- XV. इष्टापूर्तं मन्यमाना वरिष्ठं नान्यच्छ्रेयो वेदयन्ते प्रमूढाः ।
नाकस्य पृष्ठे ते सुकृतेऽनुभूत्वेमं लोकं हीनतरं वा विशन्ति ॥ १० ॥
- XVI. उद्धरेदात्मनात्मानं नात्मानमवसादयेत् |
आत्मैव ह्यात्मनो बन्धुरात्मैव रिपुरात्मनः ॥ 5॥
- XVII. विपदः सन्तु ताः शश्वत्तत्र तत्र जगद्गुरो ।
भवतो दर्शनं यत्स्यादपुनर्भवदर्शनम् ॥ २५ ॥