

Nativism, Love and Sorrow in Nissim Ezekiel's *Night of the Scorpion*

Md. Sahidul Islam

Research Scholar

Department of English

Aligarh Muslim University

Aligarh-202002, U.P. India.

Nativism is a “term for desire to return to indigenous practices and cultural forms as they existed in pre-colonial society” (Ashcroft 159). This radical concept of nativism, which was commonly found in the Indian writings during the pre-colonial India, in fact, was not fully explored by the Indian writers during the reign of the British Empire in India due to utter confusion. The postcolonial Indian writers have pursued it and become successful to a great extent in fulfilling their commitments in restoring the Indian values. As a result the Indian English Literature is sated with nativistic images so far as postcolonial writings are concerned. Great affinity of the contemporary Indian writers towards nativism and their ceaseless attempt to return to the roots are evident in their works. However “the doctrine of innate ideas” (Fowler 789) – myth and fable as well as oral traditions are echoed in the writings of the postcolonial writer Nissim Ezekiel. The author has depicted the nativistic images and incorporated the common theme of love and sorrow in his poem “Night of the Scorpion”. However, “the main problem with nativism is that it is, almost by definition, an oppositional category” (Paranjape 168).

A visionary man of numerous talents, Nissim Ezekiel (1924–2004) is considered as the father of post-independence Indian-English verse. His ability in presenting the various themes in conversational style is not only impressive but also surpasses the other contemporary poets of his time in this regard.

Nissim Ezekiel's poem “Night of the Scorpion” was published in the poetry collection entitled *The Exact Name* in 1965. A peasant is a speaker in this poem who narrates how a scorpion stung his mother one night and what happened after that in an unusually informative manner. Like that of Rabindranath Tagore's assignment in his “Broken Song”, Nissim Ezekiel's “Night of the Scorpion” too replete with nativistic images. For instance, the poet has successfully revived the dogma of inherent ideas through the behaviour and practice of a “holy man” (Ezekiel 22) when the peasant's mother was “stung” ((Ezekiel 21) by a scorpion. In fact, the holy man is brought to tame the venom with a mantra and he has done his job well:

“After twenty hours

it lost its sting” (Ezekiel, 22)

The behaviours of the peasant, his mother and his neighbours are also notable in this regard as they have shown their favour for such a traditional practice to save the life of the peasant's scorpion-stung mother. It is evident from the fact that all of them have opted for prayer and incantation for quick recovery of the victim. The peasant's father, who is rationalist, however has opted for both the scientific as well as traditional methods of treatment, and tried both medicine and ‘mantra’ for the purpose:

“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.” (Ezekiel, 22)

In his poem “Night of the Scorpion”, Nissim Ezekiel makes an effort to convey an important message to the readers pertaining to the building of an universal brotherhood among the people through the outlooks of the neighbours of the peasant whose mother was stung by scorpion. As soon as the neighbours come to know about the said incident, they have left their home behind and rushed towards the home of the victim enchanting the name of God repeatedly. It reflects their love for the speaker’s mother. Their love is so strong that they have readily faced the difficulties pertaining to the continuous rain and the darkness of the night on their way to the destination. With the help of lanterns and the candle light they start searching the scorpion “to paralyse the Evil one” because:

“With every movement that the scorpion made
his poison moved in Mother’s blood, they said.
May he sit still, they said.
May the sins of your previous birth
be burned away tonight, they said.” (Ezekiel, 21)

In “Night of the Scorpion”, Nissim Ezekiel has conveyed another vital message to the readers that is a mother’s selfless love for her children surpasses the love of any other person in this world. Despite being bitten by a scorpion and narrowly escaping death, the peasant’s mother is grateful that the scorpion did not sting her children:

My mother only said
Thank God the scorpion picked on me
and spared my children. (Ezekiel, 22)

The exclamation of the peasant’s mother through the above quoted lines have earned Ezekiel him lots of praise from the critics for his “Indian sensibility.”

The neighbours have not only shown their love to the peasant’s mother but also felt sorrow for her. They have accompanied her during that critical juncture. Their prayer brings out their true anxiety for the suffering of the peasant’s mother. They sit on the floor with the mother in the centre and make effort to alleviate her with words based on values:

May your suffering decrease
the misfortunes of your next birth, they said.
May the sum of 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.... (Ezekiel, 21)

One fact to be established is that the innocence of the rural people enables them to stick to the dictate of God. They believe firmly that if they utter "the Name of God a hundred times" (Ezekiel, 21), their prayer would not go in vain. It will reduce the pain of the peasant's mother. However, their beliefs regarding the movement of the scorpion which, according to them is directly proportional to the flow of the blood in the mother's body questions the rationality of the people of the peasant's hamlet.

"Night of the Scorpion" reflects that Ezekiel is totally committed to India and is through about the practices of the people of the country. His sense of being Indian is quite clear in the poem of which the author cannot get rid of.

After a thorough study of the poem "Night of the Scorpion" it becomes quite clear that the Nissim Ezekiel has emphasised on the archetypal Indian condition rather than paying any attention to the romantic and ideal aspects usually dealt with by earlier poets. His presentation of the Indian way of life style mixed with rationality and superstition gives an authentic insight to the readers regarding its aptness of the social milieu of India. His style is very impressive. The use of humour and irony suits his manner of presenting the content against the social background of India.

Works Cited

- Ashcraft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *Postcolonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. London and New York: Routledge, 2005. Print.
- Ezekiel, Nissim. "Night of the Scorpion." *A Pageant of Poems*. Ed. H.N. Kashyap. New Delhi: Selina Publishers, 1996. 21-22. Print.
- Fowler, H.W, F.G. Fowler, and R.E. Allen, eds. "Nativism", *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English, Eighth Edition* ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990. Print.
- Paranjape, Makarand. "Beyond Nativism: Towards a Contemporary Indian Tradition in Criticism." *Nativism: Essays in Criticism*. Ed. Makarand Paranjape. Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1997. 153-176. Print.