

Section III Night of the scorpion/Poetry



Not all villains need have a motive. Some can just act and attack out of self-defence and yet be named a villain based on their very nature. In this poem, Nissim Ezekiel captures the battle between evil and

good in the form of a battle between an 'evil' scorpion and a loving mother, who is stung by the scorpion and who has to bear the pain of the poison for an entire night.



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.

Parting with his poison—flash of diabolic¹ tail in the dark room—he risked the rain again.

The peasants² came like swarms of flies and buzzed the name of God a hundred times to paralyse³ 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.

May he sit still, they said

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



¹diabolic relating to or characteristic of the devil ²peasants poor smallholders or agricultural labourers of low social status
³paralyse cause (a person or part of the body) to become partly or wholly incapable of movement, in this case the scorpion

May your suffering decrease
the misfortunes of your next birth, they said.

May the sum of all evil
balanced in this unreal world
against the sum of good
become diminished⁴ 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,
groaning⁵ on a mat.

My father, sceptic⁶, rationalist⁷,
trying every curse and blessing,
powder, mixture, herb and hybrid⁸.
He even poured a little paraffin⁹
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 incantation¹⁰.
After twenty hours
it lost its sting.

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

NISSIM EZEKIEL

⁴**diminished** made smaller or less ⁵**groaning** denoting a deep inarticulate sound conveying pain, despair, pleasure

⁶**sceptic** a person inclined to question or doubt accepted opinions ⁷**rationalist** a person who follows the practice or principle of basing opinions and actions on reason and knowledge rather than on religious belief or emotional response

⁸**hybrid** something that is made by combining two different elements ⁹**paraffin** a colourless, flammable, oily liquid similarly obtained and used as fuel, especially kerosene ¹⁰**incantation** a series of words said as a magic spell or charm

Nissim Ezekiel (1924–2004): An English poet, actor, playwright, editor and art-critic, Ezekiel was one of the founding forces of Indian writing in English after India won its independence. Awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1983 for his poetry collection *Latter Day Psalms* and the Padma Shri in 1988, Ezekiel is recognized as one of the most notable English language poets of the 20th century because of the influence of his poems and poetic style. His poems dealt with common themes in a manner that was at the same time realistic yet profound, simple yet not too diluted.

COMPREHENSION SKILLS

A. Say whether the following statements are true (T) or false (F).

1. A hot summer had driven the scorpion to hide inside the house.
2. The peasants came like swarms of flies and chanted God's name.
3. The peasants prayed that mother's sins from her previous birth be burned away that night.
4. Mother was lying unconscious on a mat.
5. After 20 hours, the scorpion's poison lost its sting.

B. Answer the following questions.

1. *The peasants came like swarms of flies and buzzed the name of God a hundred times to paralyse the Evil One.*
 - a. Why did the peasants come in such large numbers?
 - b. Who is the evil one here?
 - c. Did the chanting help in healing mother?
2. *May he sit still, they said*
May the sins of your previous birth
be burned away tonight, they said.
May your suffering decrease
 - a. What does the repeated use of the word 'may' in these lines indicate to you?
 - b. Who did the peasants want to sit still?
 - c. What did the peasants fear would happen if the scorpion moved?
3. *Thank God the scorpion picked on me*
And spared my children.
 - a. Who is the *me* here?
 - b. What do these lines tell you about the speaker?
 - c. How do you think the children must have felt about the speaker?
4. How do you know that the poet remembers the night very clearly? Provide examples to support your answer.
5. Do you think the poet's mother was popular and liked by many people?
6. What impression do you get of the village and its people based on the references made in the poem?
7. Do you think the poet who is the mute witness to all this is angry, scared or sorrowful?
8. Do you remember any incident in your life that is striking enough for you to remember even now? What are the aspects of that incident that make it so memorable? **VB**
9. The poem makes a brief comparison between scientific medicine and traditional beliefs. Explain your views on the same.