
A Critique of Three Memorable Poems of Nissim Ezekiel: “Night of the Scorpion”, “Background, Casually” and “Jewish Wedding in Bombay”.

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ABSTRACT

Publication Info

Article history :

Received : 06-10-2024

Accepted : 10-10-2024

DOI : 10.30949/dajdtla.v20i2.3

Key words:

gentleness, subdued
mockery, Indian
sensibility, virginity.

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The paper deals with three memorable poems of “Nissim Ezekiel”, “Night of the Scorpion” and “Jewish Wedding in Bombay”. The first poem is a poem of situation on the theme of mother's scorpion bite and the reactions that followed. The poem is typical of an Indian scene which appeals to the readers. It is marked by irony. “Background, Casually” is an autobiographical poem in which Ezekiel's ancestry has been personalized. Though he hails from the Jewish Community, he assimilated himself to the Indian situation. No wonder, he asserts his Indian nationality in no certain terms. “Jewish Wedding in Bombay” is about the rituals of a Jewish marriage. It seems to be a ritual mechanically followed. Finally after ten years of marriage, a time comes for separation between the bridegroom and the bride. It ends wittily when the poet asks how to return one's virginity which defies an answer.

Modern Indian English poetry owes its recognition to Nissim Ezekiel who published his first book of verse, *A Time of Change* in 1952 published by Fortune Press, London. Subsequently, Ezekiel published several volumes of poems such as *Sixty Poems* in 1953, *The Third* in 1958, *The Unfinished Man* in 1960, *The Exact Name* in 1965, *Hymns in Darkness* in 1976 and *Latter-Day Psalms* in 1982. The three poems “Night of the Scorpion”, “Background, Casually”, and “Jewish Wedding in Bombay” are taken from *The Exact Name*, *Hymns in Darkness* and *Latter-Day Psalms* respectively. These three poems are milestones in the development of Nissim Ezekiel as a post-colonial and canonical Indian English poet.

“Night of the Scorpion” is Ezekiel's magnum opus. It has been anthologized in several Indian English poetry collections. There is something very interesting about the genesis of the poem. Ezekiel has given a clue to it in the following paragraph:

On another occasion in mid-January, 1964 in Leeds, I had to read a few of my poems at a party. That morning, when I made the selection, I was dissatisfied with it because there were not enough recent poems with an Indian ethos. I felt it was essential to pick recent ones and not those from my earlier books and also to read some poems which would interest a non-Indian audience by their Indian themes. I decided to spend the day in my University room waiting, in Rilke's sense, for a poem with only one proviso: it had to be Indian. My wife and I settled down in that room around 10 a.m., by lunch time I had no luck, by tea-time none either. Eventually when my wife warned me that it was approaching 6 p.m. that

we would soon have to leave for the party, I wrote down in a fit of desperation and after making a joke about the words, 'I remember' the joke being "I remember the house where I was born", then suddenly I wrote, "the night my mother was stung by a scorpion" end in as much time as it would take to make a copy of the poem,

- I had completed it.

That night at the party I read it out ... Eventually, when I was sending the poem for publication I made one small change : I allowed for extra space between the body of the poem and the last three lines. That was the revision I made of "Night of the Scorpion"¹⁴. (The Literary Criterion, Vol.18 No.03 1983 : 5)

According to Christopher Wiseman, it is a "very valid poem continuing a fascinating tension between personal crisis and mocking social observation" (*Journal of South Asian Literature* Vol.11, 3-4, 1976: 247). In the words of Chetan Karnani, "the theme of the poet's mother stung by a scorpion is given multiple treatment, bringing in its sweep the world of magic and superstition, science and natural and maternal affection" (*Nissim Ezekiel* 1974: 82). A very perceptive critic William Walsh states that in "Night of the Scorpion", gentleness is protected by irony and sweetness made keen by "a subdued mockery" (The Literary Criterion Vol.11 No.3 1974:6). R.Parthasarathy makes an interesting observation in the following lines:

... it enacts an impressive ritual in which the mother's reaction, towards the end, to her own suffering ironically cancels out earlier responses both primitive and sophisticated. The inter-relationships between domestic tragedy and the surrounding community is unobtrusively established. The poem also demonstrates the effective use of parallelism (*Ten Twentieth Century Poets*, 1976:28).

The poem is typically Indian in its theme and language. B.K.Das in his book *Critical Essays on Poetry*, has made an interesting observation on the poem:

The speaker in the poem recalls an incident when his mother was stung by a scorpion and then goes on to describe how it happened and the incident that follows:

"Ten hours
of steady rain had driven him
to crawl beneath a sack of rice
parting with his poison-flash
of diabolic tail in the dark room –
he risked the rain again".

Ezekiel describes the reaction of the people to scorpion bite of the speaker's mother. They came in large numbers and gave their suggestions how to cure the mother. Thus writes the poem:

more candles, more lanterns,
more neighbours
more insects, and the endless rain

my mother twisted through and through
groaning on a mat.

It took twenty hours to subside her pain. The poem evokes successfully the reactions of the people including the speaker's father. The poem contains 48 lines with free flow rhythm. The structural pattern of the poem shows the compression of ideas in a conversational language. Ezekiel ends the poem:

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

This is a typical Indian poem bearing Indian approach to an ordinary incident like scorpion bite.

'Background, Casually' was written at the request of the organizers of India Festival in London. This poem explains the background of Ezekiel and his determination to stay in India in unmistakable terms. In course of an interview to Adil Jusswalla, Ezekiel says emphatically:

"I am an Indian national. I was born in India, my tribe of the Jewish community has lived in India for 2,000 years. If I had rejected my Indianness, which some Indian writers obviously done and if I had decided that I was so much of an outsider that I have to settle down in London or New York, and then if I did write about India, I do not know if I could be regarded as an Indo-English writer."

"Background, Casually" is an auto-biographical poem written in 5 line stanzas (Ezekiel's favourite stanza pattern). His Jewish origin and Indian upbringing are juxtaposed in the poem. Ezekiel writes:

The son of my experience sung,
I knew that all was yet to sing.
My ancestors, among the castes,
Were aliens crushing seed for bread
(The hooded bullock made his rounds).

The above quoted stanza is balanced against the line "Indian landscape sears my eyes / I have become a part of it". This assertion on the part of the poet is a befitting reply to the foreign critics such as William Walsh who took him to a "native alien". Ezekiel firmly asserts that he is an Indian born and brought up in Mumbai. In the last stanza of the poem, he asserts "I have made my commitments now / This is one: to stay where I am". This is reinforced in another poem called "Island" where Ezekiel says "I can not leave the island / I was born here and belong". This autobiographical poem shows the birth, the growth and the development of Ezekiel as an Indian English poet. It is important to understand that Ezekiel does two things in this poem, one, the assertion of his ancestry Bene-Israel origin and two, the firmness of his commitment to India. Bruce King has rightly observed that "the story of Nissim Ezekiel's life and role as a founding father of Indian English poetry is now well known" (*Three Indian Poets*:2).

"Jewish Wedding in Bombay" is a poem on Ezekiel's origin (Jewishness) and his Indian sensibility. The poem contains irony, parody and above all wit. The poem has an abrupt

beginning as in the following stanza:

Her mother shed a tear or two but wasn't really crying. It was the thing to do, so she did it, enjoying every moment. The bride laughed when I sympathized, and said don't be silly.

The whole ritual of marriage has been described in the stanza two, three and four of the poem. Finally, both the bride and bridegroom broke the glass to the accompaniment of clapping of the congregation which signalled that they were “truly married according to the Mosaic Law”. Ritual of marriage is devoid of faith in marriage which makes the poet to say “who knows how much belief we had?” After the marriage they took their photographs in the studio of Lobo and Fernades. They remain married for ten years and in the meanwhile, the bridegroom went to London and return. After his return, there was quarrel between them which was serious in nature. In course of quarrel, the wife asked “why did not take my virginity from me?” The bridegroom gave a befitting reply marked by wit. The bridegroom said, “I would gladly have returned it, but not one of the books I had read instructed me how”.

If the beginning of the poem is ironical, the ending of it is bathos. The wit in the poem is memorable because virginity once taken away can never be returned. Between marriage and separation, the poem stands exquisitely balance. The poem describes mechanical observance of rituals and the disastrous consequences of breaking the marriage has been brought house in the concluding lines of the poem.

Ezekiel's poetry has a quality of memorableness. This is brought out in the three poems taken for a study. The appeal of the three poems to the readers is irrevocable.

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