



Decoding Culture in Nissim Ezekiel's "Night of the Scorpion"

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I use a cultural studies approach to analyze Nissim Ezekiel's poem "*Night of the Scorpion*". Cultural studies help us understand how culture shapes the way people think and act. It looks at how things like beliefs, traditions, and social practices influence people's behaviour and their view of the world. This approach is useful for studying the poem because it helps explain the cultural background of the rural Indian setting Ezekiel describes where people often rely on rituals, prayers and superstitions instead of scientific knowledge. The poem presents a striking contrast between a traditional community, governed by rituals and collective action, and a rational individual- the father who seeks to resolve the crisis through practical, scientific means. Using concepts from cultural studies, this paper examines how culture functions as a dominant force and highlights the tension between tradition and modernity.

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Nissim Ezekiel (1924-2004) was a prominent Indian poet, playwright, editor, and an art critic. A versatile literary figure, he played a key role in shaping modern Indian English poetry, moving beyond traditional themes to explore spirituality, societal issues, and personal introspection. Often hailed as the father of post-independence Indian English verse, Ezekiel was influenced by writers like WB Yeats and Rainer Maria Rilke, blending Western literary sensibilities with Indian experiences. The intersection of traditional Indian beliefs and modern rationality is explored in "*Night of the Scorpion*". Traditional or religious belief like karma shape the villagers' understanding of pain and suffering.



The poem's central incident—a mother stung by a scorpion triggers a collective ritual that reflects the villagers' strong reliance on shared cultural practices. Their actions such as chanting prayers in chorus, blaming karma and calling a tantric (holy man), illustrate how traditional belief systems function as both a comfort and a control mechanism. Ezekiel also uses the “*objective correlative*”—symbols like the scorpion, the dark night, and the rain—to mirror the emotional and psychological state of the characters. The scorpion becomes a stand in for fear, fate, and evil; the rain and night for chaos, helplessness, and cultural mystery. The peasants in chorus “*buzzed the name of God a hundred times to paralyze the Evil One*” reflects an attempt to combat evil through faith.

Ten hours of incessant rain is not just a background detail; it enhances the sense of discomfort and vulnerability. Though the scorpion retreats into the rain, it leaves behind a lingering presence—metaphorically captured in the form of giant scorpion-like shadows of the villagers cast upon the sun-baked walls. These large shadows reflect not just their bodies, but also the fear they feel during the crisis. Ezekiel vividly encapsulates the power of the scorpion both literally and metaphorically through the line “*With every movement that the scorpion made his poison moved in mother's blood.*” The mother is physically “*in the centre*”, but metaphorically also at the centre of attention, concern, and a circle of speculation or judgment. “*More candles, more lanterns, more neighbours*” can be examined as part of the continuity of traditional practices. In rural Indian setting, a shared emotional experience is deeply significant. People in rural communities view themselves as part of a larger collective as “*they sat around on the floor*”, where the emotional state of one individual becomes the emotional states of the entire group. In rural India, community members though constrained by limited material resources and access to formal knowledge, they respond to crisis using whatever tools, superstitions, rituals, or faith-based practices they possess. In the poem, this cultural rootedness is conveyed through the line “*May the sum of evil balanced in this unreal world against the sum of good become diminished by your pain.*” Their attempts to help the afflicted mother are ultimately in vain, leading them to interpret her suffering as a consequence of “*previous birth*” (past actions). Through their prayers they hope the scorpion's poison will “*purify*” the mother's sins; an act or a form of purification—cleansing her body “*flesh*”, desires, and unnecessary, unfulfilled “*spirit of ambition*”. These symbols are not accidental but are deeply tied to the cultural imagination that connects the natural world with spiritual and moral meaning. This communal bond is essential for understanding not just the specific crisis at hand, but also the cultural and social fabric that holds rural communities together.



This collective experience becomes a way of showing empathy, and is also an expression of shared social and emotional values, passed down through generations. The act of being together in moment of crisis is a deeply ingrained cultural practice. Also the community spirit of the neighbours' sacrifice of their comfort and sleep in the face of heavy rain reflects a communal solidarity, signalling that they are not merely individuals living separate lives but are part of a larger social organism. The deep cultural rootedness is not only portrayed in their actions but also subtly woven into their expressions and language. Ezekiel captures this beautifully through the auditory imagery of the villagers as "*they clicked their tongues*" in the frantic search for the scorpion who has mysteriously disappeared after injecting his venom into the toe of the speaker's mother appears culturally familiar. The language of the poem successfully mirrors the rural setting in its tone, form and rhythm. Ezekiel's use of the present continuous tense such as in phrases like "*parting*", "*buzzing*", "*clicking*", "*suffering*", "*understanding*", and "*blessing*", mirror the informal natural speech pattern of Indian English which is common and culturally accepted. This style enhances the realism of the scene and offers the poem an oral story-telling tradition. Story-telling is a cultural practice in rural India, passed down orally from one generation to the next. Ezekiel's "*Night of the Scorpion*" richly is a recount of a past traumatic event witnessed by the speaker as a young child. Now as an adult and a poet, he revisits that memory, transforming it into a narrative poem; blending personal trauma with communal tradition of story-telling.

Ezekiel portrays the mother as a silent sufferer, enduring twenty hours of pain without complaint. She lies passively, absorbing the villagers' interpretations of her suffering stating: "*May the sins of your previous birth be burned away tonight*" (the villagers' karmic interpretation of the mother's suffering), "*May your suffering decrease the misfortunes of your next birth*" (villagers' belief in samsara or the cyclical nature of life.) Each comment steeped in superstition and faith. The mother who suffers silently throughout the poem, becomes a symbol of the cultural expectations placed on women-to endure, to accept fate, and to remain voiceless. Her passive role reflects how gender operates within the cultural logic of the setting, where the woman's pain is managed not by her, but by those around her. Cultural studies pays close attention to how power and identity are shaped through roles like these, especially in patriarchal and tradition-bound communities. After this prolonged silence, the mother made her final words-"*Thank God the scorpion picked on me and spared my children.*" It becomes the emotional climax of the poem, revealing the depth of her love and selflessness. In just one single sentence, she breaks her silence to express what truly matters to her: the safety of her children, her voicelessness



throughout highlights the quiet strength of motherhood, and protective instinct of a mother. Unlike the villagers who focus on karma and fate, the mother accepts her suffering with grace and attitude, revealing a more grounded form of spirituality. This simple yet profound statement reflects the deep rooted cultural value of maternal sacrifice especially in Indian society. Despite enduring hours of pain, the mother expresses gratitude- not for her own relief, but for her children's safety. Mothers are willing to endure pain themselves, and if possible, would readily take on the suffering of their children without a second thought. Through this the poem highlights how Indian culture often idealizes motherhood as selfless and spiritually resilient, placing the mother at the emotional core of the family. The father's actions highlight the tension between modernity and tradition, a core concern of postcolonial cultural studies. His presence shows how colonization and education have introduced new ways of thinking, but how these often coexist uneasily with older belief systems. The father, an educated and rational figure, contrasts sharply with them. With limited resources, he takes immediate action-rubbing the bite with herbs and powders, then pouring "a little paraffin upon the bitten toe" then setting alight to stop the spread of poison. His quick thinking and practical approach represents a modern, scientific mindset within a traditional setting. Also the father's quiet and stoic strength reflects a cultural idea of the father as reliable and silently heroic. While the villagers – representing the collective consciousness of traditional rural society, the father takes responsibility and single-handedly acts in the face of crisis "*trying every curse and blessing.*" Ezekiel's father character, a quiet yet powerful hero shaped by both cultural expectations and personal strength outshines the collective presence of the villagers.

These symbols are not accidental but are deeply tied to the cultural imagination that connects the natural world with spiritual and moral meaning. This communal bond is essential for understanding not just the specific crisis at hand, but also the cultural and social fabric that holds rural communities together. Nissim Ezekiel's "*Night of the Scorpion*" is deeply embedded in the speaker's memory of a traumatic event: witnessing his mother writhing in pain after being stung by a scorpion. While she suffers, the villagers and neighbours gather not with practical help, but with chants, superstitions, and speculations. They attribute their sufferings to the consequences of sins committed in a past life, suggesting that her present pain is a form of karmic retribution.

The setting reflects rural India, where education is not widespread and the primary means of survival are manual labour and agriculture. Within this socio-cultural framework, self diagnosis, faith-healing, and ritual take precedence over modern medicine. The community's readiness to spiritualize suffering



reflects a deeper cultural pattern: a tendency to accept adversity as fate or as the moral outcome of previous actions. Raymond William's concept of "*Structure of feeling*" helps explain how the villagers' collective understanding of suffering as punishment is not merely an individual belief but a shared cultural sentiment that defined the worldview of this rural community. This structure of feeling rooted in tradition and superstition, frames pain as deserved, connected to moral failings and reinforces the social order.

Furthermore, the belief in karma and the moral causality of suffering fits into William's idea of hegemony- the way dominant cultural ideologies are maintained and accepted as the unquestioned norm. The villagers' responses to the mother's suffering reflect how deeply ingrained cultural beliefs govern actions, emotions and even the interpretation of individual experiences. Through this lens Ezekiel's poem illustrates how cultural beliefs handed down through generations, shape perceptions of suffering, creating a collective worldview of how pain is understood and dealt with.

This belief system is deeply woven into the Indian cultural domain. From a young age we are conditioned to associate natural phenomena and physical anomalies with spiritual or moral significance. Thunderstorms are interpreted as the wrath of God, and a new born with polydactyly is often seen as an incarnation of a deity. These connection, passed down through generation, revealed the depth of how cultural narratives shape perception. I am reminded of a childhood experience: during a family journey, our car suddenly stopped in the middle of a deserted road. When I asked my uncle, who was driving, why he had paused despite the absence of traffic, he replied that a black cat had just crossed our path and we must wait until another vehicle passed by first. This reflects how traditional beliefs are upheld to justify behaviour. Such moments reflect how culture is not only inherited but also permeates our everyday actions, shaping thoughts, reactions, and social behaviour. In "*Night of the Scorpion*", Ezekiel captures a similar cultural atmosphere. Set in a rural Indian village, where traditional practices often challenge modern reasoning. The villagers' ritualistic chants and spiritual interpretation of the scorpion sting reflect a powerful dynamic between belief and rational medicine. The practice of placing the suffering mother in the centre of the room, encircling by onlookers who offer sympathetic but passive murmurs, can ironically increase distress. The cultural norm of visiting the sick in large groups, for instance may be less about support and more about social performance often disrupting the patient's rest with endless chatter rather than quiet compassion.

Overall, Ezekiel's "*Night of the Scorpion*" through the lens of cultural studies acts as a canvas to explore cultural explorations, beliefs, superstitions, and rationalism. Through this poem, he demonstrates how



cultural responses are deeply tied to the circumstances and environment in which they occur-what T.S Eliot would term as “*objective correlative*”. The title itself plays a significant role; the scorpion, though physically absent for most of the poem, becomes an omnipotent presence through the weight of its single sting. Just as the venom lingers for “*twenty hours*” before fading, so too does the cultural and emotional impact persist.

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