

Q: Analyse the conflict between superstition and reason in the poem 'Night of the Scorpion'.

Or,

Discuss Ezekiel's use of irony in the poem 'Night of the Scorpion'.

Or,

What aspect of Indian society does the poem 'Night of the Scorpion' highlight? Do the peasants evoke the poet's admiration or satire?

Ans. Nissim Ezekiel's 'Night of the Scorpion' is one of the most remarkable poems in the entire gamut of Indian English poetry/poems. The poem highlights a superstition-laden Indian society in a manner that is at once detached and appealing. The theme of the poem is commonplace. But it has been treated in an extra-ordinary manner. It is the manner of treatment of the theme that gives the poem a much deeper meaning.

The poem 'Night of the Scorpion' can be read as a revealing study in Indian culture which often thrives on superstitions. The poet narrates what happened to his mother when she was stung by a scorpion one rainy night. Like 'swarms of flies' the villagers came to her rescue. The way the villagers thronged the house reminds us of the traditional corporate life of the Indian villagers. Scientific medical treatment was still unknown to the village folk. Hence, they began to 'buzz' the name of God to ease the effect of the sting. Then they began to look for the scorpion. This was because they believed that the pain in the woman's blood kept moving with each movement of the scorpion. But nothing seemed to bear fruit. So, they thought the pain in the woman's body had to do something with / had some relation to the sins of her present or next life. Thus the whole situation strikes us as extremely ironical. The sense of this irony is intensified by the complacent looks of the villagers, who thought that they understood the tragic situation only too well.

The husband of the woman was a sceptic and rationalist. He did not share the views of the naïve villagers. Hence, he applied powder, mixture and herbs to the bitten spot. He also poured paraffin and put a match to it. Ironically, however, all his treatment also proved futile. It was only after a lapse of twenty hours that the pain naturally wore off and the woman heaved a sigh of relief. Even so, he did stand for reason unlike all others on the scene.

Ezekiel draws upon irony and contrast to explore the conflict between superstition and reason. The irony of the whole poem consists in what the peasants did to cure the woman and what they should actually have done. The streak /note of this irony runs through the images of the good and the evil, the images of light and darkness, and the juxtaposition of belief and reason.

It should, however, be noted that the poet takes a perfectly detached view of the situation. Just as he does not satirize those who are superstitious, so also he does not admire the one who stands for reason. He only views the situation as an onlooker. If he does anything, he only casts an ironical smile, as an onlooker, on one of the ever-so-common incidents within his society that feeds on superstitions.