

Rereading *Night of the Scorpion* to identify the male interpretation of a female character in a male dominated society

Abstract

Nissim Ezekiel is a Jewish Indian poet. His poem *night of the scorpion*, describes the events that happens after a mother got hurt by a scorpion bite. The poem is popular for celebrating a mother's caring emotion even when she is in pain. The research paper identifies why Nissim Ezekiel's poem, *night of the scorpion* is set an example for misinterpreting the gender roles in the patriarchal society. This study recognizes the tone of male discourse in presenting a female character in a literary work. The paper explains the cultural and religious impact on analyzing and interpreting the Jewish Indian writer Nissim Ezekiel's poem, *night of the scorpion*. The paper addresses the male patriarchal societies' habit of describing motherhood for its so called tolerance and suffering. The research paper identifies and proves the effortlessness of stating gender inequality as a part of culture and religion. The study discusses the effect of culturally taught male dominant society's ease approach to gender inequality is addressed as well.

Keywords

male discourse, misinterpretation of females, motherhood, religion, culture, patriarchy, gender inequality

Introduction

Nissim Ezekiel's poem, *night of the scorpion* has always been an example for the celebration of motherhood. The Indian culture describes the mother as *sarvam-saha* which means a person who is capable of bearing everything and enduring. The word is of Sanskrit origin and which has no masculine form. *sarvamsaha* (सर्वसह).—i. e. sarva + m -sah + a, I. adj. 1. All-sustaining. 2.

Patient, enduring. Ii. f. hā, The earth, Govardh. ĀryāSaptaśatī (www.wisdomlib.org). The Indian Jewish poet might have adopted the concept of sarvam-saha in his poem, *night of the scorpion*. And most of the critics analyzed and interpreted the poem following this concept. And the poem also depicts the male character as he is not expected to show his soft emotions in front of everyone.

Night of the Scorpion is a short poem written by Nissim Ezekiel in his poem collection. Through the poem, the poet depicts the struggles of an Indian mother who is stung by a scorpion. The whole poem shows the sufferings and struggles that she experiences when the scorpion bit her. On a rainy day, a scorpion enters the house and stings the mother of the family. The poet explains throughout the poem, the attitude of the community, the religious people, the priests and the family members towards the incident. People in and around the village interpret the incident with different perspectives. Some end up saying that she is suffering because of her past sins and some are of the view that this pain will reduce her sufferings that she needs to undergo in the future. The head of the family, her husband is busy running to find a means to protect her from this scenario and bring her back to life and children on the other hand are panic stricken and look at all the incidents happening around in an astonished way.

From the poem, it can be observed that, a male member of a patriarchal society conveniently accepts and follows the life around him ignoring the opposite gender's innate feeling of pain or basic needs. Nissim Ezekiel beautifully uses the language in his poem and selectively used vocabulary in his discourse to describe the so called divinity of motherhood. Being an expatriate in India, the writer might have received considerable opportunities to understand the tradition and practices of Hindu culture and Indian family life. Those understanding would have helped him to adopt the basic theme of the poem. The concept of mother in Indian family system is

depicted in the poem. The male writer is knowingly or unknowingly associates the *sarvam-saha* ideology to the female character in the poem. The housewife is expected to tolerate the associated emotional, physical and cultural assaults of the family life. Reeta Sonawat explains the sociocultural “*Regarding social values, mean scores of boys for the two statements namely "Women should tolerate ill treatment from her husband rather than going for divorce" and "Living together before marriage is essential" were found to be higher than girls' mean scores" (Sonawat, 2001).* The writer attributes the same quality to the female character in the poem.

When the male dominated and thus culturally justified society presents motherhood as the best and associates all struggles, and miseries to motherhood, the concept is naturally being transmitted through the culture and religion to the human minds. Even women don't understand that they are the subject to these inequalities. Moreover when the male critics analyze the poem, the female character in the poem, *night of the scorpion* is as described as woman with ill repute as well (Ganguly, 2011). The narrator of the poem refers the female character in the poem as his/her mother and the narrator talks about the father as well. So the woman in the poem, *night of the scorpion* is presented as a house wife who has a husband and children. So that she would not opt any dirty business for her living. So when a critic finds the reasons for her sufferings as her prostitution, it can be explained that she might have tried to satisfy her sensual needs (Ganguly, 2011). Even though Nissim Ezekiel is not giving any such hints in the poem, and when the critic's male discourse goes to an extent to associate such a reason for her sufferings, the critic clearly proves the effect of patriarchal domination in the society and how he is being a part of it.

Literature Review

“Motherhood is one of the great stages of womanhood, experienced by a woman herself and revered in all cultures, even the taboo of the phenomenon of unwed mother is diminishing. The Indian feminine divine tradition is centered around the concept of ‘The Mother’, with all its aspects of fertility, nurturing, caring and giving, as such the feminine divine is seen as supreme with all the attributes that are fundamental to human existence itself” (C. Nandagopal, 2019).

The art historian Choodamani Nandagopal details the beginning and establishment of the tradition of motherhood in her article. She observes that the divine quality is associated to motherhood in Indian tradition. The divinity of motherhood is being described by adding its responsibility of nurturing and growing the children and taking care of the house hold. A woman’s world is her home. A famous rap band of India known as Oorali Band once performed a song on the stage which means that, “don’t try to lock the women saying that they mother or goddess”. It means that while attributing the so called qualities of mother and divinity of goddess, women are being subject to inequality. The hinduwebsite.com describes that Hind religion is a patriarchal religion alike the other major religions. The website says*“Generally speaking, the Vedas placed comparatively greater duties and responsibilities upon men and exhorted women to help their men in performing such duties. Any respect that women enjoyed in society were as daughters, mothers and wives.....This is evident from the division of duties prescribed by the scriptures between a man and a woman. A husband has wider obligatory duties than his wife. In fact, the Vedic ceremonies and sacrifices revolve around men. They are performed by men for men. If women are involved, it is usually for conception or procreation where again the emphasis is upon male children. Women cannot officiate in any Vedic ceremony. They may perform domestic rituals such as puja or perform austerities, but the host of a sacrifice*

is always a male member” ([//www.hinduwebsite.com/](http://www.hinduwebsite.com/)). By assigning duties of worshipping the supreme power to men and the responsibilities to assist the men to women, the culture defined the role women in the community. So even though bearing the Godly nature women receive the *sarvam-saha* face along with seconding position.

Dr. Omana Antony opines that “*the dominating features of Ezekiel poems are the quest for identity, Indianism, spirituality and the reality of Indian life. In all his creative works he was very keen to select Indian situations and present them with a purely Indian attitude*”. (Antony, 2012). Being a resident in India there was a possibility for the writer to experience the cultural and societal practices of Indian family life. That would be the reason made the writer to adopt the subject of the poem. The poem, *night of the scorpion* is a perfect example for portraying the Indian lower class family life in a village during Ezekiel’s time. From Dr. Omana Antony’s point of view, it can be argued that being a male writer Ezekiel rendered the Indian life through his writing however his discourse was not enough to explicate the Indian woman’s (any woman’s) emotions.

Santanu Ganguly in his appreciation of the poem, *night of the scorpion*, presented a totally different interpretation of the female character in the poem. Pronouncing the ‘mother’ in the poem as a lady with ill reputation, Santanu Ganguly’s study *In Flesh and Blood: Reinterpreting Ezekiel’s “Night of the Scorpion”* depicts how far a male dominated society uses the male discourse to describe a woman’s struggle.

Research Methodology

“Feminist theory encompasses a range of ideas, reflecting the diversity of women worldwide. Feminism counters traditional philosophy with new ways of addressing issues affecting

humanity, calling for the replacement of the presiding patriarchal order with a system that emphasizes equal rights, justice, and fairness. Liberal feminists cite women's oppression as rooted in social, political, and legal constraints” (R. Tong, 2001). Feminist theory addresses not only the gender inequality but also it discusses how the patriarchal society through the culture and religion justified gender inequality and made it a normal practice to be followed. Feminist theory deals with the identification and effect of male discourse in primary and secondary sources. It provides a context to study the literary work to identify and explain the women’s status in any community.

The current research paper identifies the power of male discourse in presenting, persuading and interpreting the status of female in the society and warning the after effects of crossing the boundaries set by the male dominated religion, culture and society together for the women using the feminist theory.

The feminist approach provided the array of contexts such as selection of vocabulary, usages, concepts etc. to identify the influences of male centered Indian Hindu society’s conventional life style in Ezekiel’ language. Even after seeing the struggles caused by the scorpion’s sting to the woman in the poem firstly the neighbors criticize her for sins she might have committed. So the reasons for women’s tussles always become their disobedience to the male dominated society’s rules. And the neighbors again tried to console her by saying the possibilities of having a peaceful rebirth because of the current dilemma she was experiencing. So in either way, the miseries she was having were justified. And the father figure in the poem was forced not to express any soft feeling while his partner was in pain. His agitated tries to cure the wife with his little knowledge of medicine would be the expression of his care or his worry to be abandoned with the huge responsibilities which were handled by his wife. More interestingly and ironically

when a male reader interpreted the poem which was popular for the celebration of motherhood, the mother was attributed with prostitution. And the prostitution is not for the livelihood too.

The gender inequality and justification of gender inequality in real life and literature were questioned by feminism. So that the feminist theory facilitated the selecting, analyzing and discussing the aspects of male discourse related the poem, *night of the scorpion* and its interpretation.

Result and Discussion

The study found out that the male discourse practices enjoying the convenience of living with the freedom was given by the male dominated culture and religion. While creating literature and by interpreting literature the male discourse tries to keep the given prestigious status to the male members of the society even though it can be accessed mostly by oppressing females and ignoring their rights.

“Nissim Ezekiel was a poet of human relationships and his major style of writing lies in creating images of women as a coy damsel, a submissive mistress, a lady of a house or a caring and compassionate mother”. (M.Goel, 2017). The poem *Night of the Scorpion* was published in the book entitled *“The Exact Name”* in 1965 and it mainly focuses on the theme of motherhood and compassion expressing the Indian receptivity of motherhood. *“The inequality between sexes has been vying attention of the scholars.”* (R.K Verma, 2012) The poem, *night of the scorpion* expresses the poet’s portrayal of mother as an entity of pain and expressing love through pain. As a male writer, the poet tries an attempt to bring in the concept of inequality, by representing the greatness of womanhood in regards to the sufferings that she undertakes in the life.

“From several years, women are seen as weaker than men.” (Divya and Aswathi, 2019). Even though the gender equality campaigns and liberty programs are being held throughout the world in the contemporary society, the stereotypical norms of considering women as equal to men is an institutional belief prevailing in the society since ages. According to Santanu Ganguly, in his study of *night of the scorpion*, he describes the reason for the mothers sufferings are the illegal relationships the mother might have had in her life. The two viewpoints has been provided by male writers, the poet highlights the greatness of women only when she suffers and the researcher focus on depicting the same character will negative reputation. Gender parity has been taken as a prominent theme by many authors and writers in all genres of literature. However, this equality has never been obtained by women even after the concept being old.

“Male dominated society will force their thinking upon women, and they conclude that patience is the most required quality of a woman.” (Divya and Aswathi, 2009). The institutionalized society lives with a predetermined faith and rule and is not ready to break this barrier, when it comes to their own society, family, religion, culture and faith. *In ancient era, society treated women as angelic figures, innocent, physically weaker and nothing less than household commodities.*” (Divya and Aswathi, 2009) Even though a few revolutions took place whilst the appearance of the male authors portraying memorable heroines in their works, the male patriarchy or the thoughts sprouting in the male authors always devoted females either as strange mystiques associated with the power of suffering.

Considering the poem, *night of the scorpion*, written by the Jewish Indian poet, Nissim Ezekiel, the poet focuses on the concept of a caring, protective mother who risks her life for her children. This is evident from the below quoted lines from the poem, where the author indirectly points out the fact that as a mother, she needs to be someone who protects and takes risks.

“My mother only said

Thank God the scorpion picked on me

And spared my children.” (Ezekiel, 46-48)

From the above lines of poem, we can see the pre-established set of rules prevalent in the patriarchal society. As per the poet, as a mother she has to undergo miseries for the wellbeing of her family. Although the author intends to support women through his writings, he indirectly falls to the preset cultures and traditions set by the patriarchy where being a woman equals to pain and misery.

On a deeper analysis to other parts of the poem, we can see the society in the role, who carries certain established belief that women in midst of every other humiliations from the society are mere instruments who needs to suffer in silence.

“May the sins of your previous birth

be burned away tonight, they said.” (Ezekiel, 19-20)

The society doesn't focus or shows concerns about the struggle or discomfort that a woman is undergoing, rather they relate it with her sins that she has committed in her previous birth. Ultimately, we can reciprocate that poet relates woman as a being who has committed sins because of which she suffers at present.

“May your suffering decrease

the misfortunes of your next birth, they said.” (Ezekiel, 21-22)

Throughout the poem, the poet stresses on the sufferings of women and points on the fact that she is someone who should live through these sufferings, whether it be past, present or future. According to the traditional norms, the miseries of a woman or the life of a woman can be directly read as a genre of tragic novel where they are subjected to humiliations, violations and sufferings right from the day they are born till they pass on to tranquility. The common response that we get from the society regarding the same is that woman has power to tolerate. They can bear pain and they need to put up with all these aches in life as they belong to the so called category “Female”.

Conclusion

The study addresses the impact of male discourse by reading Nissim Ezekiel’s poem, *night of the scorpion* and its interpretation by male critics. It also gives valid context to discuss the comfortable life of men to an extent in the patriarchal society and the distresses with rationalization imposed to women in the same society. But the study doesn’t look deeper into the effect of the unwritten rules to restrict the men from expressing their emotions in public in the conventional community. The poem can be studied and analyzed to explicate the transition of divinity of motherhood to struggles of motherhood.

The feminist reading of the poem, *night of the scorpion* assisted to identify the functioning of male discourse in the Indian Hindu community and its role in defining the females’ position in the community. The poet’s language sets an example of the power of the influences apportioned by the community to a human being who is not a part of the society. Even in the post-modern era, when a male criticizes the poem, the patriarchal societal practices’ impacts made him substantiate the mother figure’s struggle for her sensual crimes. The male dominated society

approves the male discourse which defines the ideal woman, which trains her to live, and which evaluates her life.

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