

## *Critics on the Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel*

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### **Some of T.R. Sharma's Comments on Ezekiel's Poetry**

The scholarly critic (T.R. Sharma) says that Nissim Ezekiel's poetry is the record of his confrontation with the tension between opposites. These opposites are an emotional involvement in life and a desire for detachment from it, a sensuous perception of the tangible world and a spiritual abstraction out of the tangible world, a powerful desire for prayer and a temptation to indulge in irony, a passion for this world and a hankering for the world beyond. Ezekiel tries to juxtapose poetry, art, and life in order to bring about a harmony between the inner life and the outer world. He tries to use the poetic art as a means to get the most out of his feeling of alienation which is basic to his experience of life and, therefore, to his poetry also. In a poem entitled *Poetry* he expresses a view of poetry which shows that he is not a mere romantic dreamer. His poems show, on the one hand, his philosophical-existential quest of the moral self for the meaning of life and, on the other hand, a poetic quest for the meaning of poetry. He moves between these two aims. There is a face-to-face confrontation between his moral self and his poetic self. The poems entitled, *The Communication* and *The Worm* show this clearly. His attitude towards women also shows the same thing. He quite often feels that a woman is an unavoidable need of life but is, at the same time, a threat to the spiritual journey of the poetic self. The poem entitled *To a Certain Lady* shows the tension of the poetic self. For Ezekiel the only way for an escape from the painful realities of the man-woman relationship is to bring about a synthesis of sex and meditation.

### **Sharwan Sharma's Observations**

Another critic (Sharwan Sharma) points out that Nissim Ezekiel is one of the foremost Indian poets writing in the English language. Ezekiel's poetry is a quest for identity, commitment, and harmony in life. He may be described as an endless explorer of the labyrinths of the mind. That being so, disillusionment has inevitably become one of the dominant themes of Ezekiel's poetry. A quest of the kind undertaken by Ezekiel would naturally lead to a feeling of disillusionment and a feeling of spiritual emptiness. In all his volumes of poetry including the "Hymns in Darkness" (published in 1976), Ezekiel has explored the same theme and expressed a longing for the perfection of the human personality the traits of which have not been named by him in specific terms. Ezekiel's feeling of complete disillusionment finds expression in such lines as the following:

His past like a muddy pool  
From which he cannot hope for words.

(3)

### **Urmila Varma's View of Ezekiel as a Poet of the City**

Urmila Varma has emphasized the urban bias of Ezekiel's poetry. She draws our attention to the fact that the city figures prominently in Ezekiel's poetry and that he depicts the urban scene in a realistic manner, stripping it of its glamour. Ezekiel is essentially a poet of the city, and the city he describes is Bombay. He does not by any means give us a flattering picture of the sights to be seen in Bombay and the people one comes across there. This city, he believes, is a sick city, and the people here are sick too. In fact, this city seems to be having a death-wish. It is a poverty-stricken, barbaric city afflicted by slums, noisy hawkers, and beggars asking for charity in loud voices. It is a city where posters sell health and happiness in bottles; and it is a city where people find themselves directionless and therefore feel lost.

### **Brahama Dutta Sharma's View**

Ezekiel has not only made a name for himself as a poet but has also contributed significantly to make Indo-English poetry a force to reckon with. He is a poet whose Indianness and also anti-Indianness have lent a special interest to the work of a Jew who is a foreigner settled permanently in this country (in the metropolitan city of Bombay). He has exposed in his poems the follies, foibles, weaknesses, and deficiencies of the Indians. The weaknesses, which he has exposed, include their clinging to superstitions, their inability to tackle their problems efficiently, their belief that they are spiritually enlightened when actually they are not, and their use of the English language in a ridiculously defective manner. He has made use of his gifts of wit, irony, and humour to expose the absurdities and the faults of the Indian people. However, his purpose in writing poems of this kind was not only to ridicule and mock at the people of this country but also to bring about an improvement in their behaviour and their habits. Thus his satirical poems about the Indian people have a reformatory aim; and that illustrates the constructive aspect of his disapproval, his criticism, and his condemnation of the way in which the Indians live and behave.

### **Some Important Points Made by G. Damodar**

According to G. Damodar, Ezekiel enjoys a unique place among the Indian poets in English because of his Jewish background. Ezekiel, says this critic, belongs to a Bene-Israeli sect but was born and brought up in India, with a long Jewish ancestry. He makes an attempt, particularly in his later poetry, to understand India's past; and his Jewish background does not come in his way. To him, poetry is a way of life, a continuous flow that is inextricably related to his existence in his beloved city. G. Damodar also expresses the view that Ezekiel is deeply committed to the city of Bombay and in an autobiographic poem entitled *The Island*, he has written: "I cannot leave the Island/I was born here and belong." In another poem he has written: "Confiscate my passport Lord/I don't want to go abroad/Let me find my song/Where I belong". Many of Ezekiel's poems, like *Urban*, *Jamini Roy*,

and *Jewish Wedding in Bombay* are generalizations from his own intimately-felt experiences. Such poems as *In the Country Cottage*, *Poverty Poem*, *Night of the Scorpion*, and *In India* show Ezekiel's desire to strike his roots in the reality which is the meaningful centre of Indian life. The typical strength of his poetry arises from the fact that he has his ideas firmly related to contemporary Indian realities. G. Damodar makes another important point when he says that Ezekiel's groping for an identity appears at times to reflect an East-West dichotomy in his mind, though at a deeper level he is pitted against his environment. The sordidness and the misery of this environment have aroused his passionate sympathies. For him, Bombay, the mini-India of today, is a meeting-place of East and West.

### **The Theme of Alienation in Ezekiel's Poetry as Viewed by M.K. Naik**

M.K. Naik emphasizes the theme of alienation in Nissim Ezekiel's poetry. Ezekiel, says this critic, is not only alienated from his Indian environment but also from his own minority religious ethos. Ezekiel's alienation from Indian environment began very early in his life when he was yet a student at school. His autobiographical poem, *Background*, Casually clearly reveals his antipathy to that environment where he found himself "a mugging Jew among the wolves/They told me I had killed Christ." M.K. Naik also points out the persistent sense of failure and a spirit of despair which resulted from Ezekiel's feeling of alienation and which envelops much of his early poetry before he found an easy consolation in social satire as a possible antidote. His "Latter-Day Psalms" offer a direct criticism of modern life and civilization. M.K. Naik feels that Ezekiel has not succeeded fully in transforming his alienational experience into any major poetic utterances, except occasionally as in *Night of the Scorpion*.

### **Some More Observations Made by Brahma Dutta Sharma**

Brahma Dutta Sharma says that, in poems like *In India*, Ezekiel has drawn his readers' attention to the problems of poverty, the ill-treatment meted out to women, and the like in this country, and has shown that in the cities of this country poor people are living in terrible misery as many of them are without jobs and have to earn their bread by begging. The poor do not have any proper housing facilities so that they have to sleep on the pavements or to live in hutments and slums. When Ezekiel talks of "burnt-out mothers" in this poem (*In India*), he is perhaps referring to the cruel incidents of burning widows or brides for not having brought from their parents as much dowry as the in-laws expected. When he speaks of "frightened virgins" in the same poem, he is perhaps referring to the incidents of eve-teasing and outraging the modesty of young girls.

### **An Exposure of the Follies and Deficiencies of the Indians**

The same critic also draws our attention to the way in which Ezekiel has exposed the follies and deficiencies of the Indian people to ridicule in his poems. In the poem entitled *The Truth About the Floods*, Ezekiel has

ridiculed some students for distributing biscuits among the flood-affected villages and getting themselves photographed while doing so in order to publicize what they regard as their spirit of social service. Ezekiel has also derided Government officials in the same poem and shown them as being totally indifferent to the Indian masses. And this critic cites several other examples of poems in which Ezekiel has wittily exposed the many faults and shortcomings of the Indian people including the failure of most Indians to have learnt the proper use of the English language.

#### **Prem P. Kapoor's Comment on Ezekiel's Self-Exploration**

Prem P. Kapoor speaks of the theme of self-exploration in Ezekiel's poetry. In the early poem *Background, Casually*, Ezekiel asks a self-searching question: "Could I, perhaps, be rabbi-saint?"; and the answer is: "The more I searched, the less I found". *Island* is another poem in which we find the same search for the self leading to a resigned acceptance of the environment in which Ezekiel was born; and self-exploration is very much in evidence in the poem entitled *London*, says Prem Kapoor, adding that the persona in Ezekiel's poetry keeps searching and probing the innermost recesses of his self. Prem Kapoor then quotes Linda Hess as having said that Ezekiel is an endless explorer of the labyrinths of the mind and of the devious delvings and twistings of the ego. Prem Kapoor also quotes H.M. Williams who regards Ezekiel's poems as experiments in which the author seeks to dive deep into the psyche, particularly into his own psyche.

#### **R.S. Pathak's Praise of Ezekiel's Craftsmanship**

R.S. Pathak speaks of Ezekiel's constant quest for a poetic idiom for the writing of his poems. Ezekiel, says Pathak, is obsessed with "words as fresh as women's eyes", and with the quest for the right idiom. In one of his poems Ezekiel seeks God's blessings to be able to write "not only a new poem but new poetry by a new man." In more respects than one, says Pathak, Ezekiel's journey as a poet is synonymous with his quest for the "word". Pathak pays a tribute to Ezekiel for being probably the first Indian poet writing in English to show consistently that craftsmanship is as important to a poem as its subject-matter. Form to Ezekiel is not a dress, a manner, or a style, but an organic, integrated blend of all the elements that go into the making of a poem.

## *An Exhaustive, Critical Review of Some Important Poems*

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### 1. "ENTERPRISE"

#### I. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

This poem appeared in Nissim Ezekiel's fourth volume of poems which was first published in 1960 and, in its second edition, in 1965, under the heading "The Unfinished Man". Here we have an allegorical poem, that is, a poem which, apart from its surface meaning, has a meaning below the surface. R. Parthasarthy, himself a poet, says that Ezekiel's poetry is the work of a keen, analytical mind trying to explore, and communicate, on a personal level, feelings of loss and deprivation. Nissim Ezekiel himself said that scores of his poems were written for his personal, therapeutic purposes (that is, for purposes of giving an outlet to his morbid feelings and unpleasant thoughts in order to find relief and comfort). One such poem is *Enterprise*. In this poem a situation is examined with ironic detachment in the hope that it would offer the writer with a release for his pent-up feelings.

#### II. A SUMMARY OF THE POEM

##### **The Commencement of a Sacred Journey by a Group of Men**

A group of men, including, of course, the poet (as is evident from the use of the first person pronoun "we") set out on a pilgrimage. They have a noble purpose behind their enterprise of undertaking this sacred journey which seems to hold out no difficulties or hurdles in their way. But very soon after having travelled some distance, they begin to find the journey to be somewhat unproductive and definitely laborious, with the sun scorching them with its heat. Even so, the travellers are able to continue the journey courageously and hopefully, taking down plentiful notes and recording their observations. They observe, and write down, what the peasants were selling and buying; and they similarly observe and record the behaviour of animals like serpents and goats whom they see on the way. They observe and write down what they witness in the three cities where a seer or a wise man had delivered religious discourses to the people.

##### **The Defection of the Best Man Among the Travellers**

But then differences arise among the travellers as to how to cross a sandy tract which they come across. At this point one of them, who has the gift of writing excellent prose, develops such differences with the others that he leaves them. He was the best man in the whole group; and his desertion means a deep disappointment and dismay for the remaining ones.

### Another Stage in the Adventurous Journey

Another stage in the adventurous journey is reached when the travellers are attacked, not once, but twice, and when they lose their way. A section of the group claim their freedom of action and express their wish to leave the group. The poet tries to pray for the success of their mission, while the leader of the group says that they are nearing the sea. The members of the group notice nothing remarkable as they go onwards. But now they are only a small crowd of persons having no hope. They do not pay any heed even to the thunder which had a certain significance but which has now become meaningless to them. They are all feeling exhausted by the journey, and some of them cannot even stand erect. They do not even have some of the necessities of life like soap.

### A Sense of Futility at the End

At last, they reach their destination. But now they do not even know the purpose which has taken them there. The journey has brought only dismay and disappointment to each one of them, and their faces bear clear signs of their bewilderment. They feel that their deeds were neither heroic nor unusual in any way. Then they come to the conclusion that home is the only place where they could enjoy any grace (or any serenity or any peace of mind).

## III. NOTES AND EXPLANATIONS

### Stanza 1 (Lines 1-5)

**A pilgrimage**—a sacred journey; a journey to a holy place.

**Exalting**—uplifting; elevating, ennobling. **And making all/The burdens light**—and making all the difficulties of the journey seem to be very easy to overcome.

**The second stage/Explored but did not test the call**—The first stage of the journey was its commencement. As the travellers were full of courage and hope at that time, their second stage was soon reached; but this second stage did not put their courage and hope to test. They did begin to feel the rigours of the journey, but their hope and courage were not in any way damped.

**Explanation. The sun beat down to match our rage (Line 5)**—The heat of the sun was intense and the travellers began to feel most uneasy and uncomfortable because of it. The heat of the sun was as intense as was their enthusiasm. In other words, the difficulties of the journey and the enthusiasm of the travellers were equally balanced at this time, so that they did not feel too discouraged. The word "rage" has here been used to mean frenzy or ardour or fervour or enthusiasm.

### Stanza 2 (Lines 6-10)

**We stood it very well**—The travellers faced the difficulties of the journey bravely.

**Observed**—made their observations; took notice of whatever fell on the way. **Put down**—wrote down. **Copious**—plentiful; abundant.

**Things the peasants sold and bought**—the commodities which were being sold by the peasants and the commodities which they were buying.

**The way of serpents and of goats**—the habits or the behaviour of creatures like the serpents and the goats.

**Three cities where a sage had taught**—The travellers also passed through three cities where a wise man had delivered philosophical discourses to the people.

**Note:** This account (in lines 6-10) has its surface meaning and also its hidden or allegorical significance. The hidden meaning is that the travellers went on gathering knowledge and information about various matters and about the people and other living creatures whom they met in the course of the journey. Even the word "journey" has its hidden meaning. The journey here means one's experiences in life; and the group of persons here refers to people joining one another in a co-operative effort to add to their knowledge and learning. The journey is here spoken of as a journey to a sacred place; but the allegorical meaning of the word "journey" is the intellectual pursuits by a community of men who undertake the enterprise of collecting knowledge and information for their own good and for the good of the people at large.

### Stanza 3 (Lines 11-15)

**A desert patch**—a sandy tract of land. Allegorically this phrase means a tough problem which the men of intellect have to face and over which differences of opinion arise among them.

**We lost a friend**—One of the travellers parts company with the rest of the group because of his differences with them. This defection proves a great loss to the others because this man was a scholar who wrote excellent prose. He was the best scholar of the whole group.

**Explanation. A shadow falls on us and grows (line 15)**—The best scholar of the whole group having parted company with the others, a cloud seems to have descended upon the others; and this cloud goes on becoming bigger and bigger. The allegorical meaning here is that, with the defection of the most talented man among them, the others find that their task has now become more arduous. At this point in their studies and researches, this group of intellectuals begin to feel discouraged by the difficulties of their task; and the feeling of their incapacity to grapple with their problems has become stronger.

### Stanza 4-5 (Lines 16-25)

**Explanation. Another phase was reached.....smelt the sea (lines 16-20)**—When the next stage of the journey was reached, the travellers were attacked twice and, in their efforts to save themselves from being robbed and killed, they even lost their way. As the differences among them had also now become more pronounced, some of them claimed the right to follow their own inclinations and, exercising their right of the freedom of action, they forsook the main group. The author did not take sides but was able to maintain his balance of mind and his composure. In that state of mind, he

ardently wished that the divisions among the travellers should not hurt their noble cause. The leader of the group was also able to retain his reasonableness, and he tried to raise the spirits of the others by telling them that they were now approaching the sea, and that no purpose would be served by their disagreements and their squabbles. He tried to maintain the unity of the group. Metaphorically, of course, these lines mean that disagreements and clashes of opinion retard intellectual progress and the discovery of new knowledge. A common intellectual endeavour would come to nothing if the partners in an enterprise fall out with one another, each asserting that his point of view is the right one.

**Straggling**—remaining behind while others have gone ahead. A **straggling crowd of little hope**—Those travellers, who continued the journey after the others had left them, now found themselves to be a small crowd having little hope of achieving any success in their enterprise. They felt that they had failed to maintain the speed and the pace necessary for the achievement of their purpose.

**What the thunder meant**—The remaining travellers now paid no heed even to the roar of thunder which certainly possessed some significance but which these remaining travellers could not understand because some of the best scholars and seers among them had deserted them.

#### Stanza 6 (Lines 26-30)

**The trip**—the journey; the trek. **Had darkened every face**—had brought an expression of disappointment and frustration to the face of each one of the travellers.

**Explanation. Our deeds were neither great nor rare (line 29)**—The traveller, discovered, to their dismay and their shame, that they had achieved very little and that there was nothing heroic about their achievement. Thus the enterprise has come to nothing; and the travellers at the end experience only a sense of futility.

**Explanation. Home is where we have to gather grace (line 30)**—This closing line of the poem means that there is no point in undertaking a long journey to reach a certain destination, and that it is better to stay on at home where grace may be found. This line is ambiguous. It may mean that noble purposes can be achieved without undertaking ambitious and high-sounding projects. On a deeper level, this line means that it is impossible for people to remain united or to pursue a noble purpose collectively and in a co-operative spirit because of the ego of the various persons who begin to think themselves more important than the others so that the whole enterprise collapses.

#### IV. SOME CRITICAL OPINIONS

**Commenting on this poem, a critic (Chetan Karnani) writes:** “*Enterprise* is another fine poem which shows his lyrical gift of expression. Written as a generalized allegory of the pilgrimage theme, it treats a journey



as a metaphor for life. In this journey, the poet talks about the various bickerings that lead to a sense of futility. A group of persons go to a primitive hinterland and take copious notes. But differences crop up on how to cross a desert patch. This leads to divisions within the group. After this, the journey loses its symbolic significance and becomes merely topographical. The urge and the enthusiasm for the inner meaning wear out. At the end, there is complete disillusionment. The final stanza raises the question: "Was the journey worth all that struggle?"

**Here is the view of another critic (Srinivasa Iyengar):** "In a sense, of course, it's man's destiny to be for ever evolving, and hence to be unfinished. There is a movement, a growth; something is gained but something is lost also. If the intellect acquires a sharper edge, something else—perhaps imagination, perhaps hope or self-confidence—suffers in consequence. Between the emotion and the act, falls the shadow, and so poems like *Enterprise* become images of frustration; the pilgrimage becomes a weary trek by the time the goal is reached."

## 2. "PHILOSOPHY"

### I. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

*Philosophy* appeared in Nissim Ezekiel's fifth volume of poems which was published in 1965 under the title of "The Exact Name". It is one of Ezekiel's most abstract poems. Ezekiel is certainly interested in the real world of human beings and in the familiar manifestations of human natures, as also in human inter-relationships. But one of Ezekiel's basic concerns has always been philosophy or the speculations of the human mind. Ezekiel had become interested in philosophy and philosophical speculations quite early in his life so that, when he was living in the basement of a house in London, he declared in one of his poems that his three companions at that time were philosophy, poverty, and poetry. His interest in philosophy continued in his subsequent life; and that is why this poem begins with the line: "There is a place to which I often go". Although he recognizes the value of philosophy, and of science too, he feels that poetry is even more valuable.

### II. A SUMMARY OF THE POEM

#### The Poet's Strong Interest in Philosophy

The poet often studies philosophy and indulges in philosophical speculations, and he does so, not according to any pre-conceived plan, but naturally, as if propelled by an urge from within himself. On such occasions he tears himself away from his physical environment, and enters a sphere which is governed by the ways and rules of philosophy. The poet knows that philosophy employs the method of logic and reasoning and that this is a method which is "cold" because it is totally devoid of any emotion. In this sphere there is no dearth of ideas. Philosophers are by no means slow in producing new ideas and theories about this universe.

### **The Limited Value of Science**

The science of geology, says the poet, throws considerable light on the nature and history of the earth which in pre-historic times was nothing but mud, though the earth subsequently underwent many changes and is therefore now vastly different from what it originally was. Furthermore, the evolutionary process is always at work and, in the course of this process, numerous new stars came into existence and they all went out of existence. The poet goes on to say that all the changes and the convulsions, which this earth has undergone, do make a strong impact on the human mind which experiences many agitations because of them. But the poet regards all those changes and convulsions as no more significant than a momentary shutting of our eyes which we open again.

### **The Inadequacy of Philosophy and Science to Explain All the Mysteries**

Philosophy as well as science provides us with much knowledge about this universe. Philosophy does so through its speculations and its method of cold reasoning and logic, while science does so through its cold and unemotional researches. But philosophy and science leave many things unexplained, with the result that our minds struggle and strive painfully to get at some formula which can solve the mysteries of the human mind and human nature. The poet rejects the clear-cut answers which philosophy and science give to our questions because, in the poet's view, philosophy and science are simply incapable of explaining certain things and because they should, therefore, not try to explain those matters.

### **The Language of the Senses or the Language Employed in the Writing of Poetry**

There is a language, says the poet, which is not the language of philosophy or science. This is the language of the senses; and this language is employed in the writing of poetry to deal with those matters which are beyond the scope of philosophy and science. Poetry deals with common things; and the treatment of common things by poetry shows the ineffectiveness of philosophy and science to deal with these matters. As compared with the method of poetry, the methods employed by philosophy and science are like dead bodies which are in no way helpful in throwing light on the mysteries puzzling mankind. Philosophy and science adopt the methods of logic and reasoning which are unemotional, while poetry employs the vibrant method of an emotional treatment of common things which are the real substance and fabric of poetry.

## **III. NOTES AND EXPLANATIONS**

### **Stanza 1 (Lines 1-5)**

**A cold/Lucidity**—the clarity which has a chilling effect on a person. The reference here is to philosophy and logic in which the reasoning is unemotional and, therefore, cold.

**Here**—in the sphere of philosophy and logic. **The mills of God**—the workshops and the factories run by God. The reference here is to the human mind which is constantly engaged in thinking and producing new ideas. The mind of man is here metaphorically called “the mills of God” because the human mind is a creation of God; and because all human thinking has a divine origin and is all the time inspired by a divine power. **Are never slow**—remain constantly active and quick in their operation. The idea here is that the minds of philosophers remain ever-active and ever-prompt in their thinking and in giving new ideas to the world.

### Stanza 2 (Lines 6-10)

**Geologic**—pertaining to geology which is the science dealing with the nature and history of the earth and its evolution from its original condition to its present condition.

**Quintessential**—basic; fundamental and indispensable. **Slime**—mud.

**Explanation. The landscape.....slime (lines 6-7)**—The geologist remains busy in his researches into the origin of the earth and the evolutionary process which the earth has been undergoing. The original condition of the earth was far different from what its present shape and nature is. The earth must have been all mud in the beginning, but now it has become a solid mass. Thus geology explores the nature of the earth and offers its discoveries to us for our enlightenment.

**Explanation. A million stars are blotted out (line 8)**—Science tells us that, in the course of the evolutionary process, numerous stars came into existence and went out of existence. Thus science enlightens us about the evolutionary process to which man owes his own emergence in this universe.

**Each historic passion**—every explosion and every cataclysmic disturbance in the course of the evolutionary process. **As a blink**—as a quick shutting of the eyes which are then reopened; as something extremely rapid or fleeting.

**The sad eye of Time**—Time is here personified; and Time is then imagined as feeling sad at the quick disappearance of numerous stars and the fleeting nature of the convulsions which the earth has experienced.

**Explanation. I think.....sad eye of Time (lines 6-10)**—The poet thinks that every convulsion of the earth in the course of the evolutionary process was a fleeting phenomenon, and a phenomenon which must have made Time feel sorry because of the momentary duration of that convulsion. In this stanza (lines 6-10) the poet has depicted the changes which have been taking place in the shape and the nature of the earth, and in the universe as a whole in the course of the centuries. Thus the poet has, in these lines, described the discoveries of science. Science has done a good deal to enlighten the human mind about the nature of the universe in which man lives.

**Stanza 3 (Lines 11-15)**

**Residues**—what is left after the major part of something has been removed. **Residues of meaning**—the significance of things which remain after the most substantial and the most important part has been taken away. The idea here is that, after we have put aside the knowledge which philosophy and science have provided us with, much significance still remains behind to be explored (and this task is performed by poetry).

**Darkest myths**—stories and legends whose meaning remains shrouded in mystery even after philosophy and science have provided us with answers to many of our questions. **Meander**—wander; float.

**A final formula of light**—a way of achieving the final solution of the mysteries of this universe and of human nature.

**Explanation. What residues of meaning.....do not explain (lines 11-15)**—After philosophy and science have explained the mysteries of this universe, something still remains to be explained. After we have grasped the explanations of the mysteries of the universe as provided to us by philosophy and science, we yet continue to be puzzled by certain aspects of this universe, and we then painfully struggle to find a clue to the remaining secrets of this universe. Speaking for himself, the poet says that he is not prepared to accept the explanations provided by philosophy and science as full and final, and that he is of the view that philosophy and science or any other branch of human learning should refrain from trying to explain what they cannot really explain. Certain secrets of the universe, of the earth, and of the sky, and the mysteries of human nature, can be explained only by poetry.

**Stanza 4 (Lines 16-20)**

**Mundane**—worldly; earthly, as distinguished from spiritual or heavenly.

**The nakedness**—the bareness; the conclusions which philosophy arrives at after having probed the outer surface of things.

**That dies of cold**—which proves to be totally ineffective because of its cold logic and unemotional reasoning. The idea is that philosophy relies on logic or rational methods of investigation but that these methods are cold and unemotional and, therefore, inadequate to solve all the mysteries of the universe and, more particularly, of human nature.

**IV. COMPLETE PARAPHRASE****Stanza 1 (Lines 1-5)**

I often seek the help of philosophy to get at the truth behind the mysteries of this universe; and I seek this help not by forming any design to do so but naturally and spontaneously. On such occasions, I simply move away from my physical environment and from all worldly interests; and then, employing the method of cold logic and reasoning, try to solve the mysteries. In this sphere of logic and philosophy, nobody can use his own discretion

because here philosophy is a sovereign power and because philosophy is never slow to provide new ideas and new theories regarding the enigmas which the universe confronts us with.

### **Stanza 2 (Lines 6-10)**

The science of geology deals with the nature and history of this earth; and geology is able to probe the mysteries of the earth through its researches and is able to take us to the time when the earth was nothing but mud which, indeed, is the basic nature of the earth though it has become something different from mud now. Numerous new stars came into existence in the course of the centuries of evolution; and then they went out of existence in the course of time. We feel agitated by many passions when we think of the convulsions and the changes which the earth and other planets have experienced; but each phase of the evolutionary process is, in my view, nothing more than a passing or fleeting phase like the momentary shutting and opening of our eyes. Each step in the evolutionary process represents a phase, which certainly gives rise to a certain regret in our minds, but which was inevitable in the course of the passing of time.

### **Stanza 3 (Lines 11-15)**

After philosophy and science have explained the mysteries of this universe in their own ways, something yet remains to be explained. Philosophy and science are unable to throw any light on certain aspects of this universe, and, more particularly, on the various aspects of human life and human nature. The result is that, after we have studied the explanations provided by philosophy and science, we find our minds struggling and striving laboriously to reach the final solution of the problems with which we are still faced. I too am one of those who refuse to accept the clear and unambiguous conclusions of philosophy and science as being adequate. I am of the view that, what is beyond the scope of philosophy and science, should be left alone by them. (Philosophy and science should not try to explain what they are unable to explain).

### **Stanza 4 (Lines 16-20)**

There is a language which is the language of the common people and which is the language of the senses as distinguished from the technical language of logic and philosophy and of science. This language of the senses or of the emotions offers to us its own explanations of the mysteries of the world of human nature. (This is the language which poetry employs). Poetry deals with the common and familiar aspects of human life; and they constitute the substance and fabric of poetry. The common things, including human inter-relationships, cannot be explained by the unemotional methods which philosophy and science adopt to pursue their researches. The methods of philosophy and science, being thoroughly devoid of emotion, are like dead bodies which fail to help us in our desire to understand the truths of human life and human nature. Poetry employs the emotional method of dealing with

human life and can, therefore, prove most useful to us in our efforts to understand the mysteries pertaining to human life and human nature.

### V. SOME CRITICAL OPINIONS ABOUT THIS POEM

**Commenting on this poem, Chetan Karnani writes:**

“Philosophy was Ezekiel’s early companion. He had already written that, in London, philosophy, poverty, and poetry, three companions, shared his basement room. But here (in this poem), his love of metaphysics and logic is stated explicitly:

There is a place to which I often go,  
Not by planning to, but by a flow  
Away from all existence, to a cold  
Lucidity.....

He loves the cold lucidity of logic. He does believe in science and ruthless logic but there are worlds greater than this cold lucidity where “residues of meaning” still remain. This is the world of poetry which alone gives the apocalyptic vision. Hence the clarity of sight given by philosophy and science is not enough. It is not a substitute for the world of myth represented by poetry which alone has the gift of multivalence.”

**In this context, Dr. Raghukul Tilak Writes:**

“It is one of the more difficult lyrics of Nissim Ezekiel. It is a meditative-reflective poem, and it states the superiority of poetry over philosophy. It was published in “The Exact Name” in 1965, and stands in the very beginning of that collection. It is divided into four stanzas of five lines, each with a well-marked rhyme-scheme: a a b b a. The language is simple and colloquial throughout. The difficulty of this lyric arises not from its diction but from the profundity and complexity of the content.”

### 3. “NIGHT OF THE SCORPION”

#### I. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

##### **The Speaker in the Poem, the Poet Himself or Some Other Person**

This poem has been taken from Nissim Ezekiel’s volume of poems entitled “The Exact Name” which was published in 1965. The poem reads like a story. The speaker in the poem narrates an incident of how his mother was stung by a scorpion one night when it was raining heavily. The speaker may be the poet himself or some other person, real or imaginary. The incident itself may also be actual or imaginary. But it is a perfectly realistic and convincing incident.

#### II. A SUMMARY OF THE POEM

##### **The Speaker’s Mother, Stung by a Scorpion**

The speaker’s mother was stung by a scorpion one night. The scorpion had crawled into the house and hidden itself beneath a bag full of rice. It had

been forced to enter the house because of the rain outside. It had then crept towards the speaker's mother and had stung her. After stinging her, the scorpion had swiftly moved away from her and gone out into the rain again, though it was because of the rain that it had come into the house.

#### **The Efforts of the Neighbours to Relieve the Woman's Pain**

The peasants in the neighbourhood, on learning about a woman having been stung by a scorpion, had come to the woman to express their sympathy and to relieve her of her pain if they could. They chanted the name of God again and again in order to nullify the effect of the scorpion's sting. The scorpion was a devil whose sting could be rendered ineffective only by this method, they thought. Then the peasants tried another device also to relieve the woman's pain or, at least, to prevent the pain from becoming more acute. They began to search for the scorpion in order to kill it because, according to a general belief, with every movement which the scorpion made, the poison, injected by it into the woman's blood through its sting, would also move and would increase her pain. Then they all wished fervently that the scorpion should remain motionless wherever it was. They also expressed the wish that the sins, which this woman had committed in her previous life, should be burned away that night by the pain of the sting and that, furthermore, the pain which she was suffering that night should lead to a decrease in the misfortunes which she might have to undergo in her next life.

#### **The Wishes of the Neighbours on Behalf of the Woman**

The peasants gave utterance to some more wishes of the same kind. They expressed the wish that the woman's pain should diminish the sum-total of evil in this world which is unreal (or a kind of illusion). They expressed the wish that the poison should rid the woman of her bodily or physical desires, and should also free her of all worldly ambition.

#### **The Futility of the Neighbours' Efforts to Relieve the Pain**

The peasants sat around the speaker's mother on the floor with the mother in the centre. They had an expression of tranquillity on their faces, indicative of their belief that they understood the situation well. Then they brought more candles and more lanterns to look for the scorpion. The light of the candles and lanterns threw huge shadows on the walls of the house. But they did not find the scorpion. More neighbours came and joined the ones who were already present there. The woman in the meantime suffered all the agony of the sting; and she twisted and turned her body this way and that way, groaning all the time. The rain continued outside, and the woman continued to suffer.

#### **The Futility of the Scientific Methods Adopted by the Speaker's Father**

The speaker's father was a man with a scientific attitude to life. He did not share the views of the peasants who were superstitious. The speaker's father was a rationalist. He applied a herb to his wife's flesh and, next, a

combination of the juice of certain herbs. He even went to the length of pouring a little paraffin over the affected flesh and applying a burning matchstick to it in order to burn away the sting from the woman's bitten toe. The speaker watched the flame burning his mother's flesh; and he also watched a religious-minded man performing certain rites to subdue the poison of the sting with an incantation. After a lapse of twenty hours, the effect of the poison wore off; and the woman ceased to experience the pain of the sting.

### The Woman's Thanks to God for Sparing Her Children

At the end of it all, the speaker's mother simply thanked God for allowing the scorpion to choose only her for the sting and for not allowing the scorpion to sting any of her children.

### III. NOTES AND EXPLANATIONS

**Parting with his poison**—stinging the woman and injecting its poison into her flesh. "His" has been used for the scorpion because the scorpion is an important character in the story. The scorpion causes the whole trouble and is, besides, a symbol of evil. The words "parting with" have been used in connection with the sting because, having injected its poison into the woman's flesh, the scorpion no longer has any poison in its own body. Of course, more poison would accumulate in its body in course of time.

**Flash**—glitter; a momentary gleam of light.

**Diabolic**—devilish. **Diabolic tail**—the devilish or evil tail of the scorpion. The scorpion's tail has been called diabolic because it is in its tail that its poison resides; and it is with its tail that a scorpion stings a person.

**He risked the rain again**—The scorpion had been forced to enter the house because of the rain outside; but now it went out into the rain because it did not wish to stay on indoors where it would be hunted down and killed. Every animal has certain instincts to guide and direct its movements; and the scorpion instinctively moved out of the house though it was aware of the danger which waited for it outside in the form of rain.

**Swarms**—multitudes; large numbers. **Like swarms of flies**—in large numbers just as flies gather at a place in large numbers because there is something to tempt them. Of course, the peasants could not have come in such large numbers as the flies which gather at a certain place. But the simile has been used only to convey the idea of a large number. There is an obvious exaggeration in this comparison.

**Buzzed**—uttered. Actually the word "buzz" means the sound produced by flies or bees. As the peasants have been compared to flies, so the word "buzz" has been used instead of the word "uttered".

**To paralyze**—to render ineffective. **The Evil One**—the devil. The scorpion is regarded as an agent of the devil. The poisonous sting of the scorpion links the scorpion with the devil; and so the scorpion is regarded not only as an agent of the devil but also a symbol of the evil in this world.



**Giant**—huge. **Giant scorpion shadows**—huge shadows which seemed to be the magnified reflections of the scorpion which had bitten the woman.

**They clicked their tongues**—The peasants produced sounds of disappointment and sadness with their tongues. They felt sad because they had not been able to find the scorpion.

**Note.** From this point onwards the words “they said” has been repeated five times because each time the peasants said something different. The peasants expressed a different wish each time because they saw the good side of this incident even though they sympathized with the woman who was in pain. However, this repetition of the words “they said” does not jar upon us. The repetition serves to impart emphasis to the peasants’ thoughts and wishes, besides indicating the variety or diversity of their wishes.

**The peace of understanding on each face**—Each peasant had on his face an expression of serenity which results from one’s comprehension of a situation. Everybody looked complacent. There seems to be a tinge of irony here because the peasants thought themselves to be wise enough to have understood the divine purpose behind the scorpion’s stinging this woman. Actually, of course, there is no mystery in the scorpion’s stinging a human being. It is just one of those things which happen; it is a mischance. But superstitious persons perceive a hidden meaning behind every mishap or mischance.

**Sceptic**—one who does not accept the orthodox religious beliefs; non-believer; one who doubts the validity of religious beliefs which he regards as superstitions. **Rationalist**—one who believes in reason and not in superstition.

**Herb**—medicinal plant. **Hybrid**—a mixed or mingled (liquid or powder); a combination or a mixture (of herbs).

**Put a match to it**—applied a burning matchstick (to the bitten toe). The word “toe” means the forepart of a foot.

**Incantation**—the recital of holy words; a *mantra*.

**Picked on me**—chose me.

**And spared my children**—and did not bite any of my children.

#### IV. COMPLETE PARAPHRASE

I remember the night on which my mother was bitten by a scorpion. It had been raining continuously for ten hours; and it was the rain which had forced the scorpion to creep into the house and take shelter beneath a sack full of rice. Then, with the rapidity of lightning, the scorpion had bitten my mother in the dark room and, after having injected its devilish poison into my mother’s body, and having thus got rid of his accumulated poison, he swiftly moved out of the house though it was still raining. Of course, in moving out, he took the risk of getting wet and being killed by the rain.

The peasants living in the neighbourhood came to our house in large numbers in the same way as multitudes of flies gather at a place which

attracts them. The peasants uttered the name of God many times in order to render the devilish sting of the scorpion ineffective, and thus to bring some relief to the pain which my mother was experiencing. The peasants had brought candles and lanterns with them in order to search for the scorpion and kill it. The light of the candles and the lanterns threw huge shadows on the walls of the house. These shadows seemed to be the enlarged reflections of the scorpion; and these shadows fell upon the walls which were perfectly dry because of the sun's rays which always fell upon them during the day. The peasants could not find the scorpion and, in their disappointment and dismay, they produced, with their tongues, sounds indicative of their disappointment.

The peasants said that, with every movement made by the scorpion, his poison would move in the blood of the speaker's mother, thus increasing her pain. They expressed the wish that the scorpion should remain motionless wherever he was at the time. Then they expressed the wish that the sins, committed by this woman in her previous life, should be burned away by the pain which she was suffering that night. Next, they expressed the wish that her suffering should diminish the misfortunes which she was destined to suffer in her next life. They further expressed the wish that the woman's pain should lead to a lessening of the aggregate of evil as opposed to the aggregate of good in this world. The world in their view was only an illusion and not the reality. Then they went on to express the wish that the poison in the scorpion's sting should cleanse the woman's flesh of all desire, and that it should also rid her of all ambition. They were all sitting on the floor with the mother of the speaker seated on a mat in the centre. The face of each of the peasants had an expression of serenity on it; and this serenity was indicative of each one's view that he understood the mystery of what had taken place.

More candles and more lanterns were brought. More neighbours came to the house; more insects were traced without the scorpion being found anywhere. The rain seemed to have no end. My mother sat all the time, groaning with pain, on a mat, twisting and turning her whole body because of the pain. My father, who did not hold any orthodox religious beliefs, and who was a believer in reason rather than in superstition, tried every course and invoked every blessing, at the same time applying medicinal powder, mixture, herbs, and several herbs mingled with each other. He even went to the extent of pouring a little paraffin upon the bitten toe of my mother and applying a burning matchstick to it in order to burn away the flesh where the scorpion had bitten my mother. I watched the flame burning my mother's flesh and becoming bigger. I also watched a religious-minded man performing certain rites to nullify the effect of the scorpion's poison and invoking the aid of the holy powers. After twenty hours, the scorpion's sting lost its effect, and my mother no longer felt the pain of it.

At the end my mother simply said that she was thankful to God for the scorpion's choice of her for his sting and for his not biting any of her children.

## V. WHAT THE CRITICS SAY

### **The Form; the Structure; the Colloquial Reporting; and the Rhythms**

“The poem demonstrates a deliberate attempt at formal innovation by using a loose, seemingly free-verse narrative structure. It is much more relaxed and openly worked than Ezekiel’s formal poetry, with a new quality of natural colloquialism in diction and tone. We notice in the poem the abandonment of capitals at the start of each line, the dramatic casualness of the recalled crisis, the long paragraph set off abruptly from the three-line climax, all of which give *Night of the Scorpion* a new feel, a sense of unhurried lucid progression through time. It is an interesting and very valid poem, containing a fascinating tension between personal crisis and mocking social observation, but the discrepancies of form confuse the tone which swings between the natural and the colloquial reporting of experience and more removed literary formality. And yet, for all the problems, a real voice is heard in this poem, with its own rhythms and cadences.”—**Christopher Wiseman**

### **The Primitive and the Sophisticated Responses to the Woman’s Suffering**

“*Night of the Scorpion* evokes superstitious practices we have not still outgrown. 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-relationship between the domestic tragedy and the surrounding community is unobtrusively established. The poem also demonstrates the effective use of parallelism.”—

**R. Parthasarathy**

### **The Incantatory Effect of the Words Spoken**

“The success of the poet lies in the careful variations of rhythm which helps him to achieve different effects. The rhythm of the speaking voice shifts with the sense in a manner usual in free verse. The change of rhythm in the following lines is intended to achieve an incantatory effect which it does:

May he sit still, they said,  
 May the sins of your previous birth  
 be burned away tonight, they said.  
 May your suffering decrease  
 the misfortunes of your next birth, they said.  
 May the sum of evil.....

### **The Poet’s Own Voice in the Poem; Vivid and Sensitive Imagery**

The syntax and grammar of the lines in this poem are straightforward and the voice we hear is obviously the poet’s own. The imagery is vivid and sensitive with more than usual clarity as in

Parting with his poison—flash  
of diabolic tail in the dark room—  
he risked the rain again.  
The peasants came like swarms of flies  
and buzzed the name of God a hundred times.....

### **The Traditional World Versus the World of Rationalism**

“Throughout the poem, Ezekiel deliberately withholds his own emotional colouring so that, while reading the poem, we may become aware of a traditional world of superstitions as against another of scepticism and rationalism. The poet’s emotional detachment lets the situation speak directly to us. The entire poem is built on irony which reaches its climax in the last three lines.”—Paul Verghese

### **The Theme, Given a Multiple Treatment**

“The poem has, as its setting, a tender family situation. 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 rationality, and maternal affection. The poem shows the characteristic qualities of Ezekiel. He works consciously within the range of his experience and thereby attains the poetic personality peculiar to him. This authentic and genuine streak in his work gives it its own peculiar strength.”—Chetan Karnani

## **4. “POET, LOVER, BIRDWATCHER”**

### **I. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS**

This poem is taken from Nissim Ezekiel’s fourth volume of poems which appeared in 1965 under the heading of “The Exact Name”. Here Ezekiel expresses his view about the method which a poet should adopt to achieve success in the writing of poetry. He illustrates his view by comparing a poet to a lover and a birdwatcher. In each case, he says, illumination and fulfilment come through a patient wait and through silent perseverance.

### **II. A SUMMARY OF THE POEM**

#### **The Need to Wait for the Right Time to Achieve the Goal**

Those persons, who are interested in the study of birds or in the study of women’s nature, are never in a hurry, and they do not force themselves to make haste in order to achieve favourable results in their respective fields. In the same way the best poets are those who do not force themselves to compose a poem at a particular time. They always wait for words to come to them naturally and spontaneously; and it is only then that they start writing. A birdwatcher waits patiently on a hill to observe the movements of a rare bird. A man waits patiently for his beloved to surrender herself to him in due course; and the beloved surrenders to him only after she has convinced herself of his love. In the same way the poet waits for his mind or soul to provide him with the urge to write a poem.