



Chants, Cures and Community: Local Language and Rural Infrastructure in Nissim Ezekiel's The Night of the Scorpion

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Abstract:

Nissim Ezekiel's poem "The Night of the Scorpion" vividly captures a rural Indian crisis where a mother's scorpion sting prompts communal rituals amid infrastructural deficits. The research paper examines how local language is marked by "Indian English" idioms like repetitive chanting and present progressive tenses. It embodies chants and folk cures, reflecting superstition and solidarity against the backdrop of rural poverty. It argues that these elements underscore inadequate infrastructure, such as absent electricity and medical access, highlighting community resilience in post-independence India.

Keywords: Chants, Cures, Community, Local Language, Rural Infrastructure.

Introduction:

Nissim Ezekiel's "The Night of the Scorpion" portrays rural Indian life through a scorpion sting crisis, blending communal rituals with infrastructural realities. This paper analyzes how local language shapes chants, cures, and community bonds amid development gaps.

Nissim Ezekiel's "The Night of the Scorpion" recounts a dramatic incident in a rural Indian village during a torrential rainstorm. Due to ten hours of steady rain, a scorpion hides beneath a sack of rice and stings the poet's mother. Neighbours come like a swarm of flies, buzzing God's name in frantic chants to paralyze the evil poison. Villagers are searching with lanterns that cast scorpion-shaped shadows on mud walls. They invoke superstitions, claiming the sting will purge the mother's sins or burn her evil from past and future lives. The poet's father, skeptical of rituals, tries rational treatments—herbal pastes, poultices, and even paraffin—but nothing eases her twenty-hour ordeal of groaning pain. Amid the chaos of candles, insects, and incantations, the mother's suffering persists. As

the poison finally subsides after twenty hours, the mother speaks only to thank God that the scorpion picked her, sparing her children. This selfless act underscores maternal sacrifice amid communal frenzy and infrastructural poverty.

Ezekiel's chants in "The Night of the Scorpion" come from the core of communal rituals, with neighbors invoking gods, curses, and blessings to tame the "Evil One" and purge the mother's sins from past lives. These oral traditions, delivered in local languages, create a hypnotic "buzz" that reflects shared cultural beliefs rather than medical efficacy. Scorpion features distinctive Indian English traits that mimic rural oral traditions during the villagers' response to the scorpion sting.

The recurring "they said" after superstitious phrases—like "May the sins of your previous birth / be burned away tonight" or "the scorpion must murther sin"—creates a mantra-like rhythm, evoking collective incantation and urgency. Chants in "The Night of the Scorpion" mirror Indian oral traditions through rhythmic repetition, superstitious invocations, and

communal recitation, evoking Hindu rituals and folk storytelling.

The recurring "they said" after lines like "May the sins of your previous and future lives be burned away tonight" creates a choric, hypnotic effect akin to Vedic mantras or bhajans, emphasizing collective prayer.

Phrases invoking karma and sin purgation—"the scorpion must mudeer sin" It draws from Hindu beliefs in rebirth and atonement, passed orally in rural communities during crises like scorpion stings.

Villagers "buzzing" prayers in unison reflect group chanting in Indian village rituals, such as faith-healing or exorcisms, prioritizing mystical over medical aid in oral culture. The poem's simple, rhythmic diction mimics oral narratives, preserving cultural folklore where superstitions spiritualize suffering.

Role of Chants:

Local languages in Nissim Ezekiel's "Night of the Scorpion" infuse healing chants with cultural authenticity and communal power, transforming them into a collective ritual that transcends the mother's physical pain.

Villagers recite incantations in a mix of Marathi and rural dialects, mumbling "God's name a hundred times" to neutralize the scorpion's "Evil One," creating a hypnotic "buzz-fill'd" haze. These non-English tongues evoke oral traditions of rural Maharashtra, where phonetic rhythms and repetitive sounds mimic spells believed to paralyze poison.

Local languages unify the community, making chants accessible and fervent. The lines like "May the sins of your previous birth / Be burned away tonight" carry karmic weight in vernacular cadence, amplifying superstitious faith over the father's rational herbs. Their earthy, untranslated quality underscores infrastructural isolation, as peasants gather despite poor roads,

prioritizing linguistic solidarity. The research paper argues local languages democratize healing, contrasting urban English rationality; they bind folk remedies like paraffin-burning to maternal sacrifice, critiquing modernity's neglect of vernacular resilience.

Folk Cures Applied:

The rational father experiments with powders, herbs, mixtures, and even burns paraffin on the wound, while a holy man performs rites. Absent modern hospitals due to rural infrastructure gaps, these methods persist for 20 hours until natural recovery. The father's rational yet desperate attempts dominate: he applies powders, herbs, mixtures and hybrids, culminating in pouring paraffin on the bitten toe and igniting it to draw out poison. These reflect folk pharmacology rooted in local plants and desperation, ineffective over twenty hours until natural subsidence, contrasting villagers' chants like "May the sins of your previous birth be burned away tonight." A holy man adds incantations in vernacular dialects, blending oral rituals with herbalism in a rain-soaked, poorly lit hut. Cures in "The Night of the Scorpion" represent a blend of folk remedies and superstitious practices that highlight rural India's infrastructural deficits and reliance on traditional healing amid absent modern medicine.

The poet's father is a rational, sceptic yet desperate, applies "powder, mixture, herb and hybrid" poultices, along with paraffin to burn the sting, reflecting accessible rural alternatives like local plants when doctors are unavailable. Villagers and the holy man use incantations to "tame the poison," believing stillness in the scorpion or chants paralyze evil. It tried to cure oral rituals that compensate for no antiseptics or hospitals.

Community Dynamics:

The community's rapid assembly underscores strong social bonds in isolated villages, where neighbors light lanterns and form prayer circles despite darkness and rain. Local languages unify their superstitious solidarity, contrasting the father's skepticism and criticizing infrastructural neglect in post-independence India. Folk cures in Nissim Ezekiel's "Night of the Scorpion" vividly illustrate rural India's dependence on traditional remedies amid absent modern infrastructure, tying into chants, community solidarity and local languages. Despite twenty hours of failed efforts, pain subsides naturally, underscoring how chants and cures foster community solidarity while exposing language-driven traditions filling healthcare voids.

Chants in local languages, mumbling God's names, curses, blessings—create a communal "buzz-fill'd" haze, unifying peasants who swarm despite muddy infrastructure gaps, lanterns flickering. Community bonds amplify cures: neighbors search for the scorpion (believing its motion circulates poison), forming prayer circles that sustain the mother through pain.

Role of Community:

In "Chants, Cures and Community: Local Language and Rural Infrastructure in Nissim Ezekiel's The Night of the Scorpion," the community plays a pivotal role as a source of immediate solidarity and collective ritual, compensating for rural isolation and infrastructural lacks.

Villagers swarm the hut like "swarm of flies," bringing lanterns and enduring rain to encircle the suffering mother, demonstrating rural India's closely-knit bonds where crises prompt unified action. They perform mantra-like chants invoking karma and sin purgation, using local

language to offer spiritual consolation when medical facilities are absent, fostering hope amid helplessness.

Despite superstitious inefficacy, their persistent presence—more neighbors, candles, prayers—highlights communal resilience, filling voids from poor roads, no electricity, or hospitals in underdeveloped villages. This portrayal critiques yet celebrates community as cultural bedrock, where oral traditions and empathy sustain identity against modernity's gaps.

Rural infrastructure:

Rural infrastructure in Nissim Ezekiel's "The Night of the Scorpion" symbolizes post-independence India's developmental shortcomings, forcing reliance on community rituals amid a scorpion sting crisis in a village hut. This poem is published in 1965, in post-independence era, this detail evokes pre- or early electrification eras in villages, where power shortages persist, forcing primitive illumination amid rain-induced discomforts like leaks. Mud-baked walls and thatched roofs battered by "ten hours of steady rain" expose primitive construction vulnerable to weather, typical of rural poverty without modern reinforcements. Villagers arrive with "candles" and "lanterns," casting "giant scorpion shadows" on "sun-baked mud walls," as they search the dark hut—direct evidence of no electric lights or power supply. The plea "More candles, more lanterns, more neighbours, more insects, and the endless rain" intensifies the scene, showing how light sources multiply to combat darkness, drawing insects and heightening frenzy.

No doctors, antiseptics, or hospitals prompt folk cures like poultices; the father's desperate remedies highlight miles to nearest medical aid, underscoring transport and facility gaps. The poem implies vast distances to any clinic or physician, as villagers and the father

resort to home-based treatments amid "endless rain," highlighting impassable roads and isolation typical of 1960s rural India.

No mention of bandages, antiseptics, or pharmaceuticals underscores basic healthcare voids; the father's "powders, herb and hybrid" poultices represent quackery born from necessity, not choice.

Scorpions invading rice sacks reflect pest infestations in basic storage, while peasant life amplifies infrastructural neglect in farming communities. The scorpion hides "under a sack of rice" to escape the storm, reflecting open, unsealed grain storage typical in poor villages lacking rodent-proof silos, concrete godowns, or fumigation—essentials absent in 1960s rural India. Mud floors and thatched roofs allow scorpions easy access to food stores, breeding grounds for insects drawn by "more candles, more lanterns," exacerbating health risks in homes doubling as granaries.

Conclusion:

Nissim Ezekiel's "The Night of the Scorpion" masterfully intertwines chants, cures, and community through local language to expose rural India's infrastructural frailties, offering a poignant postcolonial critique.

Indian English is repetitive "they said" refrains, onomatopoeic "buzzing," and present continuous urgency in authenticates villagers' mantra-like chants, transforming oral traditions into a linguistic bulwark against medical voids like absent antiseptics and hospitals. Swarming neighbors with lanterns fill electricity gaps, their superstitious solidarity compensating for scorpion-infested rice sacks and mud huts battered by rain, revealing resilience amid post-1965 developmental neglect.

The poem celebrates maternal sacrifice in which the mother's selfless gratitude is revealed. While indicting systemic failures; Ezekiel's localized idiom elevates rural voices, urging modern interventions without romanticizing tradition's limits. Ultimately, this interplay affirms poetry's power to humanize inequities, advocating equitable infrastructure to harmonize cultural heritage with progress.

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