

‘Paapi Bicchua’: Transactions of Desire in Nissim Ezekiel’s ‘Night of the Scorpion’

BASUDHARA ROY

Every verb is a response to the world and conjures an act that engages with it in some definite and concrete sense. That which elevates an ordinary piece of work to the level of art, as every conscientious reader/observer will agree, is more than an appeal to quality, an intuition of the work’s complex referentiality and its rhizomatic engagement with various epistemic structures of meaning. In distinguishing between the author and the writer in his essay ‘Authors and Writers’, Roland Barthes states that the author, unlike the writer, has the ability to clarify nothing in his particular linguistic use – “he knows that his language, intransitive by choice and by labour, inaugurates an ambiguity, even if it appears to be peremptory, that it offers itself, paradoxically, as a monumental silence to be deciphered” (190) Art can lay claim to longevity, even immortality, precisely because it is intransitive and embodies a sense of ambiguity that makes its effective and complete semantic consumption difficult. There is, in it an inherent tendency to inspire, generate and sustain alternative readings, each of which is as unique and as limited as the story of six blind men describing an elephant. To this effect then, every new reading of a work throws new light upon it, illuminating certain aspects, muting certain others and in allowing it to enter into dialogue with a new set of ideas, evidences and possibilities, liberates it from slavery to an ‘original’ meaning.

“It is just that I struggle with any story that has stayed the same way for far too long,” writes Indian Dalit-feminist poet, Meena Kandasamy in her Preface to *M/s Militancy*. (8) Though what she describes is a political urge to creatively reinterpret received narratives, I find myself troubled as a reader and critic by a similar restless dissatisfaction with conventional interpretations of a work. ‘What else?’ I find myself asking, intensely drawn to texts that refuse to, in Arnold’s words, “abide our question”¹ or which, as Keats puts it “tease us out of thought”.² Not surprisingly, therefore, I have been vaguely disturbed by the unchanging interpretation that has ruled Nissim Ezekiel’s well-known poem ‘Night of the Scorpion’, first published in his collection *The Exact Name* in 1965. One of the most anthologized of Ezekiel’s poems, it is widely included in the English syllabus at the school level in India with the result that most Indian students who have received their education via the English-medium of instruction are aware of (and have probably been tested and evaluated at some level on) what the poem means or is supposed to mean, even if they have resisted reading the actual text. Not only have classroom teachers unanimously read the poem as a witness to a woman’s suffering by the bite of a scorpion in India’s rural countryside and eulogized it as a glowing representation of rural wisdom and Indian motherhood, the best of critics have confirmed the reading, locating in the poem the poet’s realist eye for detail, his strong sense of irony and a quintessential ‘Indianness’ manifested through naivety and piety. Part of this overwhelming confidence in interpretation comes from the poet himself. At a poetry reading at the University of North London on 9th October, 1989, Ezekiel mentioned that the poem was based on an autobiographical event that occurred when he was about twelve years old and his mother, indeed, was stung by a scorpion. This authorial comment has been so greatly trusted that it has hegemonically dominated the poem’s context and has strictly arrested alternate readings of it.

Commenting on her adolescent impressions of the poem, Leela Gandhi writes (and her response, though long, is worth quoting in its entirety as a sample of students’ first response to the poem):

I first read Nissim Ezekiel – his, ‘Night of the Scorpion’ – at an indeterminate school-going age on a day given over to domestic science tests. The poem was squeezed into an undistinguishable English Elective anthology where it sat uneasily alongside random excerpts from James Thurber, Rudyard Kipling, R.K. Narayan, and Winston Churchill. Encountered in a bustling corner of the Presentation Convent home studies ‘laboratory’, Ezekiel did not exactly make an impression. Filtered through a morass of feminine instruction on the reheating of apple pie for exhausted executive husbands, or, on the highly efficient removal of wasp stings using a piece of plastic only, ‘Night of a Scorpion’ readily blurred in my mind into the baffling literature of home remedies. In subsequent years its influence translated into the wisdom that sacks of rice had to be handled with extreme caution in the monsoon months; that the pain from a scorpion sting is felt in the whole body causing acute spasms and occasional fever and, last but by no means least, that under no circumstances must the affected area be burnt following application of paraffin oil. (xiii)

Following Gandhi’s Preface in the book is John Thieme’s Introduction to it where he describes the poem as “a dramatization of an encounter between secular Indian rationalism and pre-modern Hindu faith”, affirming that “it can be read as a precisely realized verse account of a very specific personal experience” (xxvi) Between this interpretation and me is no love lost. As an interpretation, it, indeed, possesses the maximum degree of legitimacy. My discontent, however, has been with this being almost the only one meaning of the poem handed down from generation to generation of students of Indian English literature globally. Over the years, the poem has garnered some ecological attention and critics have discoursed upon issues of animal rights in it. But this has still left the poem’s central meaning undisturbed. Some years ago, I came across my first alternative reading of the poem in a research article by Santanu Ganguly who attempts to read the relationship between the scorpion and its victim as that between a client and a prostitute. Ganguly, however, rests his case on speculation and offers no convincing evidence within the poem to back his interpretation. In what ways does the poem invite him to regard the woman as a prostitute? Also, whether the scorpion in the poem is an instance of metaphor or metonymy is left unclarified. His entire reading pursues the substantiation of an assumption:

The scorpion crawls into the woman’s hut to seek respite from the incessant rain outside and having bitten the woman “risked the rain again”. One does not need to read the novel or watch the movie *Devdas* to know that many men indulge in harlot-chasing to seek temporary relief from the vagaries of a cruel, pitiless world. Importantly, the scorpion that enters the room takes shelter under a sack of rice, indicating that prostitution is the major occupation of the woman, enabling her to eke out a measly income for herself and her children. (439)

While, in my opinion, Ganguly’s interpretation fails to sustain itself textually, I admire its willingness and courage to unsettle the received meaning of a poem as canonical as this. In many ways, it was the inspiration received from Ganguly’s critical adventure with ‘Night of the Scorpion’ that birthed my own sometime in the last year. Our television was tuned in to a popular Bollywood song of the 90s – “ye bicchoo mujhey kaat khayega” (this scorpion will sting me)¹ to which my four-year old asked what a ‘bicchoo’ (scorpion) was. No sooner had I managed to describe the hairy insect to him that up popped his questions – will the insect bite the girl? Who will drive it away? Why is the girl singing and dancing instead of running away? I was, at this moment, at my wit’s end trying to explain to him that it was just a song without a real scorpion in it and that the scorpion in the song was only the handsome young man who had accidentally entered a ladies compartment on the train. Whether the child understood head or tail of what I was telling him, I have absolutely no idea – but my mind was now suddenly making rapid connections. What was it that linked a woman and a scorpion in implicit ways so that someone like me, without possessing objective knowledge of the film’s narrative context, could confirm to the child that this was, verily, not a real scorpion? Also, what if the scorpion in Ezekiel’s poem, too, was not a real scorpion in the first place?

In the last one year or so, these questions have propelled me on a consistent cultural hunt of scorpions², the findings of which, largely, constitute this paper. But before I begin, it is essential to set

out what exactly I am trying to do. I am, as is amply clear by now, attempting a new reading of Nissim Ezekiel's 'Night of the Scorpion'. This reading does not seek to dismiss/ dismantle/ replace the conventional reading of the poem but attempts to compound its meaning by adding more layers to it. There is no deconstruction on the terrain of the original meaning here. The aim, rather, is to offer an alternative cultural context in which the poem can be read and understood to generate a signification of a different kind. Needless to say, this reading discounts the poet's own biographical comment on the poem and approaches it with a complete endorsement of the poststructuralist idea of the death of the author.

As I attempted to consciously explore my conditioning, it came back to me that as far back as I could remember, scorpions had ruled the cultural imaginary of Bollywood music as metaphors of female erotic arousal and desire. I had, since my childhood, encountered scorpions in songs articulated by women on screen who pouted their lips, gyrated their hips, and pulsated and heaved emphatically in emulation of the scorpion 'bite'. So common was this trope in the semiological consciousness of Indian folk and performance practices also, that it had never once occurred to me to question the absence of a real scorpion on the scene or to theoretically evaluate the scorpion as a sign.. Now, as the parallels between such scorpion songs and Ezekiel's poem struck me, it awakened possibilities of reading the text in another contextual light.

I suddenly recalled an interesting verse from Satavahana Hala's *Gathasaptashati*. The *Gathasaptashati* (seven hundred verses in the Gatha form), one of the oldest extant anthologies of poetry from the Indian subcontinent, is largely a woman-centric book embodying verses that candidly speak of women's emotions, desires and inhibitions as daughters, wives, sisters, mothers, confidantes and prostitutes. Here is a verse from it that describes a scorpion-bite:

'A scorpion's bitten her,' they cried,
And as she thrashed about,
Her shrewd friends in her husband's presence
Rushed her to her physician-lover. (20)

The key words, here, are 'shrewd' and 'lover'. Take them away and the poem constitutes the narration of a familiar medical crisis – that of a person stung by a scorpion. Those two words, however, dramatically transform the poem's narrative. In their light, the scorpion is clearly not a real scorpion and yet can pass for one under the patriarch's (husband's) eye. Also, the scorpion-bite that needs urgent attention will be taken care of, as the poem amply clarifies, more by the lover than by the physician. Referring to the complex symbolism of the scorpion, Simona Cohen in *Animals as Disguised Symbols in Renaissance Art* writes:

The most essential characteristic of the scorpion as a universal, or archetypal, symbol is probably its ambivalence. From its known origins as a visual symbol, the awe-inspiring scorpion has embodied contrasting meanings, though often in terms that convey a kind of synthesis of opposites, rather than mutually unrelated oppositions. The scorpion symbol, as we shall see, united life and death, generation and corruption, the overt and the covert, sacred and profane, licit and illicit, and the gifts of life as well as the lurking dangers that render it so precarious. (267)

Associated in ancient astrological traditions with the eighth zodiacal constellation – Scorpio, the scorpion's connections with sexuality and fertility comes from its frequent historical representation on the human genitalia in the iconography of the Zodiac Man. In her article 'The Scorpion Apsaras at Khajuraho: Migrations of a Symbol', Cohen argues that while ancient Indian iconography emphasized the malevolent aspects of the scorpion, a perceptible change in iconographic representation was visible from the 10th century AD when the scorpion developed explicit associations with female eroticism and sexuality. (27) This change, she believes, could have been brought about through epistemological transactions with the Greeks. In her book *Scorpion*, Louise Pryke points out that archaeological remains from Mesopotamia suggest that scorpions were worshipped chiefly by

women and had erotic associations. It is possible, she writes, “that the scorpion’s intimate association with women as well as the goddess of sex may have signified the power of women’s sexuality over men. This connection may have been inspired by the observation of the female scorpion’s occasional consumption of her male lover after mating.” (66) Commenting on the symbolic significance of the sculptures of Scorpion Apsaras (celestial women depicted with scorpions on or around them) at Khajuraho (Madhya Pradesh, India), Cohen states that, in general, erotic sculptures on temples, were considered to be auspicious symbolism, “prescribed by sacred literature and *Silpa* texts for its propitious properties”. And that the “exposure of generative organs and exhibition of nudity fulfilled a magic function in plowing and sowing ceremonies, in rites to produce rain or enhance crops and in consecration ceremonies of the temple”. However the ambivalent symbol of the scorpion connoted not only the usual ideas of beauty, fertility and nature’s benevolence, but also personified “the temptations of the flesh and its perils in the broader context of man’s spiritual striving for *moksa*.” (31) Cohen discusses how gradually the scorpion as a cultural symbol of ambivalent female sexuality gained in potency, often merging into later representations of the femme-fatale *viskanya* (snake-woman).

In the musical imaginary of Bollywood, the scorpion-bite manifests itself as a frequent metaphor for illicit female erotic desire, illicit because unsanctioned by societal norms. The typical screen-character articulating such songs is a beautiful virgin who is experiencing love and the throes of desire possibly for the first time. The pathological effects of the scorpion bite – shortness of breath, the flesh turning blue, constant and throbbing localized pain in the stung area, the risk of dying due to it, and importantly, the social dimensions of the episode that leads to a communal gathering to witness and thereby legitimize the experience – are all skillfully woven into the narrative of illicit sexual desire in romantic love. While love, in general, expresses itself in Bollywood music through a host of innovative metaphors, the symbol of desire is chiefly one – the scorpion. Be it ‘Paapi Bicchua’ from the film *Madhumati* (1958), ‘Bicchhu Lad Gaya’ from *Inquilaab* (1984), ‘Mujhe Bicchhu Lad Gaya’ from *Qahar* (1997), Ila Arun’s famous music album *Bicchuda* (1994) or ‘Jab Dass Jaye Bicchua’ from *1920* (2008), to name just a few, the scorpion, each time, is unseen/unseeable and succeeds each time in stinging the victim to a state of arousal which can be calmed only by the ministrations of the lover. In performative traditions of folk and nautanki like the North Indian *Utaar Bicchhu Jhaanjhra*, the Marathi *Vinchu Chawla*, the Haryanvi *Bicchhu Bad Gaya* or the Rajasthani *Kha Gayo Beri Bicchudo*, the victim is often a married woman like the protagonist of the verse from the *Gathasaptashati* and confesses the vicious/fatal effects of her desire to a participating group of female friends who mimic the scorpion’s movements in order to simulate gestural erotic gratification.

Placed in this particular cultural context, Nissim Ezekiel’s ‘Night of the Scorpion’ offers several narrative and symbolic parallels, strongly arguing for a comparative reading. As a first, one is intrigued by the title itself which completely leaves out the mother that all conventional interpretations have chiefly focused on. ‘Night of the Scorpion’ with its structural resonance in nomenclature to the well-known movie ‘The Day of the Jackal’ speaks, like it, for only what it contains – a nocturnal narrative generated/ruled in some way by the scorpion. I will proceed to discuss the entire poem, part by part, so as to guide readers through my new interpretation.

I remember the night my mother
was stung by a scorpion. Ten hours
of steady rain had driven him
to crawl beneath a sack of rice.
Parting with his poison – flash
of diabolic tail in the dark room –
he risked the rain again. (130)

Night as a signifier, connotes many things – moral darkness, danger, desire and as compared to day, lends the right frame for my alternate reading. Rain too, evokes its own set of connotations of regeneration, fertility and desire. The ‘ten hours/ of steady rain’ seems strongly indicative of the

monsoon which is richly eulogized in Indian music ranging from classical to popular and from devotional to amorous, as the season of longing for an union between lovers. The 'sack of rice' that represents the woman's rural and mundane domestic life becomes the seat for the scorpion to conceal in and emerge from, rapidly leaving the room once the poison/sting has been parted with. Striking is the consistent reference to the scorpion throughout the poem with the masculine pronoun 'he'. Since the scorpion was hardly seen, its ready gender identification as masculine is puzzling unless, of course, one turns to the cultural tradition described in the countless songs that I have referred to where the scorpion is portrayed as a phallic metaphor stimulating female desire. Consider the next few lines of the poem:

The peasants came like swarms of flies
and buzzed the name of God a hundred times
to paralyze the Evil One.
With candles and with lanterns
throwing giant scorpion shadows
on the mud-baked walls
they searched for him: he was not found. (130)

While any personal crisis in the fabric of rural life becomes a communal crisis with the participation of the entire village community, a strong theatricality marks these lines that describe the arrival of the peasants. The simile 'swarms of flies' and the act of 'buzzing' connote a response that is orchestrated and practiced. Also, the peasants' search for the scorpion in the room following the decisive disclosure of its 'risking the rain' a few lines ago, hardly makes sense. One is also vaguely troubled by adjectives such as 'diabolical' and 'Evil' directly ascribed to the scorpion. Poisonous snakes have ravaged India's countryside for as far back as we can remember and yet, snakes in India continue to be worshipped for their power. Even in the West where the theological symbolism of the snake as diabolical dominates, it would be difficult to find direct references to live snakes as evil. What is the criterion, then, for referring to the scorpion in the poem as devilish or evil? One is immediately reminded of the song 'Paapi Bicchua' (Sinner Scorpion) from Madhumati. In this song, the scorpion is a sinner by virtue of symbolizing the illicit desire of a rural maiden for a dashing urban youth. Might not the peasants in the poem be passing a similar moral judgement on the unseen scorpion? YouTube videos of the nautanki 'Utaar Bicchu Jhanjhraa' portray women performing before an audience that is predominantly male and whose expressions evoke a voyeuristic pleasure in being witness to the performance of a woman's erotic angst. Among the performing women themselves, one is the chief performer – the so-called victim of the scorpion-bite while the others constitute a chorus of understanding confidantes who empathize with their friend's suffering and attempt, gesturally, to prompt her desire to orgasm in the lover's physical absence. In 'Night of the Scorpion', the peasants can be regarded as constituting both – the confidantes who realize what the woman is going through and the voyeuristic audience. The gender ambiguity of the word 'peasant' that stands for a male agricultural worker as also for the entire class of agricultural workers, appears to me to lend credibility to this idea. The 'candles', 'lanterns' and 'giant scorpion shadows' in the course of the search for a scorpion which is known to not be there, speak strongly for a theatrical tradition akin to the one performed in songs like 'Paapi Bicchua' where the search for the scorpion, rather than being realistic is only a ritual contributing to the development of the plot of erotic desire.

The next few lines of the poem have received considerable emphasis in conventional critical interpretations:

They clicked their tongues.
With every movement that the scorpion made
his poison moved in Mother's
blood, they said.
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 all evil
 balanced in this unreal world
 against the sum of good
 become diminished by your pain.
 May the poison purify your flesh
 of desire, and your spirit of ambition,
 they said, and they sat around
 on the floor with my mother in the centre,
 the peace of understanding on each face (130)

Most critics have picked on these lines to argue for the poem's manifestation of a rural fatalist thought and a quintessential Indian wisdom. They have read in it the doctrine of karma, the Hindu philosophy of reincarnation and the urge towards moksha by abnegating desire. The image of the mother in the centre and the 'peace of understanding on each face', however, reinforces my reading of the poem as a theatrical manifestation of a woman's erotic expression in line with regional and Bollywood musical traditions. In the song 'Paapi Bicchua' too, the victim finds place at the centre, the chorus surrounding her and with each member in the chorus aware of, both, the victim's tortuous desire and the punitive consequences of its consummation. The peasants' clicking of their tongues, therefore, may be looked upon as a similar performative act of commiseration and sympathy and their choral wish that the scorpion be still, that the woman's suffering diminish, and that this suffering pave the way to her fulfilment by feeding on her 'desire' and 'ambition,' seem to accrete into a theoretical discourse on the banal socio-cultural consequences of the fulfilment of desire. In her Introduction to *Translating Desire: The Politics of Gender and Culture in India*, Brinda Bose argues that "the articulation of female sexual desires, in and of itself considered a site of resistance – remains completely contained within a larger patriarchal terrain shared by warring political interest groups, in which the Right forcibly creates a nexus between morality and patriotic fervour for a "traditional" culture that we are apparently fast losing." (x) Women's sexuality is always a threat to patriarchy and hence, every measure is taken to forcibly curb or morally disfigure it in the public space. The peasants' comments on the victim's condition, then, constitute a moral policing of her desire and a reminder of her social function as a wife and mother.

My father, sceptic, rationalist,
 trying every curse and blessing,
 powder, mixture, herb and hybrid.
 He even poured a little paraffin
 upon the bitten toe and put a match to it.
 I watched the flame feeding on my mother.
 I watched the holy man perform his rite
 to tame the poison with an incantation. (130)

This stanza, again an immense favourite with critics who contrast the father's educated rationality with the unschooled superstitious imagination of the peasants, holds the key to my interpretation. Anyone who has seen the performance of the song 'Paapi Bicchua' on screen will be overpowered by its energy, compression and pace. In it too, a healer attempts to relieve the victim of her agony but no incantation can tame the poison successfully and at the song's conclusion, release comes with the arrival of the lover. In the transgressive '*Utaar Bicchua Jhaanjhra*' too, many male relatives step forward to exorcize the scorpion – younger brother-in-law, father-in-law, elder brother-in-law. Each encounter awakens different emotions in the woman – tenderness, sweetness, happiness. However, pleasure, bliss or jouissance comes only with the engagement of the husband in the act. The song

speaks not only for the stereotypical insatiability of female desire but also the volatility and threat that it poses, when morally unchecked, to family and societal relationships. In Ezekiel's poem, therefore, the father is acutely conscious of the fracture that the metaphorical scorpion poses to his domestic space and realizes that he must attempt to quell its sting by all possible means. If he fails and the matter goes out of hand, the conventional family unit will explode. The four lines here – "trying every curse and blessing ... put a match to it" compress more physical action than has been described in the entire poem put together. To me, the hectic pace of these four lines offer a structural parallel to the husband's efforts to engage with and appease his wife, climaxing significantly on the flaming phallic toe.

After twenty hours
it lost its sting.
My mother only said
Thank God the scorpion picked on me
And spared my children. (130)

These concluding lines of the poem are so well-known that few Indian students of English will err in referencing their context. Critics have interpreted in these lines the stoic fortitude of a/n (Indian) mother who, having wrestled with the pain of a scorpion-bite for over twenty hours, only expresses her gratitude to God for having the scorpion bite her and leave her children unscathed. In the poem's conventional critical interpretation, these lines signify a linear arrival of the poem's meaning and its unambiguous closure. In my reading of it, these lines enforce a critical circularity and allow access into a hermeneutic circle where the various parts operate together to shed light on the whole. Firstly, it is only in the last line of the poem that the speaker's identity acquires some clarification. If we eschew (as we have agreed to) all biographical notes on the poem, we have no clue about the speaker except that of filial kinship with the victim-woman. The last line, for the first time, informs us that the speaker is one of the 'children' and this takes us back to the poem's first line 'I remember the night....' The poem, we now realize, is narrated through the consciousness of a child who reconstructs the memory of the mother bitten by a scorpion. The general critical trend has been to regard this child as the young Ezekiel himself and as, therefore, male. However, the poem leaves the child's gender identity unspecified. What is important here is the fact of the speaker being a child and the child's inability to have complete access to the adult epistemology of the scorpion-bite. Just as my own son, on hearing "Ye bicchoo mujhe kaat khayega" had been alarmed at the thought of a real scorpion, it is obvious that the child narrator in the poem is denied semiological access to the mother's experience and is likely to talk about it in pathological terms. Secondly, the twenty hours that the scorpion-sting lasts for, inevitably brings in another night signifying another cover of darkness for the quenching of desire. Thirdly, I would argue for a different reading of the mother's only statement in the poem – 'Thank God the scorpion picked on me/ and spared my children.' The conventional reading has been 'Thank god the scorpion picked on me, sparing thereby, my children'. I would propose – 'Thank God the scorpion picked on me and also spared my children'. The conjunction 'and' in the line is vital to my reading as it brings the disruptive erotic experience engendered by the scorpion and the socially-sanctioned space of the family undividedly together, offering the compromise of women's desire being met legitimately within the conjugal space.

One realizes that it is this possibility of female sexual desire transgressing patriarchal codes of conjugality and family honour that generates the catastrophe and potential tragedy of the night in the poem. Read in this light, the poem describes a conjugal and correspondingly, a family crisis. The scorpion of carnal desire biting the woman from underneath the unassuming domesticity of a sack of rice, disturbs the habitational structures of a rural family-unit. The village community, a participating witness to this conflict between duty and desire and the radical language of eroticism that the scorpion-bite generates in the woman, attempts to patriarchally theorize desire and to counsel and encourage the victim towards spiritual and practical sanity. It is, however, only the grim husband

who knows all that is at stake and attempts his best to pacify his wife. He succeeds after almost an entire day, with the woman rising up, in satisfied domesticity, to claim her children. However, desire as one sees it, has no closure and therefore, the elusive scorpion will always haunt women at night.

There is every possibility of this reading of the poem sounding far-fetched to anyone who is acquainted with its conventional interpretation. But then critical hermeneutics is, above all, a dialectic space, consistently questioning, contesting and updating its practice through acknowledgement of and conversation with new epistemes. Why go to laborious lengths to advocate something new when the established meaning of a text is obvious, convincing and absolutely free from loopholes, one would ask? This is because no meaning can ever be legitimately 'original' and no 'original' meaning was ever enough. There can be credible and incredible meanings, simple and complex meanings, possible and impossible meanings, complete and incomplete meanings but no 'original' meaning as such. Every new context will inspire a new reading for, as Rita Felski argues, there is no "compelling intellectual or practical reason why original context should remain the final authority and the last court of appeal." (581) The point is to understand that the referentiality of a text is never semantically and semiotically complete or closed, that texts are by nature nomadic, and as Felski puts it, "dynamic, not fixed or frozen; they speak to, but also beyond, their own moment, anticipating future affinities and conjuring up not yet imaginable connections." (579) To not recognize a text's dynamic nature and to inhibit its potential dialogue with time, place, and culture, would be to arrest its health, growth and longevity and 'Night of the Scorpion' is too significant a text in our canon to allow it to vegetate.

Karim City College, Jamshedpur, India

Notes

¹ Arnold, Matthew, 'Shakespeare'. www.poetryfoundation.org. Accessed 11 Jan 2022.

² Keats, John, 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'. www.poetryfoundation.org. Accessed 11 Jan 2022.

³ This well-known song is from the Hindi film *Chamatkar* (1992).

⁴ I am greatly indebted to the research article 'Sinner Scorpions and Erotic Women: Interspecies Imaginaries in Indian Song-and-Dance Sequences' by Rishika Mehrishi for offering intellectual strength and support to my ideas and for widening my horizon in the specific performative tradition.

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