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Nissim Ezekiel's "Night of the Scorpion": In the Light of Humanistic Psychology

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Abstract:

The humanistic approach and humanistic psychology is an emerging trend in literature and English Language Teaching. Humanism emphasizes the value of human beings and concerns with the needs, interests, and welfare of individuals. It is also known as the study of humanities which focuses mainly on the moral values of humans. On the other hand, the man who possesses humanism always be a complete human. He/she will modify the society and through which they will create an innovative world. Besides, psychology means the study of mind and behavior. Humanistic psychology is the recent trend in the 20th century. This term is introduced in order to shrink the theory of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory and B.F. Skinner's Behaviorism. Since ages, literature reflects the life of different people and it effectively teaches the people how to survive. The present study pays attention to the poem "Night of the Scorpion" in the perception of humanistic psychology. It focuses a set of people who voluntarily assist a needy mother and in the course of time, showing how they prove that humanism is alive. Psychologically the villagers' attitude towards the suffering mother works positively. Though the villagers have different psyche their innocence shows the Indian ethos.

Keywords: Humanism, Humanistic approach, Psychology, Humanistic psychology, Behaviorism.

Ethical Humanism is primarily an attitude about human beings, their worth, and the significance of their lives. It is concerned with the nature and quality of living; the character and creativity of our relationships. Because of this concern, humanism spontaneously flowers into a spiritual movement in its own right.

- Edward Ericson

1. Introduction

The American Humanist Association defines humanism as "a progressive life stance that, without supernaturalism, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead meaningful, ethical lives capable of adding to the greater good of humanity". ("americanhumanist.org") Humanity plays a vital role in the life of people, who wish to live a meaningful life. It is also essential for them to build up their stance in the society. Humanism emphasizes the value of human beings and concerns with the needs, interests, and welfare of individuals. It also refers to the study of humanities which focuses mainly on the moral values of humans. On the other hand, people who possess humanism will always be a complete human. He/she will modify the society and believe that he will create an innovative world. Since ages literature reflects the life of different people and it effectively teaches the people how to survive.

Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers are popularly regarded as the founders of humanistic approach. Humanistic approach in psychology is a well known trend among the psycho, the rapists. Nowadays, it is used in health centers, corporate sectors, etc. to construct their positive attitude. In addition to this, the humanistic approach plays a significant role in literature and English Language Teaching. There are many writers who reflect humanistic views in their work. Obviously, it is because they know the needs of their readers. Everyone in this society is in need of something. It may be financial, psychological, ethical, physical or anything else. The present study discusses Nissim Ezekiel's poem, "Night of the Scorpion" which explores the human psyche and attitude towards others.

2. Freudian Theory

According to Freudian theory, the human mind is structured into two main parts. One is, the conscious mind and another is the unconscious. The former includes all that can easily bring awareness. On the other hand, the latter includes all that is external to our awareness which cannot be easily found. In addition, Freud compares the human mind to an iceberg. The visible part of the iceberg above water is compared to the conscious mind and the underneath hidden part of the water to unconscious. To prove this, Freud divides human personality into three major components: id, ego and superego.

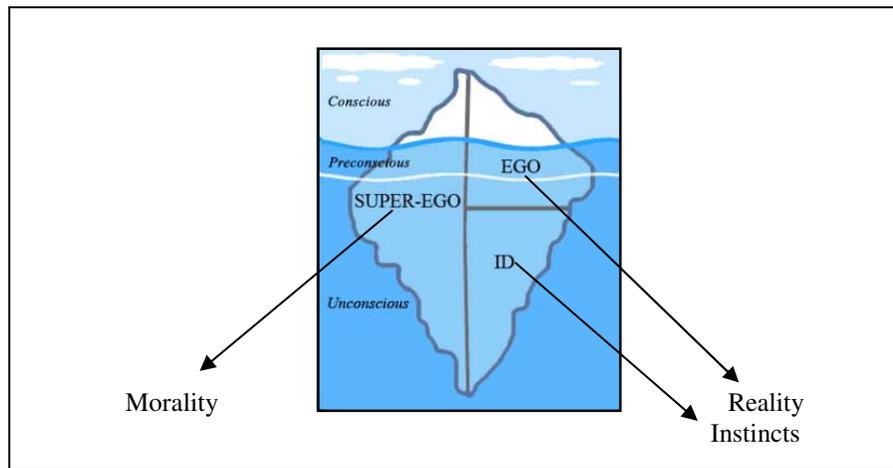


Figure 1

3. Night of the Scorpion- Overview

The poem is full of poetic devices like personification, irony, simile, etc. The poet shares his childhood experiences through this poem. Though he is a child, he observes the surroundings, and his is a vivid account of how his mother is stung by a scorpion. By giving the title “Night of the Scorpion”, he makes it clear, that really the night belongs to the scorpion. In the beginning, he focuses on the scorpion and describes its entry. Ten hours of steady rain brings it to the house and it hides under the sack of rice. Usually, Scorpions use their sting for a variety of purposes. The most obvious use of the sting is to capture the prey. Unfortunately, the poor mother is stung by the poisonous scorpion.

3.1. The Id

Freud says a man’s id consists of hereditary mechanism of personality. For example the sex instincts deal with desires and happiness and the aggressive instincts deal with death and negative things. The id is in the unconscious part of a man’s psyche. Therefore, the instincts immediately response since it inherited the basic humanity from the ancestors. (“Simply psychology”) In that way, the villagers in the poem react to the suffering mother. Basically, they have humanity and their psyche insists on them to go and help the mother immediately when she was stung by the scorpion. They never worry about the time (Night) and rain. They gather in the house and say, for every inch of a movement the scorpion makes on ground the poison would spread thick and fast in the mother’s blood and consequently they scrutinize the house and its surroundings. As a poet, he proves his excellence through the lifelike description of the situation. After sometimes the villagers pray in favor of the suffering mother. They sound outright superstitious. To console the pitiful mother they surround her and talk to her. The poet’s father, a rationalist tries his best to save his wife. At the same time, he doesn’t resist the villagers’ beliefs. The highlight of the poem is the mother’s selfless love. The poet concludes the poem with this remarkable substance. As an Indian writer, he gives importance to feelings, emotions and love.

3.2. The Ego

We are different from brutes in that we have what we call the sixth sense. As a human being we can show and share our feelings and emotions. This keeps our soul alive. In this poem, the villagers express their sympathy towards the suffering mother to console her. Out of pity they suggest a number of possibilities to overcome the pain. Here, ego acts as a mediator between id’s unconscious state and ego’s real world. It helps a man to make decision. Ego works reasonably for the real external world, whereas the id reacts unreasonably. In order to give reason for their immediate visit the villagers offer remedies for the poor mother. The poet says, “The peasants came like swarms of flies”.(8)

The peasants are compared to the flies. As flies would fly in groups, the peasants unite in helping their fellows. Naturally, the villagers have helping tendency. Whether it is theirs or others, they always pay attention to solve any problem. Apart from that they seem to be very considerate and respect others’ sentiments and emotions. In this poem, their attitude shows their innocent love and affection to the suffering neighbour. On one hand, they are sympathetic towards the groaning mother. But on the other hand, they criticize the mother’s life.

One could expect villagers to be soaked in superstitious convictions. The poet says, they buzzed the name of God hundred times to paralyze the scorpion. People of the village worried about this and they invoked God for the poor mother. The poet follows it up with: “With candles and with lanterns throwing giant scorpion shadows on the mud-baked walls they searched for him: ...”(11-14)

Ego also focuses on the problem solving personality. Their ego insists on them to voluntarily search for the hellish one with candles and lanterns in order to give solution to the mother’s problem. Unfortunately, it is not found and the people express their pity by clicking their tongue. A popular saying goes thus: ‘those who are in fear always can see the fearful one’. The poet infuses his imagination when the people search and get to see their own scorpion-like shadow under lights. Of course, their very obsession gets reflected in the image they see. This is what Sigmund Freud’s projection in psychological term. Subsequently, to help the suffering mother, they list out some superstitious beliefs.

3.3. The Super Ego

The superego is the ethical component of the personality and provides the moral standards by which the ego operates.(Wikipedia) Here, we can see how it works in the poem. "May he sit still, they said./May the sins of your previous birth/be burned away tonight, they said....".(18-20) The above lines exhibit how humanly the people involve themselves in an attempt to indicate that the pain is not only the mother's but also theirs. Consolation is the best medicine when someone is in trouble. The mother struggles in pain and she is in need of consolation. Readers might just wonder if the villagers' talk would ward off her pain. "More candles, more lanterns, more neighbours,/more insects, and the endless rain."(32-33) It means the continuous pain of the mother and the neighbours' visit. The poet says, his mother twists through and through on a mat with deadly pain. The people are in a hurry to do something to decrease the pain. Here, their part plays a major role. Most of them do not know that in fact they disturb the mother by saying that she committed sins in the previous birth; her flesh is not pure etc. Here super ego fails to control the id's demand. Super ego supposes to include values and morals of the society. Its duty is to control the id's demand if it is not favorable to the external world. It is not possible for all of them to inherit humanity biologically. Thus some of them react and talk ironically. But, 'To err is human', similarly, however it be, they show the innocent affection towards the mother. Moreover, indirectly, they wish the mother should have sinless life. At least to that extent the villagers sound positive.

The poet's father a rationalist tries herbal powder mixture for treatment to lessen the poison's effect. An extreme step, he pours the paraffin upon the bitten toe and puts a match on it. He hopes that this would help his wife, reduce the poisonous pain. Plus from all they don't hesitate to undertake a traditional remedy too. The villagers hire a holy man to perform rites to tame the poison with incantation. Here the rationalist father's psyche urges him to save his wife's life. His id directs him to reduce her pain. So he tried his homeopathic medicine. His ego acts according to the external world. That's why he did not resist the villagers' suggestions. But at last, the pain subsides only after twenty hours. And the mother said, "Thank God the scorpion picked on me/And spared my children."(47-48) From the above lines the poet draws the readers' attention to a mother's selfless love towards her children. Despite her having experienced excruciating pain she is concerned with her children's safety. She is grateful to God for having spared her children. It would have been worse if the scorpion had stung her children because the little ones couldn't have tolerated it. Only a mother can say how much pain a child can bear. She is a living god and she protects her family. Even though she deals with problems, her mind will always work for the welfare of her family, particularly her children. Through this anyone can understand the mother's psyche. Her super ego works here and she imagined if the scorpion bite her children they would not tolerate that pain. Her mind analyzes the painful moment and act according to that.

4. Findings

The collective consciousness, or psyche, of racial groups is transmitted from generation to generation and maintains its cohesiveness through what we call culture. As a result, people of the same race or culture behave in a similar manner and think alike. In that way the villagers inherited the culture and attitude of helping tendency from their ancestors and act upon that. As a result, the poem expresses a universal message of mother's love. It also emphasizes the active role of the villagers, how they console the mother and take part in the family's trouble and how they are crowded with blind beliefs. Through this we come to know that every action of the people depend upon their psyche. Knowingly or unknowingly people always act and react according to their mind. Unmindful of the heavy rain, they rush to the house and offer suggestions and advice to the needy mother. The readers might find themselves in a situation where they wouldn't deem it either significant or insignificant the effect the villagers create in trying to help the mother by hinting at some of their superstitious beliefs. But from a psychological standpoint, what the villagers do is an effective way to lessen the pain.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, by its nature the scorpion is poisonous. Similarly, as humans we should be humane. Obviously, this poem deals with humanism and the values of human beings. One should carry on the moral values in them to lead a smooth life. At the same time, they should recognize the values of others' life too. In this materialistic world, it is very difficult to find people with humanity. But this poem shows us humanism is still alive.

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