



EXPLORING EMOTIONAL RESONANCE: AFFECT THEORY AND NISSIM EZEKIEL'S NIGHT OF THE SCORPION

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Abstract:

Affect theory has, though not as popular as other critical traditions, gained much currency in the recent past. It has its resonance with various theoretical ideas which precede it, for instance rasa theory in Indian aesthetics; nonetheless it stands discrete from the rest by virtue of its extensive implications and the wider frameworks of thoughts that it incorporates. Affect studies on Indian poets are still a rare phenomenon and Ezekiel, on account of him being a forerunner of the modern verse in Indian English landscape as well as being a poet of emotions, is a rightful poet to commence with. His celebrated poem "Night of the Scorpion" has been a subject of frequent critical studies from various lenses and vantage points, in which this paper is a modest increment. This paper intends to explore the ways in which affect theory manifests itself in the literary paradigm, by taking this poem as an example. The theoretical framework involves the inputs of various eminent scholars like Sullivan Tomkins, Brian Missumi, Sara Ahmed and others who have contributed in the evolution of the affect studies. It seeks to study the affect, primarily at the precognitive and cognitive stages, on the reader or audience, of a piece of literature which is the fundamental interest and purpose of the affect theory.

Keywords: *Affect, Emotion, Moment of Intensity, Objective Correlative, etc.*

Affect Theory: Reconceiving Reality and Experience:

Structuralist and post-structuralist approaches primarily regard linguistic determinism as the organising principle of the reality we experience. They consider reality as something constructed and defined by language and assume that language not only constructs reality but also helps us interact with it. The affect theory seems to be a critical counter to the structuralist and post-structuralist line of thought. It maintains that the reality is beyond language. It offers the body and its interactions with the surrounding objects the central place and puts cognition and consciousness at the periphery. The body rather than the cognitive mind becomes the receptive and the experiential entity. Thus, it would not be incorrect to say that the affect theory, besides its other endeavours, seeks to bring out a direct relationship between the body and affects. Defining affect is a complex task, because of the presence of numerous perspectives from which it can be analysed, but for the general understanding we may say "affect, at its most anthropomorphic, is the name we give to those forces—visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond



emotion—that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension, that can likewise suspend us (as if in neutral) across a barely registering accretion of force-relations, or that can even leave us overwhelmed by the world’s apparent intractability” (Gregg and Seigworth).

Affect has its beginnings supposedly from the book *Ethics* (1677) written by the seventeenth century philosopher Baruch Spinoza, who used the word *affect* simply to refer to the capacity of affecting and being affected. Gilles Deleuze developed further upon Spinoza calling affect the “prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body’s capacity to act” (Deleuze and Guattari). Scholars like Brian Massumi, Sara Ahmed, Silvan Tomkins and others have contributed and modified the discourse of affect theory focussing to comprehend a collection of common issues, including issues of materiality, politics, gender, sexuality, racism, class as well as literary analysis.

Unpacking Affect: Encounter, Variation, and Potential:

Gregory J. Seigworth, in a YouTube podcast (“What Is Affect Theory?”) organized for the purpose of discussing his book *The Affect Theory Reader* co-authored with Melissa Gregg, sums up affect as “*the force of encounter or the encounter of forces.*” As per Seigworth the affect involves three things at the least. The first of the three has been called the point or moment of intensity or encounter, which basically signifies the initial contact of the observer with an external object. It is this encounter that eventually begets the affect. The second aspect is the line of variation in which this intensity arrives which denotes the continuity of the developments taking place before the concerned encounter. And finally, as the third aspect, comes the context or the capacious potential of what could happen in a wider set of relationships. To explain these ideas, he takes an example of him walking his dog at an evening, the dog’s interactions with its surrounding becomes the moment of intensity or encounter, the changes in the surrounding that come off as the dog moves on constitute the line of variation and the potentiality of experiencing still greater variations if the dog enters an unknown garden becomes the third aspect of an affect.

Nissim Ezekiel: A Poet’s Profile:

Nissim Ezekiel (1924-2004) was a major post-Independence Indian English poet and has been hailed as an “artist who is willing to take pains, to cultivate reticence, to pursue the profession of poetry with a sense of commitment” (Iyengar, 657). He was from a Bene-Israel Jewish family which migrated generations ago to India. He lived a major part of his life in the Indian city of Mumbai. The regional ethos of the city with its challenges gets a place in his poetry. Ezekiel wrote poems at the juncture when India had recently got its freedom but was still struggling to find her own identity. Rightly said that “most Indian poetry before Ezekiel was old-fashioned, Victorian, amateur, public political declamations or spiritual guidance, more a hobby than an art” (King, 2). Ezekiel shaped the path of modern Indian English poetry and gave it the maturity and freedom that it lacked until then. His diction is simple, the tone is conversational and subject matter is common and original. As an artistic poet he demonstrates his merit in painting vivid word pictures appealing to the senses: “Ezekiel’s poems are as a rule lucid—a merit these days—and are splendidly evocative and satisfyingly sensuous”



(Iyengar, 657). Though his literary output is enormous, the best known works are his verse collections.

Ezekiel's "Night of the Scorpion", a short poem, is "one of the best-known examples of the commonplaces of Indian life made into art" (King, 35). The poem has become widely popular and has secured a place as "one of the finest poems in recent Indian English literature" (Naik, 204). It can both be found being taught in schools and university curriculums and drawing academic attention and inspiring critical studies. The subject matter of the poem involves a mishap whereby the poet's mother is stung by a poisonous scorpion and how neighbours, who are simple peasants, and the poet and his father, react to the situation.

The poem becomes an appropriate subject for our purpose because it appositely captures and displays the dynamics of relationship among the objects and the surroundings and the affect induced out of their interplay. The poem is dynamic also in the sense that emotions, affects, symbols etc. keep changing rapidly and consistently as the poem progresses. The reader's journey through the poem is not a smooth ride but a tortuous excursion. Another source of our particular interest in the poem is the way in which the bodies, the non-abstract or the material part of the poem like the scorpion as a character, the onlooking swarm of mob, the suffering mother, the elements of weather, have been dealt with gives rise to intensity and impetus (or force). We may say the poem is a testimony of Ezekiel being "painfully and poignantly aware of the flesh, its insistent urges, its stark ecstasies, its disturbing filiations with the mind" (Iyengar, 657).

Echoes of Affect: Critical Contexts:

The primary concern of this paper is to analyse the interplay between the aspects of the affect theory and the regime of literature. Before doing an affect study of Ezekiel's *Night of the Scorpion* it is appropriate to revisit the already available strains of thoughts that analyse literature based on the emotive values. The affect theory when read in the context of a literary work comes nearest to the models given to us by the American psychologist Sullivan Tomkins, who in his book *Affect Imagery Consciousness* (1962), described various types of affects. According to him there are nine types of affects and they are expressed through the body by different types of movements and gestures of the body. The nine types of affects are namely, enjoyment or joy, interest or excitement, surprise or startle, anger or rage, disgust, dissmell, distress or anguish, fear or terror and shame or humiliation.

The nine affects elaborated by Tomkins have a close resemblance to the nine *Rasas*, found in the Indian aesthetic system. According to the *rasa* theory propounded by Bharata Muni *rasa* is a specific kind of aesthetic experience similar to Tomkins's affect and is evoked by a combination of determinants, consequents and fleeting emotions. The consequents are the reactions to the body's exposure to an external object, which can be a thought, a symbol, an utterance, a material object, the environment etc. here referred to as determinants. Even the classification of types of *rasas* described by Bharata has a correspondence to Tomkins classification. For example: the affect called anger or rage has a parallel in Bharata's *Raudra rasa* which begets the *sthayi bhava* (permanent emotion) of anger, the affect known as disgust has a parallel in *Vibhatsa rasa* which begets the *sthayi bhava* of disgust and so on. The similarity between Tomkins's affect and Bharata's *rasas* extends even in the ways in which



these affects and *rasas* are manifested through bodily reactions. Like Tomkins, Bharata also talks of what effects do *rasas* produce physically in the body, calling them *saatvik bhavas* which include reactions like *stambha* (paralysis), *sveda* (sweating), *ashru* (shedding tears), *vepathu* (trembling) etc. Thus, it can be said that affect theory in this context was present in the literary apparatus for a considerable time. The distinction between *rasa* theory and the affect theory apparently comes in the sense that affect theory has its implications even beyond the dominion of aesthetics and extends even to more crucial and critical disciplines like cultural studies, gender studies, media studies, socio-economic discourses etc.

Critics have been interested in evaluating the effects produced by literary works on the audience or readers for a considerable time. The formalist critics of the early and mid-twentieth century, called the evaluation of a literary work based on the effects produced by it on the readers as a fallacious one. The term 'affective fallacy' has been described as "a confusion between the poem and its results (what it is and what it does), a special case of epistemological skepticism, though usually advanced as if it had far stronger claims than the over- all forms of skepticism" (Wimsatt and Beardsley). The affective assessment of a piece of literature has been subverted for quite a long time, presumably to prefer objective criticism. But simultaneously we also find a strain of criticism which seems to favour and assert the significance of the objects and their affect on the surroundings. The concept of "objective correlative" offered by T.S. Eliot fundamentally emphasizes the fact that material or immaterial objects give representation to a character's feelings and reinforce the emotions which an author intends to evoke through that character. He writes "*the only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an* "objective correlative"; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked" (Eliot, 100). Eliot even goes on to say that failure to find an apt objective correlative may result in "artistic failure" (Eliot, 98) of the literary work as he claims is the case with Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

Needless to say, affect theory plays an important part in literary interpretation. It has not only provided an alternative framework of literary analysis but also re-centred the emotive and the subjective aspects of the critical paradigm which were gradually pushed into peripherality.

The Affect in *Night of the Scorpion*:

The poem begins by describing the time of the incident which occurs in it i.e. night time. The affect comes to play from the first line of the poem itself, which grabs our attention to the environmental features of the place in concern. The word "night" automatically transports us to a space devoid of light, where the scope of gaining familiarity with the surrounding is diminished; the bodily senses that bring information to our cognition are incapacitated, effectively rendering us to linger into a pre-cognitive state which is perfect for the interplay of the affect to occur. The landscape of the poem has been repeatedly painted as dark, dismal, and cramped through the use of phrases like 'dark room' and 'swarm of flies.'

The poet then relates to us the event towards which the title of the poem indicates. Poet's mother has been stung by a scorpion. The confrontation of the scorpion and the reader,



interestingly at a very early stage in the poem, is one of those moments which Seigworth calls “the point or moment of intensity or encounter” (“What Is Affect Theory?”) The scorpion is not only an object but also imagery and a symbol. The scorpion has been described as possessive of a “diabolic tail” discharging “poison”. The scorpion also takes on a mysterious air when after stinging the mother it practically vanishes in the dark and even though “they searched for him: he was not found.” The candles and lanterns only appear to augment the demonic aspect of the arachnid by projecting “giant” shadows of him on the wall. Again, after failing to physically locate the scorpion, the peasants seem to be trying to overpower him through an alternative and more esoteric path: they buzz “the name of God a hundred times / to paralyse the Evil One.” These representations of the scorpion are not neutral and plain; instead they suggest that the poet, by design, desires to impart a certain affect to the peruser regarding the figure of the scorpion. Evidently, the scorpion has been donned in a satanic attire and juxtaposed against the figure of the God. The affect enters the scenario as soon as the scorpion takes the place of Satan or the Devil and the reader navigating through the poem pre-cognitively takes on the impact of such imagery, that is to say, he gets affected. Consequently, the scorpion becomes an object that should be, just like the Devil, eliminated immediately. This gives rise to a question, what would have happened if the scorpion had been found?

According to Seigworth, the second aspect of the affect is the line of variation by which the intensity arrives. The progress of events in the poem is replicative of this line. The chain of events has different intensities and forces behind them and thus they have varied affects. The coming of peasants “like swarms of flies” and the buzz arising out of the swarm shows the charged environment of the room. The peasants have rushed inside the poet’s house partly because of curiosity and partly because of the fear and awe. This curiosity is soon converted into disappointment when the peasants fail to find the scorpion. Their disappointment is manifested by their bodily gesture; the poet expresses it writing “They clicked their tongues.” Soon enough this disappointment vanishes and a bout of concern, consolation and prayer takes over and everybody wishes relief from pain and absolution from sins for the victim. Even this is not the end of variance, the father of the poet keeps on trying methods and tactics to treat the mother, in terms of the line of variance the father contributes to again intensify the ambience. The affects at different points in the poem keep varying from excitement, curiosity to disappointment and worry.

The idea discussed in the above paragraph can also be corresponded to the Tomkins’s idea of affect and their manifestations. Several of the nine varieties of affect described by him can be traced out to be sporting throughout the poem. The initial part of the poem betrays the affect of surprise or startle, when one raining night, a scorpion suddenly stings the poet’s mother and vanishes again in the rain. Interest, another affect, fills the room and peasants gush into the poet’s house. Then we find that fear has taken the place of interest and peasants are buzzing the name of God. Fear is then replaced by distress or anguish, firstly because of the missing scorpion and secondly due to the sharp agony of the victim who is twisting through and through helplessly. Dis-smell and disgust also follow as methods upon methods are being tried upon the mother including “powder, mixture, herb and hybrid” and even paraffin. The concoction of these substances emits a sensory experience, presumably not a pleasant one, to the reader. Even one may find a trace of joy by the end of the poem when the poet reports his



mother saying that she is thankful to the God that the scorpion picked her and not her children, but effectively, it is a version of anguish masked in the form of joy.

The tropes, metaphors and the diction employed in the poem impart it with certain affects. Words like “curse”, “blessings”, “rites”, “candles”, “evil”, “diabolic” and “sins” give the poem a religious undertone. Even the phrase “swarm of flies” has religious implications to it and may allude to Beelzebub a prominent demon in Christianity who is alternatively known as the Lord of the flies. In a similar way, the lines “I watched the flame feeding on my mother. / I watched the holy man perform his rites..” has an affect tantamount to that of a funeral pyre and where the rites of the holy man insinuate towards the last rites. These lines have an affect which seems to be a complex mixture of rage, melancholy, fear and sorrow. The choice of words and phrases like “groaning”, “twisted through and through”, and quantification of ideas like “Ten hours/ of steady rain”, “name of the God a hundred times”, “After twenty hours/ it lost..” seem to be a conscious effort towards intensifying the affect induced at various occasions.

Seigworth also talks about the third aspect of an affect: the context or the capacious potential of what could happen in a wider set of relationships; the possibilities of what variations in an affect can occur if objects and their connection to the surrounding are altered. What changes in affects would have been materialized if the event of the poet’s mother being stung by the scorpion had taken place in the daylight rather than the night? The potentialities are manifold but still some probable variance in the affect can be expected to have taken place, for example, the environment suddenly becomes more fathomable and less esoteric, the mysterious and supernatural character of the scorpion subsides and it becomes a more natural creature that has a poisonous tail and darts it when it gets frightened. One may even feel sympathetic towards the scorpion in this case.

Another probability worth considering is, if we let the timing of the event remain as it is, then what prospects could have taken place if the scorpion had been found by the peasants? Would it have been killed? If so, the killing of the scorpion would not have been a mere revenge but a symbolic defeat of the “Evil One”, the “diabolic” one and the victory of God. One can see the drastic shift in the organisation and manifestation of the affect even with a minor change in the object- environment relationship.

Eliot’s concept of the objective correlative, which has some of its features overlapping with the affect theory, too has its applications in the poem. According to Eliot a successful work of art must get the emotions and feeling “communicated to you by a skilful accumulation of imagined sensory impressions” (Eliot, 100). The poem is not only sensuous in a manner that it directly addresses and stimulates our senses but also uses solid and material objects for the representation and rendition of those sensations. Darkness of the night, the flashy tail of the scorpion, flickering candles and lanterns and the flame feeding on the mother’s toe appeal to our visual sense or the sense of sight. On the other, side the dead silence of the world implied in the nighttime only broken by the persistent rain in the backdrop, the buzzing of the peasants’ swarm, the clicking of their tongues, mumbling of prayers and curses and groaning of the afflicted mother, resounds to our auditory senses. Olfaction of the reader is also affected by the dampness that is hinted in the poem via describing the space as moistened by the incessant rain, cramped by objects like rice sacks and the throng of people and the air naturally



loaded with the smell of “powder, mixture, herb and hybrid” besides “paraffin”. The synchrony between the objects and emotions correlated to them shapes the poem into a fantastic specimen of emotion-centric work of art.

Conclusion:

To conclude, affect theory is concerned with exploring how emotions and feelings influence human behaviour, cognition, and social interactions. It deals with the relationship between objects and the surrounding and how the encounter of those objects creates intense emotions and brings changes in our perception about the subject matter. It has been influential in various fields, including psychology, sociology, and cultural studies. Critical evaluation of the poem *Night of the Scorpion* under the premises of affect theory offers us a different vantage of understanding, so that we can peep into the emotional footings of the characters of the poem as well as the affect it transmits to the reader. Showing how both the characters and the surroundings undergo a continuous change, the content, the form, the symbols, and the style of the poem, when overlooked from the affective frame, betray the emotive intensities contained in it. The poem becomes an apt topic for an affective study.

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