

# Representation of Indian Culture and Beliefs in the Poem, The Night of The Scorpion

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## Abstract

Nissim Ezekiel is a poet of post-independent era. He occupies a substantial place in Indian Literature. Ezekiel always refers to Indian cultural beliefs and superstitions in his poetry. Through his poetry he throws light upon the popular beliefs revolving around common people of India. The concepts include 'Karma', which is about the deeds and results of previous life and after life. He not only represents Indian culture, but also comments and satirizes on the positive aspects of Indian culture and its distinct features. The poem, "The Night of the Scorpion" was the poem written by Nissim Ezekiel. It was first published in Nissim Ezekiel's anthology entitled 'The Exact Name' (1965). This is a poem situated in an Indian rural background that focuses on the Indian agricultural family beliefs. Before independence, the rural Indian culture was an obvious contrast to the emerging urban culture. Ezekiel as a modern Indian poet thoroughly used the modern Indian themes and styles in his poetry. His usage of poetic techniques and diction are fairly simple and easy for the readers. The chief objective of the present paper is to focus on Nissim Ezekiel's representation of Indian culture and beliefs in the poem 'The Night of The Scorpion'.

**Keywords:** Indian Culture, Beliefs and Superstitions, Representation

## Introduction:

Nissim Ezekiel was an Indian English poet. He was influenced by the Indian culture. His first collection of poetry was *A Time to Change* which was published at his 28<sup>th</sup> year and marked as the turning point in post-colonial Indian literature towards modernism. Ezekiel was born in 1924 in Bombay to a Jewish family. They were part of Mumbai's Marathi-speaking Jewish community known as Bene Israel. His father used to teach Botany at Wilson College, and his mother was the principal of a school. Ezekiel graduated with his Bachelor's Degree in 1947. In 1948, he moved to England and studied philosophy in London. He stayed there for three and a half years until working his way home on a ship.

After his return to India, he joined the literary circles in India. He became an assistant editor for *Illustrated Weekly* in 1953. He founded a monthly literary magazine named, *Imprint*, in 1961. He became an art critic for *The Times of India*. He also edited *Poetry India* from 1966-1967. Throughout his career, he published poetry and some plays. He worked in various reputed positions such as a professor of English and a reader in American literature at Bombay University in the 1990s, and secretary of the Indian Branch of the International Writer's Organization, PEN.

Ezekiel was also a mentor for the successive generation of poets, including Dom Moraes, Adil Jussawalla and Gieve Patel. Ezekiel received the Sahitya Academy Cultural Award in 1983. He also received the Padma-Shri, one of the India's highest honors for civilians, in 1988.

Ezekiel died in 2004 after a long battle against Alzheimer's Disease. At the time of his death, he was considered as the most famous and influential Indian poet who wrote in English.

### **Indianness in Ezekiel's Poems:**

Ezekiel primarily examined themes which were associated with the daily life in India. On observing his career, readers can feel the Indianness in his poems. Due to his Jewish heritage and metropolitan mindset, Ezekiel has previously been accused of not being truly Indian. Ezekiel himself writes about this in his essay entitled *Naipaul's India and Mine* (1976), in which he disagrees with another poet, V.S. Naipaul, about the critical voice with which he writes about India. "While I am not a Hindu and my background makes me a natural outsider," Ezekiel writes, "circumstances and decisions relate me to India. In other countries I am a foreigner. In India I am an Indian. When I was eighteen, a friend asked me what my ambition was. I said with the naive modesty of youth, 'To do something for India.'" We can see this attitude at work in Ezekiel's poetry—even when his poems are satirical, they come from the voice of a loving insider rather than someone who is looking from the outside. In this way, Ezekiel's poems are quintessentially Indian because they exist there. Ezekiel writes, "India is simply my environment. A man can do something for and in his environment by being fully what he is, by not withdrawing from it. I have not withdrawn from India." (1976)

The critic Vinay Lal argued in 1991 that it is not surprising that a poet like Ezekiel brought about so much literary change in India: "It is perhaps no accident either that the first blossoms of the birth and growth of modern Indian poetry in English should have come from the pen of a poet who, while very much an Indian, belongs to a community that in India was very small to begin with, and has in recent years become almost negligible, a veritable drop in the vast ocean of the Indian population." (1991)

### **Indian Culture and Beliefs in The Night of the Scorpion:**

Ezekiel is well known for addressing the problem of the modern man's identity. He frequently discusses urban and rural areas. His poetry also has a strong emphasis on Indian culture or the idea of being Indian. His poetry "Night of the Scorpion" likewise touches on this distinct Indianness. Readers are exposed to a wide spectrum of characters who reflect the cultural environment.

The symbolic significance of "Night of the Scorpion" might be understood in the context of Indian culture, which frequently bases its tenets on faith and superstitions. There are numerous examples that highlight how superstition permeates and is connected to the lives of rural people. First of all, according to traditional stories, the concept of scorpion is the "Evil One" or "diabolic". The villagers or peasants who had come to offer their helping hands to the mother began chanting the name of God. They were looking for the scorpion in an effort to paralyze the nasty reptile. They also thought that the poison in the mother's blood would move on with each movement of the scorpion, increasing the discomfort she would feel.

When they finally failed to locate the scorpion, they resorted to their religious convictions for guidance. The people thought the mother was merely atoning for her transgressions from her former existence. The pain would diminish her after life's miseries. They thought the poison would rid her flesh or body of all aspirations and wants of the outside world. In other words, the process resulted in her being spiritually cleansed. Even when they just wanted to be of assistance, their method was founded more on faith and superstitions than on reason.

First, there are the peasants, who are portrayed as a mass of people. They hold to the Hindu notions of "previous birth" and "afterlife" as well as the idea of spiritual purification through suffering. They believed the sting would cleanse the mother's body and aid her in letting go of typical human instincts like "desires" and "ambitions." Although contemporary readers—including the Indian audience—feel removed from these peasants, readers can still relate to them thanks to the poem's cultural context and Ezekiel's mastery of representation.

Secondly, Ezekiel introduces the father who was more rational in his ways. He employed both traditional and scientific methods in order to pacify his ailing wife. Readers of the poem may feel at one with his methods, but he seems to be an outsider amidst the traditional peasants. He represents someone who was neither completely modern nor completely free of his Indianness.

Finally, there is the stereotype of the "silent mother," who merely wishes the best for her kids. She is regarded in Indian culture as a role model for women who have divine traits like selflessness, unwavering love, and unadulterated dedication to their children. The mother's persona in the poem is essentially sanctified. Indianness is characterized by these supernatural qualities attributed to mothers. In addition, the mother's character is frequently utilized to symbolize mother's nature, another Indian belief.

The immense and radically dominant theme of "Night of the Scorpion" is the unconditional affection that a mother feels for her children; in the poem's last lines, Ezekiel states the voice of a silent mother:

*"My mother only said:*

*Thank God the scorpion picked on me  
and spared my children."*(1989)

The mother has nothing except her kids' welfare in her mind. Readers find her approach to be quite emotional and ironic. She received a fatal scorpion sting, but she was grateful that it did not harm her kids. This is the defining quality of an Indian mother, who is idealized in Indian culture as a devoted, selfless woman. Regardless of the cultural setting, a mother never stops loving. She shows affection the way she would.

### **Conclusion:**

In this manner, a mother is creative, complete, quiet, and perfect in Indian culture. It seems ironic in this poem about the portrayal of a mother's role in India. This is the reason why the poem "The Night of the Scorpion" proves to be quite a realistic representation of Indian culture.

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