

Indian Ethos in Nissim Ezekiel's *Night of the Scorpion***Navita**

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Abstract

The present paper intends to explore the intricacies of Indian ethos and philosophy in the poem 'Night of the Scorpion' by Nissim Ezekiel. The poem beautifully weaves the various characteristics of Indian culture and philosophy in the background of Indian rural life. It reaffirms the faith of Indian people in karma and rebirth. The existence of a divine power is at the heart of every religious philosophy. The poem blends superstitious and rational approach of people. The paper also highlights the communal solidarity of rural people, selfless love and sacrifice of an Indian mother.

Keywords: Indian ethos, divinity, karma, rebirth, superstition, motherly love

Nissim Ezekiel, often regarded as the father of modern Indian English poetry, presents a deeply Indian philosophy in his poems not just through subject matter, but through his tone, worldview, and attitude toward life. His poetry reflects the Indian psyche, values, contradictions, spirituality, and search for identity in a rapidly changing society. Nissim Ezekiel's poem "Night of the Scorpion" beautifully reflects his Indian philosophy, combining realism, spirituality, and acceptance of life's contradictions. The poem portrays a simple village scene where a mother is stung by a scorpion, and the villagers respond with prayers, chants, and superstitious beliefs. Ezekiel, though rational and modern in outlook, presents their faith with empathy rather than ridicule, showing his understanding of the Indian mind that finds comfort in collective spirituality during suffering. The mother's calm endurance and her selfless prayer thanking God that the scorpion spared her children reflect the Indian ideals of motherhood, sacrifice, and acceptance of fate. Through this poem, Ezekiel captures the essence of Indian philosophy a blend of superstition and faith, pain and endurance, and a quiet acceptance of life's mysteries. His portrayal is neither mocking nor sentimental but deeply humane, revealing his belief that spirituality and compassion lie at the heart of Indian life.

The poem beautifully captures the images that are typical of rural India. When the mother in the poem is stung by a scorpion all the villagers who gather in the interlocutor's house are peasants. They come with lanterns in their hands. The image of an Indian village without the provision of electricity. The village is submerged in complete darkness. The phrase 'sun-baked walls' refer to the typical village house having wall of mud. As typical of an Indian village, the health services are not available and an emergency has to be tackled with the collective experience and wisdom.

The poem shows the beliefs of Indian people in karma theory. This concept is found in many religions like Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism and Jainism. The concept holds the principle that all our actions have consequences. We will bear the result of all our actions. The actions of our past lives influence our present and our present actions influence our future accordingly. One has to bear suffering if one has done some 'sin'. The poem also shows the concept of 'sin', which refers to the immoral acts which can be understood as a deviation from God's will.

"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."

Here it is clear that the impact on the future referred is not limited to the present life but extends to the next life. The concept of ' rebirth ' is closely associated with karma theory. Indian spiritual and holy books mention the concept of immortality of soul. It is a common belief that death does not end the journey of soul. It is only a gateway to another life. Our spiritual books motivate us to do good karmas to lay the foundation of a happy life ahead. The villagers in the poem pray to God that the present suffering of the mother will wash away the her past sins. They also pray that this suffering will reduce the sufferings and misfortunes of the next birth.

The poem strongly reaffirms the unflinching belief of the innocent rural people in the existence of a divine power. They had strong belief that this material world is ruled by a supreme power. The divine power strives to make balance against evil and has its own ways to strike the balance. The villagers believed that the suffering that the mother is undergoing will be helpful in striking the balance of good and evil in this unreal world. Our spiritual wisdom has always taught us that we must get rid of our physical desires and spiritual ambitions to attain a state of purity. The villagers gathered in the house of the interlocutor were of the view that the present suffering of the mother will be helpful to attain a blissful state. The different explanations of the incident put forward by the villagers reaffirms their faith in the working of God. The different explanations justify the act of God and say that the incident of the biting of the scorpion must have had a good reason to happen. This shows their unflinching faith in the 'will' of the God. They kept on chanting the names of God sitting beside the mother. They did their best and sought grace of God by remembering him.

" 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."

'Night of the Scorpion' also brings in focus the superstition and illiteracy of rural people. Their belief in the superstitions was as firm as the belief in God. They believed that with the movement of the scorpion the poison in mother's will also move. For this reason they searched for the scorpion, but could not find him. They were putting all efforts with sincere and pure intentions. The most striking characteristic of their behaviour was their extraordinary confidence. They were so sure of their thinking and behaviour that there was 'peace of understanding' on their faces. They did not doubt or felt hesitant about their faiths and beliefs. The poem also presents the rational approach represented by the father of the interlocutor. He had knowledge of various herbs and powders and he tried a variety of mixtures on the bitten toe of the mother. Although he had a rational approach, he gets influenced by the superstitious approach and poured a little paraffin on the bitten toe and put a match to it.

In Nissim Ezekiel's poem "Night of the Scorpion," superstition plays a central role in portraying the mindset and cultural beliefs of rural India. When the poet's mother is stung by a scorpion, the villagers immediately gather and respond not with scientific reasoning but with deep-rooted superstitious beliefs. They chant prayers, burn lanterns, and make offerings, believing that each movement of the scorpion will increase the mother's pain. This scene reflects how faith and fear intertwine in traditional Indian society, where people turn to religious rituals and collective prayer as a way to combat misfortune. Even though their actions are guided by superstition rather than medical understanding, their intentions stem from compassion and communal concern.

Ezekiel, while educated and rational, does not ridicule these beliefs; instead, he presents them objectively and sympathetically, recognizing them as part of India's cultural fabric. Through this portrayal, he reveals that superstition, in such contexts, is not merely ignorance but a form of faith and emotional support during crisis. Thus, in "*Night of the Scorpion*," superstition becomes a reflection of the Indian ethos, showing how spirituality, tradition, and humanity coexist in everyday village life.

Among the different approaches and reactions of the villagers to the incident, the most striking aspect seems to be the power of co-ordination and co-operation with which they work. They came immediately after the scorpion stung the mother. They came in groups like 'swarms of flies' and were really concerned about the wellbeing of the lady who was bitten by the scorpion. They searched for the scorpion and felt dejected when they were unsuccessful in finding him. The rural culture of meeting neighbours often and remaining in groups as opposed to the the urban culture of living in isolation has been highlighted. In this way the poet highlights the communal solidarity of the rural people who love to live in company and support on another whenever anyone is facing a problem.

Lastly the poem 'Night of the scorpion' focuses on the selfless love and sacrifice of the mother. This aspect takes the theme of the poem to a universal level. The intensity of a mother's love and the extent of the sacrifice she can make can not be explained. The mother in the poem went through the suffering for nearly twenty hours. She was in deep pain and

was twisting and turning on the mat. She remained uncomfortable and restless for such a long time. She bore the pain with patience. The poem reaches the climax when the effect of the sting is gone and the mother is normal. She thanked God that her children were spared by the scorpion. The feeling and desire of a mother for the well being, safety and security of her children is really heart touching.

Nissim Ezekiel's "*Night of the Scorpion*" stands as a remarkable poetic reflection of Indian ethos, blending faith, superstition, compassion, and endurance into a single powerful narrative. Through the simple yet profound incident of a mother being stung by a scorpion, Ezekiel brings to light the deep spiritual sensibilities and moral values that define Indian life. The villagers' immediate prayers, chants, and ritualistic actions, though rooted in superstition, express a strong sense of community, empathy, and shared faith qualities that lie at the heart of India's cultural identity. The poet's father, representing scientific rationality, and the mother, embodying patience and sacrifice, together symbolize the coexistence of reason and faith that characterizes modern Indian thought.

Ezekiel does not mock either perspective; instead, he presents them with a tone of understanding and balance, showing that both belief systems have their place in human experience. The mother's ultimate gratitude thanking God that the scorpion spared her children epitomizes the Indian ideal of motherhood, marked by selflessness and unconditional love. This act of acceptance and grace mirrors the philosophy of karma and endurance central to Indian tradition, where suffering is seen not as punishment but as a path to spiritual strength. Through his realistic imagery, subtle irony, and deep compassion, Ezekiel captures the spirit of India its contradictions, faith, and humanity. "*Night of the Scorpion*" is therefore not just a poem about a single event but a symbolic representation of Indian ethos itself, where devotion, resilience, and moral strength triumph over pain. It affirms that in the Indian way of life, spirituality and humanity are inseparable, and it is through this blend of belief and endurance that true grace is attained.

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