



Folk Beliefs and Rural Superstitions in Nissim Ezekiel's Poetry

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Abstract: Folk beliefs and rural superstitions had occupied a significant position in the cultural and social fabric of traditional Indian life. These belief systems, rooted in collective memory and oral traditions, had often governed the everyday experiences of rural communities. Nissim Ezekiel, a pioneering figure in post-independence Indian English poetry, had sensitively depicted these beliefs in several of his poems. While Ezekiel had been frequently associated with urban modernity, his engagement with rural India revealed a nuanced understanding of folk practices, superstitions, and cultural anxieties prevalent among village communities. The present study had examined the representation of folk beliefs and rural superstitions in Ezekiel's poetry, with particular reference to poems such as "The Night of the Scorpion," "Enterprise," and "The Patriot." The study had explored how Ezekiel had portrayed superstition not merely as irrational belief but as a cultural response to fear, suffering, and uncertainty. By employing irony, realism, and compassionate observation, Ezekiel had exposed the psychological and social dimensions of rural superstition. The analysis had demonstrated that Ezekiel's poetic treatment of folk beliefs had served both as cultural documentation and subtle social critique, reflecting the tensions between tradition and emerging rationalism in post-independence India.

Keywords: Nissim Ezekiel, Folk Beliefs, Rural Superstitions, Indian English Poetry, Cultural Practices.

1. Introduction: Folk beliefs and superstitions had constituted an integral part of rural Indian society for centuries. These belief systems had emerged from a close relationship between human life, nature, and the unknown forces perceived to govern existence. In rural communities, superstition had often functioned as a coping mechanism during moments of crisis such as illness, death, and natural calamities. Indian English literature, particularly poetry, had repeatedly engaged with these beliefs to reflect cultural realities and social practices.

Nissim Ezekiel had emerged as a central figure in modern Indian English poetry, introducing realism, irony, and psychological depth into poetic expression. Although Ezekiel had been widely recognized for his portrayal of urban life and modern sensibilities, his poetry had also captured significant aspects of rural existence. His depiction of folk beliefs and rural superstitions had revealed his keen observation of Indian society and his concern for cultural authenticity. Ezekiel had neither romanticized nor outright dismissed superstition; instead, he had presented it as an inseparable part of rural consciousness.

The present study had focused on Ezekiel's portrayal of folk beliefs and rural superstitions, examining how these elements had been woven into his poetic narratives. The study had argued that Ezekiel's treatment of superstition had reflected deeper social, psychological, and cultural dimensions rather than mere irrationality.

2. Folk Beliefs and Superstitions in Rural India: A Cultural Context: Rural India had historically been shaped by oral traditions, mythological narratives, and communal rituals. Folk beliefs had been transmitted across generations through stories, customs, and religious practices. Superstitions related to disease, fertility, death, and natural phenomena had been deeply embedded in village life. Scholars had observed that superstition had often functioned as an explanatory system in societies where scientific knowledge had limited reach (Frazer, 1922).

In rural Indian contexts, belief in spirits, omens, curses, and divine intervention had governed social behavior. Rituals performed during illness or misfortune had reflected collective faith in supernatural forces. Such beliefs had not merely been individual practices but communal experiences reinforcing social cohesion (Malinowski, 1954).

Ezekiel's poetry had captured this cultural milieu with precision. His rural settings had reflected communities bound together by shared belief systems, where superstition had coexisted with emotional solidarity. By situating folk beliefs within everyday experiences, Ezekiel had documented the psychological reality of rural life rather than presenting superstition as isolated ignorance.

3. Nissim Ezekiel as a Social Observer: Ezekiel had approached Indian society as an insider with critical awareness. Despite his Jewish heritage and metropolitan upbringing, he had considered India his cultural environment. His poetry had reflected an intimate engagement with Indian social realities, including rural traditions and beliefs (Ezekiel, 1976).

Ezekiel's poetic vision had been marked by realism and irony. He had observed human behaviour with detachment but also with empathy. When portraying superstition, Ezekiel had avoided ridicule; instead, he had exposed the emotional foundations underlying such beliefs. Critics had noted that Ezekiel's strength lay in his ability to reveal social truths without overt moralizing (Chelliah, 2018).

His rural poems had functioned as cultural documents, recording how superstition had shaped responses to suffering and fear. Ezekiel's poetic voice had remained observational, allowing readers to interpret the significance of these beliefs within their social contexts.

4. Folk Beliefs and Superstition in "The Night of the Scorpion": "The Night of the Scorpion" had remained one of Ezekiel's most frequently analyzed poems dealing with rural superstition. The poem had been set in a rural household where the speaker's mother had been stung by a scorpion. The incident had triggered a series of ritualistic and superstitious responses from the villagers.

The villagers had been portrayed chanting prayers and invoking divine protection to counteract the scorpion's poison. Their belief that the scorpion's movement had reduced the poison's effect had reflected a folk explanation rooted in collective faith rather than medical knowledge. Ezekiel had described these practices in a neutral tone, allowing the scene to unfold without authorial intrusion.

The poem had revealed how superstition had functioned as communal support. The villagers' presence had provided emotional reassurance, even if their methods lacked scientific basis. Ezekiel had juxtaposed folk belief with rational skepticism through the father's attempts at medical remedies. However, neither system had been presented as entirely effective, suggesting the limitations of both tradition and modernity.

Critics had argued that the poem had illustrated the coexistence of faith and fear in rural life (Naidu & Praveena, 2023). The mother's final act of selflessness had transcended superstition, emphasizing human compassion over belief systems. Thus, Ezekiel had used superstition as a narrative device to explore deeper moral and emotional truths.

5. Superstition as Psychological Response to Fear: Ezekiel's depiction of superstition had often revealed its psychological dimension. In rural settings, fear of the unknown had intensified reliance on folk beliefs. Superstition had offered explanations for suffering when rational understanding had failed. Ezekiel's poetry had captured this psychological dependence without condemnation.

In "The Night of the Scorpion," the villagers' chanting had reflected anxiety and helplessness. Their belief in divine intervention had been driven by fear rather than blind faith. Ezekiel had presented superstition as an emotional response shaped by collective vulnerability.

Scholars had suggested that superstition in literature often functioned as a symbolic representation of human anxiety (Malinowski, 1954). Ezekiel's poems had reinforced this view by portraying belief as an instinctive reaction to crisis rather than intellectual conviction.

6. Folk Beliefs and Social Cohesion: Ezekiel's rural poems had demonstrated that superstition had reinforced social bonds. Rituals and prayers had brought communities together during moments of crisis. In this sense, superstition had functioned as a social glue sustaining communal identity.

In "The Night of the Scorpion," villagers from distant places had gathered to support the afflicted family. Their shared belief system had created a sense of collective responsibility. Ezekiel had highlighted this communal aspect without endorsing the beliefs themselves.

Anthropological studies had emphasized that folk rituals strengthened group solidarity (Frazer, 1922). Ezekiel's poetry had echoed this perspective by portraying superstition as a communal rather than individual phenomenon.

7. Irony and Subtle Critique of Superstition: Although Ezekiel had depicted superstition empathetically, his poetry had also contained subtle irony. His realistic portrayal had exposed the limitations of blind belief. The villagers' faith in chants and rituals had contrasted sharply with the father's rational attempts, neither of which had offered immediate relief.

Ezekiel's irony had been gentle rather than harsh. He had allowed readers to recognize the inefficacy of superstition without explicitly condemning it. This approach had reflected Ezekiel's balanced perspective, avoiding extremes of skepticism or blind faith.

Critics had noted that Ezekiel's irony had functioned as social critique without alienating cultural practices (Thorat, 2017). His poetry had invited reflection rather than judgment.

8. Superstition and the Conflict Between Tradition and Modernity: Ezekiel's rural poems had frequently reflected the tension between traditional beliefs and emerging rationalism. This conflict had been particularly evident in post-independence India, where scientific thought had begun to challenge age-old practices.

In "The Night of the Scorpion," the father's use of modern remedies had symbolized rational thought, while the villagers' chants had represented tradition. Ezekiel had presented both systems as inadequate, suggesting the complexity of cultural transition.

This balanced portrayal had reflected Ezekiel's modernist sensibility. He had acknowledged the emotional comfort provided by tradition while recognizing the need for rational progress. His poetry had thus captured the transitional phase of Indian society.

9. Folk Beliefs Beyond "The Night of the Scorpion": Although "The Night of the Scorpion" had been the most prominent poem addressing superstition, Ezekiel's engagement with folk belief had extended to other works. Poems such as "Enterprise" and "The Patriot" had subtly reflected rural mentalities shaped by tradition and belief.

In “Enterprise,” the failed pilgrimage had symbolized blind faith and misguided devotion. The journey, driven by belief rather than rational planning, had resulted in disillusionment. Ezekiel had used this narrative to critique unexamined faith.

Similarly, “The Patriot” had revealed how traditional beliefs and nationalist sentiments had merged into uncritical acceptance. Ezekiel had exposed the dangers of unquestioned belief systems, whether religious or ideological.

10. Folk Beliefs as Cultural Documentation: Ezekiel’s poetry had served as a cultural record of rural Indian belief systems. His detailed depiction of rituals, chants, and communal practices had preserved aspects of folk culture undergoing transformation.

Literary scholars had emphasized the importance of such documentation in postcolonial literature (Singh et al., 2022). Ezekiel’s poems had captured cultural practices threatened by modernization, contributing to cultural memory.

11. Critical Reception: Critics had widely acknowledged Ezekiel’s contribution to Indian English poetry. His portrayal of superstition had been praised for its realism and empathy. Chelliah (2018) had observed that Ezekiel had combined social awareness with poetic discipline.

Thorat (2017) had highlighted Ezekiel’s ability to portray superstition without sensationalism. His balanced approach had distinguished him from romantic or dismissive portrayals of rural belief.

12. Conclusion: The present study had examined folk beliefs and rural superstitions in Nissim Ezekiel’s poetry, highlighting their cultural, psychological, and social dimensions. Ezekiel had portrayed superstition as an intrinsic aspect of rural life shaped by fear, tradition, and communal identity. His poetry had neither glorified nor ridiculed folk beliefs; instead, it had presented them with realism and empathy.

Through subtle irony and compassionate observation, Ezekiel had exposed the limitations of superstition while acknowledging its emotional significance. His poems had reflected the tension between tradition and modernity in post-independence India. Ultimately, Ezekiel’s depiction of rural superstition had functioned as both cultural documentation and social critique, enriching the understanding of Indian rural consciousness in modern poetry.

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