

Superstition, myth, motherhood and night of the scorpion

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Abstract

This research paper examines some evil superstition practices prevalent in Indian society with the help of the poem "Night of the Scorpion" by Nissim Ezekiel. The issues taken up are substantiated by various newspaper articles and essays. The paper also takes up the aspect of motherhood and undying love of a mother for her children, despite having least empowerment in Indian society.

Keywords: superstition, myth, motherhood

Introduction

Nissim Ezekiel's portrayal of superstition ridden India in his poem Night of the Scorpion

Whatever part of the world we travel despite tremendous modernisation locals still have belief in superstitions and India is no exception in this case. In Indian society, superstitions have always existed and continue to exist despite the anti-superstition law which brings superstitious practices such as witchcraft under the criminal offence. These superstitions vary according to caste, religion, society and region and harm our society in numerous ways. "The Night of Scorpion" by Nissim Ezekiel portrays the picture of such superstition-ridden India and it is also a satire on the way, the Indian society functions with its maladies. The poem also explores the theme of love of the mother for her children, which is the essential feature of Indianness and womanhood. The poem is written as a first person narrative in which the son is a witness of pain and agony of his mother when she is bitten by a scorpion.

"I remember the night my mother
Was stung by a scorpion" (Ezekiel 1)

When the scorpion stings narrators mother instead of looking for medical assistance the ignorant villagers start looking for scorpion so that they can paralyse it. According to their superstitious belief, every movement of scorpion is directly proportional to the movement of poison in the blood of the mother. The narrator's father who is called "sceptic and rationalist" also does not try any scientific medication to cure the poison rather he himself acquire the role of doctor and pours paraffin on the sting wound and burns it. Such thoughtless procedures by villagers and family members show the extent to which Indian society is drowned in the stream of superstitions and myths. The villagers are superstitious to the extent that they believe that mothers present suffering will reduce the misfortunes of next birth of lady and that the pain will purify her soul of sins

"May the sins of your previous birth be burnt away tonight, they said.

May your suffering decrease
The misfortunes of your next birth, they

Said."(Ezekiel 2)"Dr Navneet, working in a government hospital in India said, "The practitioners of black magic are at times more trusted than a doctor. They treat jaundice, dog, snake or scorpion bites with chants, instead of medicine.""(Sharma Sandhu Tanushree) So, we can see that in India superstitious cures are considered more powerful than the advanced medical cures.

Similar is the situation in the twenty-first century. Even today people believe that joint pain and various other diseases can be cured wearing a certain copper ring or wearing a certain tabiz by a powerful saint. Though such superstitions are more prevalent in village community as is shown in the poem but in certain urban areas of India such superstitions do prevail. "The so-called curators, known as 'Tantrik', or 'Baba' (occult and black magic practitioners), claim to be able to resolve issues of marital discord, or health and financial problems. Not only do the poor or uneducated fall victim to their claims, but the educated and the elite of society do as well."(Sharma Sandhu Tanushree dw.com)

Many superstitions are also linked with natural phenomenon of solar and lunar eclipse and also many people believe that if a dog bites it leads to the birth of puppies inside man body.

"When 18-year old Shankari Mahato was bit by a dog in her village in west Midnapur district in the state of est Bengal last month instead of going to a regular doctor, she went to a witch doctor in the neighbouring village." "the 18-year old girl said she went to a witch doctor because she knew his medicine would save her life" (Sheikh Rahman dw.com)

Many babas and saints fool ignorant people and give them trash in the name of medicine similar to the herb potion which narrators father gives to his wife and performs many illogical practices including witchcraft similar to narrator's father's burning the sting wound using paraffin. Such superstitions show the dark underside of progressive Indian society. "Indians are already availing themselves of astrology, palm-reading, numerology, tea leaf prophecies, and such like, and black magic only makes things worse.

Shantanu, a banker, visited a 'Baba' to bring his career and love life back on track. His problems remained unresolved and instead he went into debt to pay the Baba's recurring fees, he says." (Sharma Sandhu Tanushree dw.com) These practices harm the citizens mentally as well as financially.

So such practices need to be eliminated from our society in order to make it advanced and modern in the real sense. This can be done with the spread of education and proper enforcement of the law that clearly defines faith and superstition as there is a very thin line between the two. The blind faith of the ignorant citizens need to be broken and more scientific learning needs to be given.

Motherhood in night of the scorpion

“What is a “good mother”? One who would sacrifice all for her children. One who offers love that is endless, silent, undemanding, One who would deny her own maternal identity rather than see her offspring rent in two. A good mother is her children; she does not have a story of her own. She is the channel through which others learn to speak.”(Glosswitch)
Motherhood in India is considered very sacred thing but still, mothers are not empowered. They are made to sacrifice their own happiness for the sake of her children. Is this attitude right in a progressive society like India? Should fathers not have equal responsibility for their kids? In the poem as soon as the scorpion’s poison is neutralised mother rather than thinking about her pain and suffering thanks god for keeping her children safe. Even on her deathbed mother never forgets to think of the safety of her children. She is ready to suffer from scorpion bite as long as her children are safe.

“My mother only said
Thank god the scorpion picked on me
And spared my children.” (Ezekiel 2)

Agreed, that this love of the mother for her children is pious and cannot be replaced but we need to empower women so that they can show their love without oppression. And maternal violence which is still prevalent today needs to be stopped so that mothers can bloom and can lead a happy life with her children.

Burning of mother’s flesh by patriarch father also has a stink of patriarchy in it. Women in our society are considered as possession of man. Also, the burning flesh brings on our mind the burning of women in India for dowry. In India, newly wed brides are harassed by her in-laws for dowry and deaths due to this is so prevalent in India that every hour a life is lost by burning due to harassment of dowry. “In a crime that is prevalent only in India, greedy husbands and his relatives harass the newly wed bride for getting more dowry and often kill her in the process. And, very often, she is burnt alive. This horror is therefore called bride-burning or in official terms, dowry death.

In 2010, there were 8391 reported cases of dowry death in the country. That works out to a shocking one death every hour approximately. Bride-burning is on the increase — just a decade ago, in 2000, there were 6995 cases.”(Varmal Subodh)
Even though the law has been formulated which bans dowry but still this law has not been enforced properly and in contemporary times as well dowry is given and taken.

This practice with its evils need to be stopped urgently but we are failing in this field.

“perhaps the primary reason for spread of this cancer has been the almost complete absence of any public campaign or mobilization against it for the past 25 years. As a result, girls are considered a burden on the parents, families go bankrupt trying to get their daughters married off, choice in forming

relations is frowned upon and thousands — maybe lakhs — of young women suffer violence silently behind closed doors.”(Varmal Subodh)

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