

A Patchwork of Faith: Mapping the Socio-Cultural Geography of Ezekiel's Poetry

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Abstract: *This article explores the intricate representation of rural India in the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel, positioned at the intersection of his identity as a “persistent foreigner” and an “indigenous insider.” Central to this study is the concept of “Socio-Cultural Geography”—a framework that views the rural landscape not merely as a physical setting of mud-baked walls and monsoon rains, but as a psychological space defined by the tension between tradition and modernity. The study focuses on the metaphorical “Patchwork of Faith,” where Ezekiel weaves together the disparate threads of primitive superstition, communal resilience, and the skeptical rationalism of the urban observer. Through a close semiotic reading of seminal poems such as *Night of the Scorpion*, *The Professor*, and *In India*, the paper argues that Ezekiel rejects the romanticized, “pastoral” trope common in colonial literature. Instead, he adopts a post-colonial realism that highlights the socio-economic stagnation and the linguistic nuances of the Indian subaltern. Special attention is paid to Ezekiel’s use of “Indian English” as a tool for mapping social hierarchy and cultural identity. The article concludes that Ezekiel’s rural poetry serves as a vital bridge in Indian English Verse, transitioning the genre from Victorian imitation to a gritty, ironic, and deeply empathetic engagement with the “real” India. Ultimately, the “patchwork” he creates is one of profound reconciliation—where the poet’s own alienated identity finds a home within the very contradictions of the village collective.*

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1. Introduction: The poetic landscape of post-Independence Indian English literature is profoundly marked by the arrival of Nissim Ezekiel, a figure whose ontological displacement served as a catalyst for a new brand of realism. Unlike the romanticists of the pre-Independence era who sought to idealize the Indian countryside through a transcendental or nationalist lens, Ezekiel approached the rural heartland with the calculated, albeit empathetic, eye of a “detached observer” (King, 2005). This introduction examines how Ezekiel’s unique socio-religious identity informed his poetic cartography, creating a “socio-cultural geography” that challenges traditional pastoral tropes.

1.1. The “Urban Alien” in the Rural Space: Ezekiel’s positionality is central to his depiction of India. As a member of the Bene Israel Jewish community—a microscopic minority within the vast, predominantly Hindu and Muslim demographic of India—Ezekiel occupied a space of “double alienation” (de Souza, 1999). He was an urban, English-speaking intellectual rooted in the cosmopolitan fabric of Mumbai, yet ethnically and religiously distinct from the Vedic or Islamic traditions that defined the rural masses. This status as an “Urban Alien” allowed him to perceive the Indian village not as an ancestral home, but as an

ethnographic site. His poetry reflects the tension of a man who is “indigenous by birth but a foreigner by intellectual temperament,” leading to a perspective that oscillates between ironic distance and a profound, shared vulnerability with the subaltern subjects he describes (Chindhade, 1996).

1.2. Defining “Socio-Cultural Geography”: In the context of this study, “Socio-Cultural Geography” transcends the mere mapping of physical topographies—such as the “mud-baked walls” and “monsoon rains” prevalent in Ezekiel’s imagery. Instead, it refers to the intersection of physical space and the mental landscape of its inhabitants. It is a “human geography” where the physical environment (the scarcity of light, the presence of the scorpion, the heat of the sun) dictates the psychological and spiritual responses of the collective (Rahman, 1981). By “mapping” these spaces, Ezekiel explores how the limitations of the rural environment foster specific cultural behaviours—ranging from the frantic rituals of the peasantry to the stoic resilience of the marginalized mother. The “geography” in Ezekiel’s verse is, therefore, a record of how faith and survival are etched into the very soil of the Indian village.

2. The Spectator’s Lens: Detachment and Modernity: In this section, the study examines Ezekiel’s unique positioning as an “outsider-insider.” Unlike the Romantic poets who viewed the rural landscape through a veil of pastoral idealism, Ezekiel adopts the stance of a modern, urban intellectual—a spectator whose primary tool is ironic detachment.

2.1. The Ironic Observer: Narrative Voice and Skepticism: The hallmark of Ezekiel’s rural depictions is a narrative voice that is profoundly analytical yet consciously distant. This detachment is not a sign of indifference but a stylistic strategy to navigate his dual identity as a member of the Bene Israel community in a post-colonial Indian landscape. As King (2005) notes, Ezekiel’s poetry often functions as a “journal of a mind” trying to make sense of an environment that feels simultaneously native and alien.

His skepticism acts as a linguistic barrier between the observer and the observed. By maintaining this distance, Ezekiel avoids the trap of sentimentalizing poverty. Instead, he records the “bitter-sweet” reality of the village with a clinical precision that highlights the absurdity of certain traditional practices. This ironic gaze allows the poet to critique the stagnation of rural life while acknowledging his own inability to fully integrate into the collective folk consciousness (Taranath, 1966).

2.2. Modernity vs. Tradition: The Westernized Foil: Ezekiel uses his Westernized, urban education as a “foil” to the ancient, ritualistic life of the Indian hinterland. This creates a dialectic tension between the “rational” city and the “irrational” village. In his poetry, modernity is represented by the quest for logic, secularism, and scientific inquiry, whereas tradition is grounded in cyclical time, karma, and communal ritual.

This tension is not merely thematic but structural. Ezekiel’s adherence to disciplined formal verse—stanzas, rhyme, and controlled meter—imposes a sense of “urban order” upon the chaotic, “pre-modern” experiences he describes. According to Verghese (1972), this encounter between the modern mind and the traditional heartland reveals the deep-seated cultural schizophrenia of the post-colonial Indian intellectual who is “at home nowhere” but “roots himself in the reality of the present.”

2.3. Key Poem Analysis: *In India* and *The Unfinished Man*: In the sequence *In India*, the spectator’s lens is at its sharpest. Ezekiel describes the “wooden benches” and the “atmosphere of smoked-out evenings,” mapping a geography of boredom and socio-economic inertia. He portrays the rural/semi-urban setting as a place where “the spirit of the place” is defined by a lack of progress.

Similarly, in *The Unfinished Man*, the urban protagonist is often haunted by the “primitive” shadows of the countryside. The “city” in these poems is a place of aspiration, while the “village” represents a primal,

unpolished state of being that the modern man has both outgrown and yet remains tethered to. Ezekiel suggests that the “unfinished” nature of the Indian identity stems from this very inability to reconcile the scientific temper of the present with the ritualistic weight of the past (Chindhade, 1996).

3. Mapping the Social Reality: Poverty and Persistence

3.1. Socio-Economic Undercurrents: The Landscape of Scarcity: Ezekiel’s rural topography is defined by a “gritty realism” that eschews the romanticized “Green India” tropes of his predecessors. The physical environment—marked by “mud-baked walls” and “sun-dried earth”—serves as a silent witness to a precarious existence. In Ezekiel’s verse, the rural setting is often synonymous with a lack of modern intervention; the “darkness” mentioned in *Night of the Scorpion* is not merely atmospheric but symbolic of a pre-industrial reality where electricity and medical emergency services are non-existent (King, 2005).

The struggle for survival is depicted through a lens of environmental hostility. The rain is “steady” and “merciless,” acting as a catalyst that drives the venomous scorpion indoors. This creates a sense of “claustrophobic poverty,” where the domestic space offers little protection against the natural world. The socio-economic undercurrent here suggests that for the Indian peasant, the “physical struggle” is a permanent state of being, mediated only by communal solidarity.

3.2. The Human Landscape: Archetypes of the Hinterland: The “geography” of Ezekiel’s poetry is populated by figures who embody the intersection of tradition and hardship. These characters function as socio-cultural archetypes:

- **The Peasantry (The Collective):** Described through the simile “like swarms of flies,” the villagers represent a subaltern mass whose identity is rooted in collective action rather than individual agency. Their “buzzing” of names of God highlights a dependency on the metaphysical in the absence of the physical (i.e., medicine).
- **The Skeptical Father:** He represents the “urban-rationalist” transplant. His character highlights the socio-economic divide within the Indian identity—the educated man who possesses “powder, mixture, herb and hybrid” yet remains ultimately powerless against the visceral realities of the rural sting (Taranath, 1966).
- **The Suffering Mother:** She is the emotional anchor of the landscape. Her silent endurance reflects the “stoic persistence” of rural Indian women. Her eventual gratitude that the scorpion “spared my children” elevates the poem from a critique of superstition to a tribute to maternal resilience, a core tenet of Indian social fabric.

3.3. Key Poem Analysis: *Night of the Scorpion* — The “Peace of Understanding” vs. The “Sting of Poverty”: The central tension in *Night of the Scorpion* lies in the juxtaposition of the “peace of understanding” on the faces of the peasants and the literal “sting” of their impoverished condition. Ezekiel observes that the villagers sit with a sense of fatalistic calm, believing that the mother’s current pain will “purify” her soul for her next birth.

While a modern reader might view this as “backwardness,” Ezekiel presents it as a psychological survival strategy. In a geography where professional healthcare is an economic impossibility, “the peace of understanding” serves as a communal anesthetic. The “sting of poverty” is thus mitigated by a “patchwork of faith.” Ezekiel’s irony is gentle here; he recognizes that while their science is flawed, their communal empathy provides a “social security” that the rationalist father cannot replicate with his “paraffin and match” (Verma, 1989).

4. The Religious Patchwork — Ritual, Superstition, and Skepticism

4.1. Case Study: *Night of the Scorpion*: In *Night of the Scorpion*, Ezekiel does not merely recount a childhood memory; he maps a conflict of ideologies. The poem serves as a “geographical” site where two Indias collide: the India of the Enlightenment (represented by the father) and the India of Ancient Ritual (represented by the peasants).

4.1.1. The Peasantry as a Collective Force: Ezekiel depicts the villagers not as individuals, but as a swarming, organic part of the landscape. He describes them coming “like swarms of flies,” bringing a buzz of incantations to “paralyse the Evil One.”

- **Socio-Cultural Reflection:** Here, the “geography” is one of communal identity. In the face of a threat (the scorpion’s sting), the village reacts as a single body. Their faith is a “patchwork” of reincarnation and karma—they pray that the sting might “burn away the sins of your previous birth.”

4.1.2. The Geography of the Domestic Space: The poem utilizes the physical environment—the “mud-baked walls” and the “diabolic tail” in the dark rain—to heighten the sense of vulnerability.

- **The Rationalist’s Failure:** The father, described as “sceptic, rationalist,” tries “powder, mixture, herb and hybrid.” His presence represents the urban-educated mind attempting to impose order on a chaotic, rural reality. However, the geography of the village is too deep-rooted for his science; he eventually resorts to “pouring a little paraffin” upon the toe and putting a match to it—a desperate act that mirrors the very “primitive” fire-rituals he ostensibly rejects.

4.1.3. Faith as an Anaesthetic: The most striking element of this “patchwork” is the lack of medical infrastructure. In Ezekiel’s rural India, prayer is the only accessible medicine.

- **The Mother’s Silence:** While the villagers “clicked their tongues” and the father experimented with fire, the mother “twisted through and through, groaning on a mat.”
- **The Resolution of Identity:** The final lines—“*My mother only said / Thank God the scorpion picked on me / and spared my children*”—shift the poem from a study of superstition to a study of selfless Indian motherhood. This final “patch of faith” transcends the intellectual debate of the rest of the poem, grounding the cultural reflection in maternal resilience.

4.1.4. Ironic Distance and Empathy: Ezekiel’s tone is crucial. He maintains an ironic distance from the “superstition” (referring to the peasants’ shadows as “giant scorpion shadows”), yet there is a subtle empathy for the communal warmth. He maps a culture that is “backward” by modern standards but “rich” in human connectivity.

5. Linguistic Geography: The Use of “Very Indian English”: Ezekiel’s innovation in Indian English poetry lies in his refusal to adhere to the “Queen’s English,” choosing instead to map the socio-linguistic reality of a decolonized nation. He identifies a specific “Linguistic Geography”—a space where the vernacular mother tongue (L1) intersects with a learned, often imperfect, English (L2).

5.1. Voice and Identity: The “Geographical” Soul of Syntax: Ezekiel uses “Babu Angrezi” or “Very Indian English” as a structural tool to locate his characters within a specific social stratum. By utilizing the present continuous tense where standard English requires the simple present (e.g., “I am doing” instead of “I do”), he provides a rhythmic heartbeat to the rural and semi-urban identity.

In *Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.*, the speaker’s rambling, circumstantial speech reflects a cultural geography of warmth and communal belonging over Western linear logic. As King (2005) notes, Ezekiel was the first to recognize that the way Indians spoke English was not a “mistake” to be corrected, but a

dialect to be celebrated as a marker of post-colonial identity. The syntax—marked by the omission of articles and the literal translation of Hindi idioms—serves as a map of the speaker’s internal world.

5.2. The Politics of Language: Mimicry vs. Empathy: A central debate in Ezekielian scholarship is whether his use of “Indian English” constitutes a mocking caricature or an empathetic “internalized” identity.

- **The Argument for Irony:** Critics often point to the “comic detachment” in poems like *The Professor*. The character’s boastful listing of his children’s successes (“Every one won’t be/General Manager”) highlights a certain provincial narrowness.
- **The Argument for Empathy:** However, a deeper reading suggests that Ezekiel is not laughing *at* his subjects, but rather capturing the “humanity behind the hybridity” (Parthasarathy, 1976). By giving these characters a poetic voice, he validates their existence. The “Very Indian English” poems represent an internalized identity; Ezekiel, as a member of a minority community, finds his own “home” in this linguistic middle ground. He demonstrates that the “patchwork of faith” is also a patchwork of language—fragmented, flawed, yet undeniably authentic.

5.3. Key Poem Analysis: *The Professor*: In *The Professor*, the geography is one of social mobility and the passage of time. The protagonist’s speech—“*Geography mainly list of names of places/But I am remembering all names*”—is deeply ironic. While the Professor claims to know geography, he is trapped in the static socio-economic geography of his own past.

- Ezekiel’s use of the present continuous—“*Everything is happening with God’s grace*”—serves to “ground the poem in a specific cultural ethos where destiny and daily life are inextricably linked” (Rahman, 1981, p. 42).

5.4. Refining the Argument: This linguistic “mapping” proves that for Ezekiel, the village and the small town are not just places one visits; they are voices one carries. The “Very Indian English” is the bridge that allows the urban poet to step into the rural landscape without losing his critical, yet affectionate, lens.

6. Conclusion: The Integrated Outsider

6.1. Synthesizing the Patchwork: The Claim of Belonging: The “patchwork of faith” identified throughout Ezekiel’s rural corpus serves as the definitive map of his reconciliation with the Indian landscape. While critics often highlight his “alienated” status as a member of the Bene Israel community, Ezekiel’s poetry suggests that true integration does not require the erasure of one’s critical faculties. By documenting the rural hinterland with “unclouded eyes,” he performs an act of radical belonging. As Ezekiel famously asserted in *Background, Casually*, “My backward place is where I am,” a sentiment that reinforces his commitment to the Indian reality despite his Westernized rationalism (Ezekiel, 2005). His “otherness” is thus transformed into a specialized vantage point—one that allows him to claim India not through blind nationalism, but through an honest, albeit ironic, engagement with its complexities.

6.2. Final Reflection: The Currency of Faith in the Geography of Hardship: Ultimately, Ezekiel’s depiction of rural India is defined by a “bitter-sweet” realism. He maps a geography where socio-economic deprivation is the baseline, yet this void is filled by a profound, collective spiritualism. In the absence of institutional infrastructure—medical, educational, or economic—faith becomes the primary “currency” for survival (King, 2001). Whether it is the incantations of peasants in *Night of the Scorpion* or the stoic resignation of the subaltern, Ezekiel illustrates that in the Indian village, ritual is not merely superstition; it is a psychological fortification against a hostile environment. His poetry captures this tension perfectly,

presenting a landscape where the “scorpions” of poverty and pain are met with the “lanterns” of communal faith.

6.3. The Legacy: Paving the Way for the Modern Voice: Ezekiel’s contribution to the canon marks a seismic shift in the evolution of Indian English Verse. By pivoting away from the romanticized, Eurocentric “pastoral” tropes of his predecessors, he established a “poetics of the everyday” (Rahman, 1981). He granted future generations of poets—such as Keki N. Daruwalla and Jayanta Mahapatra—the “linguistic license” to explore the grit, dust, and localized syntax of the Indian experience without apology. His legacy lies in his ability to prove that a poet could be “modern” while remaining deeply rooted in the “vernacular spirit” of the soil. Through his meticulous mapping of India’s socio-cultural geography, Ezekiel ensured that the Indian village was no longer a distant myth, but a living, breathing, and intellectually rigorous subject for world literature.

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