

Superstitions as Cultural Identity Markers in Esther David's *The Man
with Enormous Wings* and *My Father's Zoo*

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Abstract

Superstitions play a crucial role in driving the lives of people all over the world. Every culture does have a particular set of superstitions. Since literature is the reflection of society, writers keep attempting to portray the mindsets of people through fictional as well as non-fictional texts. Popular superstitions in the West like regarding the number thirteen, black cats, and breaking of the mirror as unlucky are some, which prevail. In India too, we have similar superstitions such as putting a spot of soot on a baby's forehead commonly. Shreds of evidence of superstitious practices can be found even in the earliest human settlements in the later Paleolithic and Neolithic periods. The presence of many things of daily-needs in the graves of those periods confirms the superstitious practices rampant in that society. Even in the highly developed civilization of Indus valley, amulets were used possibly to prevent evil

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forces. Traces of Superstitions can also be found during the adventurous and courageous Aryan period. Superstition not only controls the minds of the illiterate people but also of the literate ones equally.

Esther David (1945-) is an Indian Jewish novelist. She has won the Sahitya Academy Award for her novel *Book of Rachel* in 2010. She depicts the lives and experiences of Jews in India, known for unity in diversity. This paper attempts at the portrayal of superstitions in *The Man with Enormous Wings* and *My Father's Zoo*. She satirizes the blind faith in *Khansi Pir* (cough healer), sacrifice, and idolatry in the former whereas she highlights the superstitious faith regarding snakes and bearcats in the latter. By depicting these, David shows how one's cultural identity changes/evolves based on the milieu one lives in.

Keywords: Superstition, Identity Marker, Halloween, Amulet, Sacrifice, Idolatry.

Most cultures have their own superstitions. Superstitions play a crucial role in driving the lives of people. Superstition refers to any belief or practice, which is explained by supernatural causality, that one event causes another without any natural process of linking the two events- such as astrology and certain aspects of religion, like omens, witchcraft, and prophecies that contradict natural science. *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines superstition as, “the belief that particular events happen in a way that cannot be explained by reason or the belief that particular events bring good or bad luck” (1553). Some beliefs and practices which are considered superstitious by some may not be considered so by others. The term superstition is Greek in its origin, which literally meant fear of demons. Robertson Davies (1913-1995), a Canadian novelist, and critic begins his essay, “A Few Kind Words for Superstition”, stating the perceptions of people of that time as “the Renaissance of the irrational”, where superstitions do not pose a serious challenge to reason. They are not interrogated, rather they drive the course of the lives of even intelligent people like university

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students, and learned professors. He gives four kinds of superstitions: 1) Vain Observance, 2) Divination, 3) Idolatry, and 4) Improper worship of the Proper God.

Almost every popular superstition has a history behind its origin. Determining the origins of superstitions is largely a matter of guesswork; some are so old that their origins are lost in the mists of time. It seems interesting how some popular superstitions received social confirmation in different cultures, and how they drive the lives of people, how even educated and intelligent people remain under their spell.

A good example of this is Halloween. “The night of thirty-first October is known as Halloween” (Cielo 38). It was believed in the past that dead people appeared from their graves; children dressing as ghosts and witches now celebrate it in the US, Canada, and Britain. This tradition can be traced back about two thousand years to the Celtic belief that the spirits of the dead still remained present on our plane of existence, and required food and drink to be placated. Failing to leave out an offering was sure to invite the disgruntled spirits to cause mischief and ill fortune in retaliation. Later people began dressing up as the spirits in order to receive these offerings of food, and playing practical jokes on those who did not furnish them.

Another superstition is regarding number thirteen that it brings bad luck (Cielo 4). This belief is so strong throughout many societies that many major hotels and high rises traditionally either build only twelve floors or if they want to go higher, skip levelling the thirteenth floor entirely. Many people refuse to stay on the thirteenth floor, or in the room 13th. On 13th of the month, people stay home from work, for the fear of something bad happening. There are many theories as to why this belief is held. One is that Judas, known as “the Betrayer of Jesus” was the 13th member present at the Last Supper. Further Friday the 13th is also considered unlucky. Paraskevidekatriaphobia is the official word for the fear of Friday the thirteenth. Jesus was said to have been crucified on Friday and the number of the

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guests at the party of the last supper was thirteen. So after such events, Friday is just considered an unlucky day and number thirteen is unlucky, and whenever the thirteen of the month falls on Friday, it has become a general accepted notion that it would definitely bring ill-fortune.

There are many versions of the belief regarding black cats. One version of the belief goes that if a black cat crosses your path, it will bring bad luck. While “another version claims that if a black cat walks towards you then it brings very good luck to you; but if it walks away from you, then it takes its good luck with it” (Cielo 123). In ancient Egypt, the Goddess Bast was a black female cat. Christians, wanting to rid society of all traces of other religions, could convince the ignorant that black cats were a demon in disguise and should thus be destroyed. In the process they also destroyed the kindly women who cared for the cats, believing them to be witches. Being demons, a black cat crossing your path would create a barrier of evil, cutting you off from God and blocking the entrance to heaven. In England, black cats are thought to bring good fortune. It is also supposed that they can see spirits, so they are considered excellent guardians against evil spirits.

Another popular belief is regarding the breaking of a mirror, which is supposed to bring seven years bad luck. The unbreakable metal mirrors of the early Egyptians and Greeks were valued items because of their magical properties. After the glass mirrors were introduced, the Romans tagged the broken mirror a sign of bad luck. The length of the prescribed misfortune, seven years, came from the Roman belief that man’s body was physically rejuvenated every seven years, and he became, in effect, a new man. “The true reason that breaking a mirror was seven years bad luck is because when mirrors were first made they were so expensive that if you broke one you would serve seven years as an indentured servant to the owner of the mirror because not too many people could afford to buy another one to replace it” (Cielo 97).

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“A horseshoe, hung above the doorway brings good luck to a home. In most of Europe, protective horseshoes are placed in a downward-facing position, but in some parts of Ireland and Britain, people believe that the shoes must be turned upward or the luck will run out” (Cielo 122). The origin of horseshoe superstition is a rich convergence of many ancient roots, beliefs, and traditions:

One legend (dating from the 10th century) says that the Devil called on St. Dunstan, who was skilled in shoeing horses. St. Dunstan recognized him and fastened him to a wall. He then set to work with such roughness that the Devil roared for mercy. St. Dunstan turned the devil loose after making him promise never to enter a home on which a horseshoe was fixed. Witches fear horses, so a door also turns them away with a horseshoe mounted on it (Cielo 65).

To bless someone who sneezes has been a peculiar belief throughout Europe. It was thought that when one sneezed, the soul briefly flew out of the body, and this might allow an evil spirit to take up residence within. The blessing of those who sneeze started when the great plague took hold of Europe. Sufferers began sneezing violently, and as such, were bound to die. The Pope, therefore, passed a law requiring people to bless the sneezer. At the same time, it was expected that anybody sneezing, would cover their mouth with a cloth or their hand. This was obviously to stop the spreading of the disease, but many believed that it was to keep the soul intact. Sneezing ‘into the air’ would allow the soul to escape and death would be imminent (Cielo 78).

Superstitions shape and limit the thinking of ignorant people. They make people think in a particular way as in Althusserian sense. They are a part of ideological apparatuses.

Superstitions are a commonly witnessed phenomenon in India. People of every caste, class and community are superstitious. It is only because of it that *babas*, *sadhus*, and self-styled healers have a bright career. Most people prefer them for treatment when diseases or

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misfortunes befall them. To stop suddenly on seeing a cat crossing our path is a widely seen phenomenon in Indian society. Similarly, “the howl of the dog at the deadly hours of night instills a feeling of horror as it symbolizes the death of some near and dear one or is an indicator of bad luck for the listener” (Cielo 122). If someone sneezes while a person is departing, it is believed that s/he is going to flop in his mission. The breaking of the mirror by any member signifies a death in the family before the year closes. There are a lot of superstitious beliefs regarding itching. “If your right-hand itches, you will receive money; if the left, you will spend money. If the left ear itches, it is an indication that someone is speaking ill of you; if the right ear, that someone is speaking well of you” (Cielo 83). If the two persons accidentally make the same remark at the same time, they must join their hands and wish. Such a wish will be fulfilled. Further, a much-used superstition in Indian movies is the presentation of the falling star. If anyone sees a falling star and wishes by closing his eyes. Such a wish is fulfilled (Cielo 130). Basically, all such practices have no rational ground. They have been prevalent in society since time immemorial. They have their origin in illiteracy. They are born from a lack of rational belief, scientific attitude, and lack of faculty to interpret certain events (Cielo 1). Its origin can be traced to pre-historic times when people did not have knowledge and exposure as we have today. The people of those days had no control over forces of nature. In such situations, superstitions got considered as a means to explain the causes and effects of some mishappenings (Cielo 2). Such incidents are said to have been caused by some supernatural elements. Gradually, these interpretations of events in life received acceptability and were passed on from generations to generations. In the course of time, they became part of social life. Pieces of evidence of superstitious practices can be found even in the earliest human settlements in the later Paleolithic and Neolithic periods. The presence of many things of daily-needs in the graves of those periods confirms the superstitious practices rampant in that society. Even in the highly developed civilization of

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Indus valley, amulets were used possibly to ward off evil forces (Sharma 41). Superstitions were also present during the adventurous and courageous Aryans of the Rig Vedic period (Sharma 58). Repeated co-incidents helped in making stronger the superstitions. For instance, if a person while going out on a certain mission comes across a particular animal or person, and by chance he is unsuccessful, s/he begins to believe that it was caused by the animal or person which he happened to see. If the incident is repeated, this established that animal or person as a bad omen, and conversely, success associated with a series of coincidental happenings creates a superstition. Indian religious system also contributed to its propagation, by following totemism. This sometimes gives superstitions the status and sanctity of religion. The mode of practice of superstitions in India is different from that of the west. Here, superstitions are deeply rooted in society. Even with the spread of education and awareness, superstitions could not be driven out of society. Superstitions hold educated and uneducated alike. It has such a strong grip over the minds of people that they could not make themselves free from them. To hang an ugly fearsome face usually painted at the back of an earthen vessel to the façade of the house, and to hang artificial black shoes at the back of a truck or bus, in order to save it from the evil eye are very common in India. The sacrifice of innocent animals in the name of certain religious practice is a gruesome form of superstition in India, which often catches the headlines of several dailies. Here, a widow is treated as a subject to be hurt and humiliated. If someone sees her while going out for work, she is considered unlucky for him. Her presence is also disliked on auspicious occasions like marriage. Thus, the culture of superstitious practices is rich and varied in India.

Through literature, a writer either instructs the readers or reflects the customs, rituals, traditions and trends prevalent in the society. The English Romantic poet John Keats (1795-1821) advocates the immortality of art and the temporariness of animate beings in this world, in his famous ode, "Ode on a Grecian Urn". Among the three pictures painted on the

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Urn, one is of a young bull decorated with garlands is being led by a priest to the altar to be slaughtered and people from the nearby town have come to see the scene. The poet questions, “Who are these coming to the sacrifice? / To what green altar, O mysterious priest, / Lead’st thou that heifer lowing at the skies, / And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?” (36). The poet here questions the irrationality and futility of the sacrificial ritual.

Nissim Ezekiel (1924-2004), an Indian Jewish English poet, in his poem “Night of the Scorpion” brings out the superstitious nature of the villagers remembering the night when a Scorpion stings his mother and how the villagers come holding lanterns in their hands. They do not search for the doctor rather they search for the Scorpion and say, “With every movement that the scorpion made / his poison moved in mother’s blood, they said / May he sit still they said” (27).

Esther David (b. 1945) is an Indian Jewish writer who has won the Sahitya Akademi Award for her novel, *The Book of Rachel* in 2010. David in her novel, *The Man with Enormous Wings*, depicts some deeply rooted superstitions, which are an integral part of mass culture present in Indian society. Firstly, she presents the mentality of the people in the time of diseases, where the people like to visit *Khansi Pir ki dargah* (shrine of a coughing saint). They prefer *Pir* rather than a doctor. Esther David presents Ahmedabad as a city of dust. During summer, the weather gives birth to many diseases, especially coughing or throat problems. Patients move to *Khansi Pir ki dargah* for the cure. When patients enter the *dargah*, Munnabhai (the coughing saint) waves a broom of peacock at them to drive away the evil forces from them. He cures maladies with the water from *dargah* tap (8). Here the writer presents that the *Pir* has a set pattern to deal with his believers. Believers come to him with plastic bottles filled with water, he closes his eyes for prayer, and blows air into the bottle and, give it back to the believers. He instructs them to follow a course of five Thursdays. It is necessary for the believer to drink the miracle water, and to offer sweets like *pedas* and *jalebi*

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at the *dargah*. If anyone is cured by the fifth Thursday, he is expected to offer *kheer* and some donation. Here, David depicts the hedonistic as well as the materialistic aspect of the *dargah*. Staunch devotees invite severe ailments because of their blind faith. Such programming of the minds becomes fatal. She observes that common people, as well as readers, need to turn aware and rational. About *Khansi Pir's* technique, which he adopts to deal with his patients or believers, she comments, “logically, five Thursdays means a month, during which time a cough would cure itself naturally, but when it comes to believing in the impossible, reason does not work.” (9)

Secondly, Esther David depicts the superstition of sacrifice. “The *Khodiyar Mata ni Vav* is a stepwell in Vasna. There is a legend about this step well which states that a young prince and his bride were sacrificed to get a boon of water” (21). In fact, no one has witnessed the sacrifice. People just knew this legend from their elders, who had heard from their elders. The practice of sacrifices has been rampant since time immemorial in India. This practice has been glorified to appease the deities to have favours in return. It seems to champion the corruption. She desires change by criticizing the customs of human as well as of animal sacrifice.

Thirdly, David depicts *Hadakai Mata Nu Mandir* at Shela in Ahmedabad. *Hadkai Mata* is known for curing dog bites, rabies, and barrenness in women. It was a custom that a vow to *Hadkai Mata* can be made only on Sundays, and Mondays. A silver bell is tied on the arm of a person like an amulet. This bell is removed only when the believer is cured. The same applies to cows, buffaloes, and goats, silver bells are tied to the legs of the animals. Here, the believers need to follow a particular diet provided by the temple for five months. The believers are paid for it. At this point David makes the rational readers think that how a simple silver bell as an amulet can cure all diseases of men, women, children, and of animals too. If *Hadkai Mata* saves people as well as animals from diseases, why she did not do

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anything to prevent the communal riots in Ahmedabad or the rest of Gujarat? (16). By questioning the impotency of God, David seems to be conveying an old proverb that God helps those who help themselves.

In *My Father's Zoo*, Esther David's attack on superstitions regarding snakes and bearcats comes to the forefront. She depicts Reuven David, the protagonist, as a rational character who questions the prevailing system of cure in case of snakebites. He is of the opinion that a venomous snakebite can be cured only by scientific remedial measure. The afflicted person can be saved only by injecting anti-venom serum in time. Once "He made an announcement on radio and in the newspapers which said:

Reuven David of Hill Garden Zoo has announced an award of Rs. 5000/-, to anyone who can cure a bite from venomous snake by magic, *mantras*, black stones, *nag-mani*, *herbs* or by virtue of any other means, other than anti-snake venom serum. One condition imposed by Reuven David is that the venomous snake which would be used to administer bites to the person will only be provided from his own collection" (87).

But no one dares to turn up to take this challenge. Therefore, he says that such healers succeed in curing only non-poisonous snake bites, and many victims lost their lives because of these self-styled healers. Reuven David also exposes the tricks of snake charmers which they use to befool people. In the case of snakebite, he advises rushing the victim to a hospital. Snake charmers say that the Cobra becomes captive to the music played on a flute, and in this way, they collect their alms. But Reuven David says that it is not true. The cobra follows the movements of the flute, not its music. He is also of the opinion that cobras do not drink milk but feed on other non-poisonous snakes, rats, frogs, and bird eggs.

Esther David also presents blind faith about a bearcat's tears. It was believed in the society that a bottle of bearcat's tears had magical powers. It was used as a charm. So, for this reason, they were tortured and compelled to shed tears by the poachers. Reuven David

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questions this stereotypical thinking about animals. He buys two bearcats for The Hill Garden Zoo, and appeals people not to torture them -- but rather love them. He also appeals to people not to kill the animal as they help in maintaining the ecological balance.

Thus, in these texts, Esther David satirizes the avaricious nature of *pirs* in the pretext of faith, questions the potency of God by depicting Goddess *Hadkai* helpless in averting the riots in the city, and proves the practice of sacrifice to please deities pointless, and unreasonable. She criticizes irrational beliefs, which prove disastrous to men, animals and the environment. She pleads to maintain a harmonious coexistence of human beings, flora and fauna. She is of the opinion of preserving the respective peculiar culture heritage but at the same time, she makes an appeal to the readers to re-think some superstitious beliefs, blind adherence of which can result disastrously for life.

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