

Myth and Reality in O.V. Vijayan's The Legends of Khasak

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Abstract

Historic development can be seen, in general terms, in human development. Man grows from solipsism to an awareness of the outside world. The awareness is initially overwhelmed by fear and distrust. This grows into a stage when one attempts to organise his/her perceptions of the world by explaining phenomena with help of myths and reality. The main theme provides an organic unity to a novel. Myths are universal phenomena having their own peculiar place in the cultural ethos and milieu of a people. O .V Vijayan's The Legends of Khasak is based on myths and reality. As it being a multi-faceted novel; readers can assimilate and reproduce it in a multiple ways. Many intellectuals have found in depth presence of myths in the novel. Likewise there are several other themes like the concept of rebirth, death and nature, lust and mystic experience, sense of sin etc. The present paper tries to show that O. V. Vijayan's mythmaking with reality and the various themes that expresses in the novels are not simply imaginary and irrelevant. He was not a person fabricating imaginary takes, unrealistic in nature. He is a writer belonging to most modern and post-colonial era and creates picture of what is going on in the society and the world. Superstitions are inter-woven with myths, legends, unnatural things and disaster, customs and traditions, and mainly the outcome of ignorance in the real world.

Keywords: Solipsism, Universal phenomena, Multi-faceted novel, Cultural ethos and milieu.

Indian mythology is one of the richest elements of Indian culture, which enriches it further and makes it a unique one in the world. Through generations, different stories in mythology have been passed either by word of mouth or through carefully stored scriptures. The interesting aspect of the stories in mythology is that they are usually meant to convey subtle facts, rules and maxims to guide our daily lives. The stories in mythology vary from subtle maxim-conveying tales of Panchatantra and Jataka-tales to subtle life paradigm defining stories from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. So each version is right in its own merit. This certainly is the result of the natural evolution the stories might have gone in the process of being handed over from generation to generation for centuries. Significant contributions to Indian English

Fiction were made only after the Second World War. Indian fiction in English has travelled a long way from its inception. It adopted the form of novel from the western sources but developed into its own form in the time. The three writers who had contributed much for the development of Indian fiction in English are popularly known as the 'Big Three of Indian Fiction in English'; they are Mulk Raj Anand, R.K.Narayan, and Raja Rao, who wrote predominantly a humanist phase. We have witnessed the growth and development of Indian Literature in English which has won laurel as well as negative applause. O.V Vijayan's The Legends of Khasak is based on myths and reality. As it being a multi-faceted novel; readers can assimilate and reproduce it in a multiple ways. Many intellectuals have found in depth presence of myths in the novel. Likewise there are several other themes like the concept of rebirth, death and nature, lust and mystic experience, sense of sin etc.

Oottupulackal Velukkutty Vijayan, popularly known as O. V. Vijayan is a writer who has first written his novels and short stories in his regional language, Malayalam. Being a student of English Literature, he felt a need to translate them into English and he has done it. It would not be as overstatement to register here that a great novelists has been kept away from the common readers, for the courses unknown. O. V. Vijayan's Indianness lies in his choice of stories and characters taken from myths, legends, folktales and historical events. He used the form and artifice of Indian Classical and Folk Tradition. He deals with the evils of caste politics, fascism, and biased treatment of women in his novels. Myth is a traditional or legendary story, usually concerning some being or hero or event, with or without a determinable basis of fact or natural explanation, especially one that is concerned with deities or demigods and explains some practice, rite or phenomenon of nature. Translation Studies, another important offshoot of comparative literature, suits the kaleidoscopic richness of the multilingual scenario of India. Indian novels are best read from the multiple perspectives of comparative literature, translation studies and critical theory. Girish Karnad is one of the outstanding dramatists in Modern Indian English Drama. The play proceeds, exactly in the way, the playwright carries out

his exploration. The scenes are linked in flashback style. Girish Karnad does the same when he looks at the history, myth and folktales from the contemporary view. Historiographic deconstruction is a popular stratagem of the political novelists who attempt to demythify the metanarratives of history. Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* which is a reconstructed form of the epic, *The Mahabharata*. He has succeeded not only in casting a cynical modern sensibility upon the great myths and legends of the past but also in casting some of the values of that past onto the experiences of the recent past.

The novel was 'translated' into English by Vijayan in 1994 (under the title *The Legends of Khasak*, Penguin Books). This version differs substantially from the Malayalam original. Most Kerala readers prefer to read this as an independent novel rather than seeing it as a translation. The English version has been translated into German by Ursula Gräfe. *Khasakkinte Itihasam* was inspired by the Ottupulackal family's stay at a village called Thasarak near Palakkad (in central Kerala) for a year. O. V. Vijayan's sister O. V. Usha was appointed as the teacher of a single-teacher government school in the village (1956). Some of the characters in the novel were modeled after real-life characters that Vijayan encountered in Thasarak. 'The Legends of Khasak' is the magnum opus of O. V. Vijayan, offers a fitting study for asserting his stance among the literary genius of the nation which forms an area of study of comparative literature. A self translated rendering of a masterpiece that resets the history of Malayalam fiction, *The Legends of Khasak* is also a rich specimen for translation studies. Cast in an antique, surreal environs, yet narrating the tale of psychologically intricate characters whose lives are closely underlinked with myths, the novel offers fertile ground for the application of two core areas of criticism theory-psychoanalytic criticism and archetypal studies. Vijayan was a true visionary and Indian foremost fabulist in the recent past. His writing is an evocative as that of William Faulkner and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. There are plenty of established literary giants whose works have been a reasonable well translated. Foremost among them is O. V. Vijayan whose works arguably ranks alongside Salman Rushdie's own output. Vijayan's book contains the same magical realism that has made Rushdie as an international celebrity. As a novelist, Vijayan's major concerns are consciousness and persuasion for change. He made his stand very clear during his discussion with well-known novelists like U. R. Ananthamurthy and Prasanna.

The Legends of Khasak is set in the blackwaters of Southern India in the middle of the twentieth century.

The District Board has established a single-teacher school in remote Khasak, in an effort to give the local children access to basic education, and Ravi is the outsider in this place but he easily fits in the scheme of things here. Contrasts abound in the book-modern world intruding upon tradition, strangers mixing with locals-but Vijayan doesn't make it a book about these contrasts. It is this remarkable village - world which takes everyone, including Ravi into its embrace (and just as readily let them slip free, if need be)-that is the centrepiece of this richly populated work. There is a paradise, a fall a pox-epidemic, a journey, a suffering and penance. The visual image that inspired him to write this novel was in the village Thasarak. Vijayan, here, has effectively combined Persian, Biblical, and Hindu myths to telling its effect. It is concerned with the existential crisis. It takes into its sweep both material and spiritual forms of existentialism and describes journey from material world to spiritual one. Ravi is not a dominant central figure, he almost merely one among many, the short chapters shifting focus among a large cast of characters. *The Legends of Khasak* presents an idyllic world of Ravi's childhood which is like paradise:

"His most cherished memory was of the sky-watch, a pastime in which his mother joined him, though not often as she was big with child. She told him stories of the Devas. These dwellers of the sky drank the milk of the Kalpaka fruit, their elixir of immortality, and flung the empty husks down to the earth. If you gazed on the sky long enough, you saw the husks as transparent apparitions. The sky at noon was full of them".[1]

The novel tells the story of a young university student, who leaves a promising future to take up a primary school teacher's job in a remote village (Khasak). Little by little, the village reveals its secrets. The protagonist is soon bewitched by this ancient village where dreams and legends intermingle. He immerses himself in the 'bewitching sensuousness' of the new 'rustic, amoral world', only to emerge as an 'involved outsider'. [2] He finds rational inquiry meaningless and begins a metaphorical journey inwards. [3] The novel is often associated with the general disillusionment with the communist movement in Kerala in the 1960s. The novel is characterized by the matter-of-fact inclusion of mythical elements into seemingly realistic fiction (magic realism). The novel, published in 1969, after more than a decade of drafting and redrafting, became an instant hit with the young Kerala people. The protagonist, Ravi, a Malayali final year under-graduate student in Madras, is haunted by the guilt of an affair he had with his stepmother. He thus abandons the prospects of a bright academic career,

deserts his girlfriend Padma and leaves on a long journey, which finally brings him to the remote (fictional) village of Khasak near Palakkad (central Kerala). At Khasak, he works in a single-teacher government primary school as part of the Malabar District Board's education initiative.

The story commences with Ravi's arrival at Khasak and the beginning of his encounters with its people and legends. He immerses himself in the 'bewitching sensuousness of the rustic, amoral world', only to emerge as an 'involved outsider'. He finds rational inquiry meaningless and begins a metaphorical journey inwards. The narrative strategy of the novel is characterized by the matter-of-fact inclusion of fantastic or mythical elements into seemingly realistic fiction. The narration also makes sense of multiple separate realities. At the end of a series of events, including the threat of suspension from the authorities, Ravi keeps his word to his ex-girlfriend Padma to leave Khasak. The novel ends with Ravi in the monsoon rain, waiting for his bus to leave the village, watching a snake that had struck him withdrawing into its hole. Many intellectuals have found in depth presence of myths in the novel. Likewise there are several other themes like the concept of rebirth, death and nature, lust and mystic experience, sense of sin etc. There one can see powerful images like the image of water and image of time. O.V.Vijayan had undoubtedly created a magic world and the readers can have a comprehensive outlook about the known and the things about the existence of man in this universe and the mysterious ways that make his life possible on this earth. The first work which won fame for O. V. Vijayan among the Malayalam novelists is *The Legends of Khasak*(1968). In this novel, he unfolds the mechanical life of man, the abandonment of values, the erosion of values in individuality and the existential pathos through the picturisation of a village. O.V. Vijayan's *The Legends of Khasak* is one of these.

The themes in this novel have universal appeal and it has succeeded in its attempt and in its manifestation. The novel has no story-line. It recounts the numerous encounters of Khasak from a spiritual and philosophical frame of mind. Through these encounters, Vijayan narrates numerous stories, myths and superstitions cherished in Khasak. He places them in opposition to the scientific and rational world outside, which is now making inroads into the hamlet through Ravi's single-teacher school. The irony of the interface between these two worlds occupies a substantial space in the novel. Through the myths and stories, Vijayan also explores similar encounters of the past recounted by the people of Khasak, enabling him to have a distinctly unique view of cultural encounters across time and space. Likewise there are several other themes

like the concept of rebirth, death and nature, lust and mystic experience, sense of sin etc. There one can see powerful images like the image of water and image of time. In this novel, the writer has created a myth. The characters delve deep into the foregone days. At the same time, it retains the vitality throughout the novel. They do not worry about the troubles and turmoil of life; they do not repent their actions too. Ravi more or less appears as an outsider in Khasak. And he is forced to carry his own actions. He is overburdened with responsibilities. Ravi's arrival to Khasak is not an escape from his life; instead a constant pursuit of life. Thus he becomes the representation of the modern world.

It can be seen that Vijayan's mythmaking and reality and the various themes that expresses in the novels are not simply imaginary and irrelevant. He was not a person fabricating imaginary takes, unrealistic in nature. He is a writer belonging to most modern and post-colonial era and creates picture of what is going on in the society and the world. Beside these concerns, over indulgence in erotic sexualism, myths and mythology, social and cultural history, misuse of power, all these are put together connecting past and present and reliving the impact of past on present. These issues are not isolated from each other. They are intermixed and it is this reality that provides authentic background to Vijayan's novels. O.V. Vijayan had undoubtedly created a magic world and the readers can have a comprehensive outlook about the known and the things about the existence of man in this universe and the mysterious ways that make his life possible on this earth.

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