

Portrayal of Indian Rural Life in The Legends of Khasak by O.V. Vijayan

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Abstract

India is a land of villages. In fact the large modern cities like Mumbai, Kolkata and Delhi do not represent the true India. True India can be seen in villages. But people have greater attraction toward cities than the villages. Village life and its cultural spirit are destroyed by economical and practical thinking. Many Indian writers of pre-independence as well as post-independence periods felt the true dignity of village life and depicted in their works. Authors writing in English such as Raja Rao, R.K Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Sarojini Naidu, Bhabani Bhattacharya, O.V. Vijayan and many more have reflected Indian rural life in their writings. This research paper aims to explore the depiction of various aspects of Indian rural life in O.V. Vijayan's well-known novel 'The Legends of Khasak'.

Keywords: rural, Indian Literature, O.V. Vijayan, Legends of Khasak, post-independence

Khasak is a village in Kerala's Palghat region where Ravi came as a teacher. He joined a single teacher school established by the District Board in this remote village. He was on a journey to seek the ultimate truth and didn't come to Khasak only to escape from his life. Khasak is depicted as a fusion of history, folktale and mystery. The place is like any Indian village where people of different faiths co-exist and share cultural heritage. The novel is not only the tale of Ravi's journey but it is a collective narrative in which many stories pertaining to history, religion, folktales, myths and superstitions are found such as Appu-Kili, Mollakka, the saga of Khasak, the Sheikh and Khasak's crown Chetali.

Ravi's search for the ultimate truth led him to this place. The village was set in the backwaters of southern India. The school was a leased house with two rooms and corridor and a large yard shaded by tamarind trees. It was on the outskirts of the village and belonged to an impoverished feudal chief of Khasak named Sivaraman Nair. Ravi made this school his abode and started teaching. He was an outsider and came from modern world but was embraced by this village. Many people in the village saw the school as a threat to the cultural and social fibre of the village because it was seen as the

scientific and rational world outside making inroads into the traditional village life. The novel explicitly presents the encounter between the forces of modern world and traditional rural life. This fear is evident in the following lines:

"...They all gathered beneath the banyan tree which stood at the centre of the village square. The mullah, seated on the brick-paved platform around the foot of the tree, spoke to his congregation of the perils of the new school, its angular letters and its reckoning used in forbidden usury. The mullah evoked fearsome visions of the insanity of the new learning, the anger of the Sheikh and his second coming. Khasak had two schools-the madrassa where the mullah taught the Koran, and ezhutthu palli, literally the house of writing, run by a family of hereditary Hindu astrologers. The schools never competed" (Vijayan 12)

Myths are usually old and were used by people in ancient times to explain the world around them when science and technology were not developed. Myths often have gods, goddesses, deities and supernatural beings having god like qualities. Myths, legends and folklores are inevitable part of Indian village life as most of the historical, social and cultural events are recorded through them. Irrespective of region, religion and language they are found in all parts of India. Khasak is no exception and is depicted as "a land from the past, potent with dreams and legends." It seems like a mystical place full of mythical figures and tales such as the saga of Khasak taught by Allah-pitcha, the mullah in the madrassa. According to the saga a cavalcade of a thousand and one horses arrived at Khasak on palm grove. The riders were the Badrins, warriors blessed by the Prophet, and at the head of the column rode the holiest them all- Sayed Mian Sheikh. The horse of the Sheikh was ill and old. When the old horse could go no further the sheikh signalled his warriors to stop. The faithful animal died and was buried in a palm grove. It is said that he helps the people who have lost their way. The thousand riders dismounted and pitched their camp in the palm grove. The people of Khasak descent from those one thousand horsemen. As depicted in the novel:

"Today the Sheikh sleeps in a rock crypt on top of Chetali. Mortal eyes are yet to discover its exact location. Both the Muslims and the Hindus of Khasak look upon the Sheikh as their protecting deity." (Vijayan 11)

Myths tend to teach moral lessons and explain the significance of social or historical events. People in any society act and react to the norms and customs of their time and place. O.V. Vijayan in this novel has used myths to present a small village life and its wisdom and values. The novel has many stories and tales exhibiting cultural heritage of the village. The life of the people in this village is governed by myths and beliefs.

Village economies mostly rely upon agriculture and handicrafts. Agriculture is the centre of rural life but it depends on rains and therefore economic stability is hard to achieve. It is the land of farmers, shepherds and artisans. In the very beginning of the novel, the old luggage-carrier shares his anxiety about the monsoon as it is late this year. He says "The rains haven't come yet... Maybe the monsoon will fail us this year." (Vijayan 5) Many farmers are trapped in the vicious circle of debt which they cannot pay due to weak monsoon or crop failure. Thus, some of them become tenant-farmers and were exploited by landlords. The novel depicts the conditions of farmers, tenant-farmers, toddy-tappers, well-divers and shopkeepers who are integral parts of rustic life. Kuppu-Acchan was a toddy-taper married Kallu who was the daughter of a prosperous tenant-farmer. She was the youngest of seven sisters. Her father had married off six of them, and when Kallu's turn came, there was little left of the family's gold and money. After marriage she convinced her husband to become a tenant-farmer because the station of a tapper was lower than that of a tenant-farmer. Kuppu hated the feudal humiliation of tenancy and gave it up at the very first harvest.

According to the author the actual work of the novel had started in 1956 when the nation was facing many challenges such as connecting all its parts and providing basic amenities to all the citizens. Particularly Villages faced many difficulties such as lack of infrastructure, no healthcare, poverty and lack of education. There is no hospital or health care centre in Khasak, villagers have to go to nearby towns like Palghat. For example, the mullah had to be taken to a hospital in Phalghat when he fell ill.

Superstitions and sorcery are inevitable part of rural life due to lack of education. Many superstitions are described in the novel like they believed that the hedge lizard sucks the blood of children. Another superstition is regarding Appu-kili who was fondly called parrot in the village. When he was ten his arms gave up growing. The torso

grew, and so did the head. He suffered from a growth disorder. But villagers thought there was something wrong with him and the Khazi suggested that Appu-Kili was possessed by demons and 'poothams'. The Khazi told Neeli to "Have no fear, I shall lure them out with spells and banish them forever!" (Vijayan 72) Lack of education resulted into superstitions among villagers. Villages are known to have thriving community life. People understand the importance of community and try to preserve its values. All the communities participate and contribute in the development of a village. It is the community life that brings unity in diversity. It is the custom for the villagers in Khasak to help each other to mend the thatch of their roofs and it clearly shows the unity existed among them. When the mullah was severely ill, Sivaraman Nair had sent his best bullocks to take the mullah to the hospital in Palghat. Harmony and spirit of co-operation are integrated into rural life.

Nature is woven into the fabric of village life. Khasak is located in the backwaters of southern India. It is surrounded by palmyra fronds. Not touched by modernity or industrialism. The villagers live in harmony with nature. One such example is when Kunhamina, a ten-year-old girl saw the flock of peafowl on her way to the madrasa, she was mesmerised by them. She fed them all vellayappams, her mother had packed for the mullah. The month of Chaitra was depicted as the time of flowering and renewal in the novel. On their annual picnic to Chetali, children began the climb in the kindly sun. As they climbed higher, they saw giant insect and plants with large leaves indicating tropical climate and forest. They discovered big butterflies, red spiders and dragonflies. All these depictions in the novel show the proximity of the people with nature.

Religions co-exist in Khasak. The characters, Muslim and Hindu, with all their beliefs and traditions, live together in harmony in this village. The mixing of deities is also found here. For example, when Kunhamina promised the mullah that she would not attend the new school:

"By Mariyama', the girl chanted again, adding gratuitous divinities to her oath. 'By the goddess on the tamarind branch, by the snake gods-I will not go the kafir's school!'" (Vijayan 17)

Though Kunhamina went to the new school. Another example of communal harmony is that both the Muslims and the Hindus of Khasak look upon the Sheikh as their protecting deity. The population of India is vast and heterogenous and the thousands of villages in India truly represent a heterogenous society.

The Legends of Khasak depicts idyllic life of a south Indian village. It has the voices from the past and the present describing its heritage, beliefs, myths, supernatural-spirits, and haunted locales. All the aspects of rural life are portrayed in this novel. On many instances, Ravi has to admit to his students that he doesn't have answers but his students have answers in the form of legends. Vijayan has showcased the elements of rural life and added mysticism which gives this novel a remarkable place in Malayalam literature as well as Indian writing in English.

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