

**A POSTCOLONIAL READING OF O.V. VIJAYAN'S
KHASAKINTEITHIHASAM (THE LEGENDS OF KHASAK)**

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Abstract:

Literature of an era reflects the cultural contours of a nation and moreover it responds to the very pulse of the respective time period. This process can be understood as cultural representation in literature. Interpretation and depiction of cultural aspects in literature is undoubtedly a part of this principle. The post-independence Malayalam literature witnessed a remarkable shift to modernism with the contribution of writers like M.T Vasudevan Nair, O.V Vijayan, Kakkanadan, M. Mukundan, Anand, Vaikom Muhammed Basheer, Sethu and Punathil Kunhabdullah among many other eminent authors. The researcher has selected the magnum opus fiction Khasakinte Ithihasam (self-translated as The Legends of Khasak) written by O.V Vijayan to analyze the aspect of cultural representation in the post-independence Malayalam literature.

Key Words: Colonialism, Post-colonial literature, Cultural representation, Modernism.

Post-independence Malayalam literature became more realistic with the advent of modernism. But since Kerala culture is built through the legends of 'vadakkanpattukal' (ballads of the north), 'theakkanpattukal' (ballads of the south), 'pulluvarpattukal' (traditional songs of pulluvar community), 'Mappilapattukal' (traditional songs by the Islamic community) and such other 'pattu' school of poetry and the vast array of myths and legends that form the crux of Dravidian and Aryan ancestry, there could never be a total deviation. Colonialism left its deep imprint upon almost all wakes of Kerala history and literature was no exception. It was the continuation and persistence of colonial practices even after colonization that plagued the society for a very long time. Villages were the worst affected as they still could not shrug off the colonial attitude imposed on them. A typical village in Kerala just like Khasak presented by O.V. Vijayan in *Khasakinte Ithihasam (The Legends of Khasak)* is run by its traditions influences of folklore, myths, legends and religious practices. The politics of such villages was bound by such traditional practices and religious percepts. With the advent of the modern era after independence, villages became the warehouse for the entire nation to dump its venerable colonial practices as part of its cosmopolitan growth. Modern educational practices, technological advances and scientific knowledge proliferation were denied an impactful stint with a decently fast pace, in the villages. As a result, villages remained a vexing mix of traditional cultural practices and the dead slow inroads of modern ways.

When it comes to Malayalam literature, a trail of western influence therefore is quiet obvious, but it was not swayed by the process but rather flourished with the foreign language influences and contact with other cultures. The point to be assessed here is how did the modern writers deal with the above mentioned process of continuation of colonial practices in the villages? It's here the setting in of realism as part of modernism assumes importance because the focus was also on the folklore, legends and myths along with the true to life depictions of Kerala society. The focus on the roots of ancestry and origin is definitely a way of exposing the perspective that the legends, myths and traditions have to be there to co-exist with the post-imperial modern world views. It is in this regard O.V. Vijayan's Khasak becomes symbolic of the

significance of a village neck deep in traditions and beliefs, struggling to accommodate the colonial hangover and the modern trends. Another version of this analysis is plausible when we assess the trend of celebrating the legends and myths of a village as a way of glorifying the immaculate beauty of them.

KhasakinteIthihasam, a Malayalam novel written by O.V. Vijayan and self-translated as *The Legends of Khasak* takes up the legends of Khasak (originally Thasarakk), a remote village in the Palakkad district of Kerala, India, as the background of the narrative and syncs it with an unusual tragic sense, the story of Ravi, the protagonist; a story of compassion and sensual instincts. Ravi adorns the role of a teacher of a primary school, the only such one in Khasak. Khasak is originally a village named Thasarakk in Kerala where the Dravidian and Islamic myths protrude their prominence through temples, mosques and other religious centers. Ravi was an Astrophysics student who was researching on the nexus between astrological signs and theories of physics. He lost his mother early in his childhood and was reared by his father and stepmother. Ravi often reminisces with a nostalgic touch the deep bondage he had with his mother and father but also crashes down when he recalls the event of sharing bed with his stepmother. Ravi could not complete his research as the moral denigration of the past haunts him like a spirit. Thereafter he traverses paths far and wide in search of a shelter and a calm mind but the shelter can only offer him sensual satisfaction, quite often sexual urges. His compassionate mind accepts all the individuals of Khasak which include the mentally challenged Appukili, the illiterate lot of the village Kunjamina, Maimuna, Chathan, Perakkadan and many others. But another facet of Ravi seeks sexual satisfaction with Maimuna, Kesi and Chanthumma. O.V. Vijayan has sketched the character of Ravi as one who is haunted by his past but at the same time strives to live in the present, participate in the saga of Khasak. The Chethali hills where the Arabi legend Shake Thangal passed through with his cavalry, the Arabi pond, 'Sarpakavu' (dedicated for worshipping serpents) along with the deity of chastity named 'PulimkombathePothi' form the crux of life in Khasak. The novelist gives picturesque representation to each of these pulses of the village and Ravi too is made a part of all these living myths. Ravi knows the outside world and he could sense that the village is struggling to find a balance between the tradition and the tumultuous ways of modern life. Ravi himself represents the flip side of a modern individual who has lost trust in his past and while seeking solace in the present gets drowned in deep sin.

It is important to analyze a few stories that are presented in the novel as myths and legends to substantiate how important they are to the writer to establish the fact that such stories do have a significant impact on the villages and they should not be sacrificed for the western influences. The Islamic legend named Shake Thangal had once camped in the Chethali hills of Khasak with his full cavalry. One horse in his cavalry was a very aged one and upon death it had been given a ceremonial burial in the foot hills. Villagers believe that Shake Thangal cares for the aged and helpless and the instance of the aged horse is believed to be a representation of the same. The whole village keeps faith in Shake Thangal whenever they face difficult times and people say they can listen to the footsteps of the aged horse in the Chethali hills even to that day. Another legend is woven around the Hindu religious principle of chastity, a deity named 'PulimkombathePothi'. There is a huge tamarind tree right at the heart of Khasak where people believe that only men whose wives are chaste can climb up.

'Ghaliyar' is a typical status given to the one who is a priest to SheikhThangal and is considered as the care taker of the village, upon which another legend is built on. The 'Ghaliyar' is someone with curative powers and is also bestowed with a skill to make prophecy. All these stories build around myths and legends, whether it is the Islamic legend or the Hindu deity of chastity or the village 'Ghaliyar', do suggest that they all hint at a need for humane values like compassion, love, sound moral values, and more over a strong community feeling. When Ravi dived into this rich flow of legends, he naturally lost his feet on the ground, stumbled and eventually perished. Villages like Khasak were totally aloof from the cities that emerged in the post-independent India. The administration almost totally neglected the villages and they became the most vulnerable habitats for the continuation of colonial practices like color/caste

discrimination, denial of education, and denial of employment opportunities etc. but what affected the villages worse was the slow domination of modern life style over the traditional practices. This slow, ineffective and most importantly the undecided change to modern ways compelled the people of Khasak to forgo their age old cultural practices. A few instances from the text to analyze the point would be helpful. It was a practice in Khasak that the children (belonging to Islam community) should join the religious learning center run by AllapichaMollakka, the then 'Ghaliyar' of Khasak. When Ravi started the government owned school, children were initially interested in the process but were torn between the two sides. They were not sure whether they should continue the religious learning or the school learning but eventually they gave up both and the parents were not bothered by these developments. This makes it clear that the village cannot just forgo the age old practices and slip into a modern system. The modern education system should have allowed them to embrace both traditional learning and the formal school learning. Similarly when there was a spread of small pox cases in Khasak, people were interested in the pooja (an offering to the Hindu deity) done by KuttadanPoosari. They were not educated enough to sense that in such emergencies they have to consult a doctor. This event illustrates the other side of the problem; the benefits of modern education and technological advancements turned a blind eye to the villagers thereby prompting them to resort to blind faith and fake practices. Myths, legends and traditional practices of a village form the backbone of its existence and such practices should be allowed to coexist with the modern life style. In the case of Khasak, the slow inroads made by the modern ways effectively ruined the whole structure of the society built on traditional customs (religious and cultural). The whole effect of the process was a continuation of colonization of the villages because in effect they were neither modernized nor allowed to be founded on their ancient traditional practices.

KhasakinteIthihasam, projects the various myths, legends and cultural practices of Khasak, thereby reiterating the repertoire of faith for the village. The narrative makes it apparent that a total deviation and neglect of such practices would lead to a chaotic state. The juxtaposition of native culture with modern practices in the subtext of the novel emphasizes the point that the myths, legends and traditional cultural customs cannot subsist but they do exist. With these leads, the researcher attempts to bring out the cultural representation in the novel and subsequently to assess that such a representation determines the position of the native. The village Khasak in *KhasakinteIthihasam* represents age old myths, legends and the traditional practices. Khasak, with all its mythological and legendary guardian spirits, is slowly driven to a state of indecisiveness and stunted development owing to the complete neglect by the administration and a slow but dominating surge of modernism. The villages of India were colonized owing to the filthy remnants of pre independence Imperialism in the form of discriminatory (towards the villages) administrative practices, corruption and willing sustenance of color/caste segregations. As an impact, the villages in India were forcibly cut out from their age old traditional practices, without an effort to harmoniously blend tradition with development. O.V Vijayan's approach is unique as it focuses on representing the relics of myths and legends with vivid detail as a strategy towards building a literary resistance against the shadow colonization of villages.

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