

A POSTCOLONIAL APPROACH TO MAGIC REALISM IN O. V. VIJAYAN'S NOVEL *THE LEGENDS OF KHASAK*

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Abstract

By definition, post colonialism is a period of time after colonialism, and postcolonial literature is typically characterized by its opposition to the colonial patterns. The methodology applied to this paper is basically analysis and interpretation of the text through the lens of postcolonial theory; a close reading of the text along the lines of the characters and understanding spatial concerns. It is interesting to read the characters' resistance of neo-colonial strategies and how they create an identity or space for themselves. Their voices tell their stories; the act of oration suggests the assertion of their native identity.

Research Paper Objectives:

- To study the characters, setting, theme and narrative technique employed in the novel from the Postcolonial standpoint:
 - To analyse the central character of the novel to understand the existential crisis of a colonized mind
 - To understand the setting of the novel as a metaphor for the assertion of the native identity of the colonized
 - To liken and explain the theme of journey or quest to the transition of the colonized mind from a sense of unfamiliarity to the acceptance with respect to his native identity
 - To identify the narrative technique of oration as a challenge to the colonial trait of recording history.
- To underline the Postcolonial design in the use of Magic Realism in fictional writing – breaking away from the Realistic mode of writing in fiction

Keywords: Colonialism, Neo-Colonization, Post colonialism, Native Identity, Magic Realism

“Vijayan’s visionary energy converts what could easily have been an ordinary naturalistic rural narrative into a magical experience of mythical proportions.”

-K. Satchidanandan

(A Sage and Iconolast)

The Legends of Khasak (1994) is O.V.Vijayan’s translation of his debut novel in Malayalam, *Khasakkinte Itihasam* (1969), into English what is pivotal to the novel is its rural landscape, Khasak, wherein Vijayan sketches a wide range of characters and weaves the folkloric element of the place with the lives of these characters through his creative imagination. The novel, thus, reveals the complex vision of this novelist-cum-cartoonist of people and places. The dexterity with which vijayan accomplishes this blend, “the way myth and reality, realism and fantasy mix, was ingenious and unprecedented [in Malayalam]”, according to the critics. They also add that such an innovative attempt by the author saved the book from being a “mundane village romance”. *The Legends of Khasak* noted for its experimentation in style and content is identified with Magic Realism.

Magic Realism is an artistic genre in which magical elements or illogical scenarios appear in an otherwise realistic or even "normal" setting. It has been widely used in relation to literature, art, and film. Magical realism differs from pure fantasy primarily because it is set in a normal, modern world with authentic descriptions of humans and society. It weaves, in an ever-shifting pattern, a sharply etched realism in representing ordinary events and details together with fantastic and dreamlike elements. Writers, who use magical realism, don't create new worlds, but suggest the magic in our world. Accordingly, the novel *The Legends of Khasak* with its seamless blend of real and unreal, temporal and corporal, modern and orthodox and all its unconventionalities is considered an enterprise in the magic realism mode of fictional writing.

This paper attempts to read the novel from the Postcolonial standpoint to establish how it’s different elements like the character, setting, theme and narrative techniques, together exemplify the designs of Postcolonial writing, though they are quintessential of Magic Realism.

Ravi, the apparent protagonist, is a product of westernized education in India, rational minded and civilized. And, hence, he is skeptical of the uncivilized, primitive and unscientific life of Khasak. Vijayan uses these characters to bring out the contrast between them and to further the needs of narration in the Magic Realism mode. However through the postcolonial lens, Ravi, who comes to Khasak with a mission to start an English medium school and introduce the modern ideas to the people there, appears as a representative of the colonizer and the

school that of the institutions patterned as per colonial standards. Ravi and his enterprise pertaining to the school indicate how a colonized mind unconsciously perpetuates the institutions and rational outlook of the colonizer in the postcolonial era underlining the notion of Neo-colonization. Further, Ravi's amazement at the conviction of the people in Khasak about their tales, beliefs and rituals combined with his reluctance to accept the unscientific and crude life of the place evidences how deeply the colonial standards of rational thought is imprinted on his mind. However, the whole situation is reversed when Ravi instead of influencing the people of Khasak, gets sucked into their way of life and subsequently compromises his rationality in order to comprehend this indigenous way of life. This again is suggestive of how a colonized mind in the postcolonial phase experiences an existential crisis. He feels torn between his imposed identity and the native identity; he fails to discard the former and is reluctant to identify and accept the latter.

Khasak, the setting of the novel reminds the readers of the settings of Gabriel Marquez in its remoteness and strangeness typical to Magic Realism. Topographically locked in between the mountains of Palghat, the world of Khasak remains cut off from the rest of the world. Mountains usually depict rigidity and here stand as a metaphor to the equally rigid mindset of the inhabitants of Khasak. Khasak is held together by the shared indigence, tragic fate, legends and belief systems and a common deity and represents the remote villages wherein the relics of the pre-modern India have managed to survive. Khasak, thus, exists in a different space and time, though the novel is set in the middle of the 20th century. A postcolonial approach to this metaphoric significance of the setting of the novel reveals the spatial concerns of the colonized people out.

The colonized as a sign of resistance to and rejection of the colonial control create a space for themselves wherein they practice and perpetuate a life in tune with their indigenous culture. Thus, the world of Khasak, which practices absolute isolation and leads a primitive way of life, gets caught between traditions and modernity only when Ravi arrives in Khasak to start the District Board's English school. Ravi who tries to impart western education to the children of Khasak and attempts to bring about changes in the village, and the school are both seen as a threat. However the people of Khasak together resist this intrusion and safeguard their identity. In fact, the people of Khasak even strike a compromise about the school by deciding that the children of Khasak would attend their lessons at the *madrassa* and *ezhuthupalli* before taking English classes. Thus there is a co-existence of both the schools instead of a replacement of one by the other.

This assertion and protection of their identity, practices and institutions is also seen in the other aspects of their life. The articles of daily use and methods of treatment suggest a primitive and unscientific life, typical of a remote village but indigenous in nature, their own. For instance, people in Khasak use wick lamps for lighting, palm-frond thatches for

umbrellas, palm fibre torches, beedi, toddy and arrack.. Also their indigenous cure for small pox is an illustration of their rootedness. When people take ill in Khasak they are believed to be possessed and are treated by kuttadar, the oracle and the Khazi in turns, who indulge in elaborate rituals and sorcery to cast off the spirits. Ravi is treated for small-pox with neem leaves and breast milk. All these features of the village of Khasak from the postcolonial point of view appears as an act of resistance to the colonial norms and standards of rationality, scientific temperament and sophistication. The fact that the village discourages any force to alter or define their lives is a strong assertion of their individuality and native identity.

Furthermore, the fact that Hindus and Muslims co-exist in Khasak hints at a precolonial society in India. The natives of Khasak, broadly divided into Hindus and Muslims, believe in the myths of both the religions and together look upon the Sheikh as their protecting deity. Even the 'madrassa' and the 'ehzutthupalli'-the two traditional schools of Khasak, specific to the two religions respectively "never competed". The new school is considered corruptive and seen as a threat by both the parties. Besides, there are many events in the novel which show how the people of Khasak very easily decide on issues that seem grave today on account of communal aspects involved in them. For instance, Appu-Kili, the orphan of Khasak, is suddenly converted into Islam. This instigates a spoken dispute about the Kili's religion in the village panchayat. Such an event could have triggered communal tensions elsewhere; however, in Khasak people find a compromise formula for Appu-Kili as well. The panchayat decides: "The parrot was to be allowed the freedom of both the religion. For certain days of the week he could be Muslim, for the rest he could be Hindu. If necessary Hindu, Muslim and Parrot all at the same time."

The theme of the novel is journey. The novel traces the psychological path trodden by the protagonist Ravi. From the novel one understands that Ravi is troubled by guilt for committing incest with his stepmother and in an attempt to escape the same but in vain. His journey to Khasak, though made for official reasons, perhaps was his rational way of escaping this reality pertaining to his life. However, even in Khasak he is haunted by this fact of his life. But the village of Khasak provides him with a resolution in the philosophy of karma, that the people there strongly believe and find solace in, in the face of death. Towards the climax of the novel, it is therefore that Ravi standing at the bus-stop to leave Khasak allows a snake bite him, believing that death would deliver him from his guilt, and allow him to be reborn and pay for his sins in the next birth. Thus, Ravi embarks on a new journey, that of afterlife. This journey of Ravi from rationality to spirituality is yet again remarkably suggestive of the transition of the colonized mind from the reluctance to discard the identity imposed by the colonizer to recognition and acceptance of a native one. Instead of escaping from his inner self, Ravi comes to terms with his guilt from the past and thereby prepares for a new life. A colonized mind goes through the same stages in the process of decolonizing and

liberalizing himself from the constraints of an imposed identity and embracing his native identity.

The narrative technique of oration, crucial to the treatment of Magic Realism in the novel, evidently challenges the colonial practice of recording. The novel is full of such personal records which are orally narrated rather than being written down. The author makes his characters narrate their experiences in life and share their knowledge about the legends attuned to the life of Khasak. For instance, Chandu Umma narrates to Ravi the legend of the tamarind tree. She tells him how the curse of the Goddess of Chastity who resides in the tamarind tree takes the life of her husband. The past of Khasak is recreated through a number of legends associated with Sayed Mian Sheikh, the twelve mosques in ruin, the Araby tank, the mountain Chetali. These stories are orally narrated by Allah-pitcha, the mullah, to his pupils in the 'madrassa'. The pupils in turn reiterate these stories to Ravi. The author, thus, exploits the most vital aspect of folklore in the novel. He shows how the legends of the natives, and also how people live and die with them making/creating many more legends in turn, to be passed on. The novel, as the title announces, is the legends, that is, histories of Khasak except that it is the persona histories of the people of the place that make its history. Thus, the experiences, fears and beliefs perpetuated in the tales is given a subjective treatment as opposed to the colonizer's objective approach to history. Thus Postcolonialism is depicted in the narrative technique employed as a part of Magic Realism in the novel that breaks away from the conventional realistic mode of fiction.

The interweaving of myth and super-natural elements in an ordinary rural reality marked with black humour, guilt and expiation, physical desire and existential angst, is what makes the novel innovative and the world of Khasak magical and wondrous. In experimenting with the conventions of fictional writing, O. V. Vijayan in his work, *The Legends of Khasak*, provides a "magical journey" for his readers indeed. However, this iconoclast can be said to have accomplished much more in employing the techniques of Magic Realism in the novel which unconsciously operate the Postcolonial ideology within its framework. The unconventionality of *The Legends of Khasak* is as much postcolonial as much it is of Magic Realism.

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