

The Demeanor of Nature in O. V. Vijayan's *The Legends of Khasak*

Saran S

PhD Research Scholar,
M S University, Tirunelveli

Dr. R. Vasuhi

Head of the Department
M S University Tirunelveli

Abstract

The Legends of Khasak is one of the famous and artistic works of renowned writer Ottupulackal Velukkuty Vijayan, commonly known as O. V. Vijayan, was a novelist and cartoonist, who was one of the most important figures in modern Malayalam literature. He is best known for his first novel *Khasakkinte Ithihasam* (1969), he was the author of six novels, nine short-story collections, and nine collections of essays, memoirs and reflections. The plot is set in the backwaters of Kerala, in the half of the twentieth century. Critics in Malayalam have been unanimous in their praise of Vijayan's uses of language. Never before, or after, has any writer, they aver, experimented the poetic dimensions of prose with such telling effect. In *Khasakkinte Ithihasam*, Vijayan is able to present Khasak as a mythical place of primordial Purity by making use of a strange mixture of Tamil and Malayalam. While Raviand Madhavan Nair speaks pristine Malayalam, the natives use a crude mixture of Malayalam and Tamil. This is reinforced with powerful images and metaphors. Ravi is the protagonist of this novel and he comes to the village of Khasak in Palakkad region as a single school teacher. Ravi is a great visionary in astrophysics who finished his post graduation in Physics from a very famous college at Tambaram. Palakkad District Board has established a single teacher school in the village Khasak for the local children as an effort to give them basic education. Ravi is from a different place and he is to be the first teacher in that village. Khasak is both wondrous and a magical place. Ravi is not only a dominant central figure in this novel. *The Legends of Khasak*, Vijayan's first novel, appeared in 1969 and it took twelve years' writing and rewriting to reach its final form. It leads to a great literary revolution and cleaved the history of Malayalam fiction into Pre-Khasak and Post-Khasak eras. The novel ends when protagonist begins his journey to some other realms of existence. It

was a kind of stepping stone for the writer Vijayan to that world and marked the alight of a truly visionary writer in Malayalam Literature.

Keywords: Malayalam Literature, Astrophysics, Myth, Nature, Etiology

Introduction

O. V. Vijayan's mythographical genius is most pronounced in his Magnum opus in *The Legends of Khasak*, it is Ravi's mother who creates a myth out of the visual defect, but Vijayan claims it was his grandmother who told him the story of the "Devas and the Kalpakas". He does not know whether the story that his grandmother told him is based on oriental mythology. This metaphor could not have been borrowed from some books on the affairs of gods. His grandmother could have been told this story by her grandmother.

The Legends of Khasak has effectively combined Persian, biblical and Hindu myths to telling effect. Vijayan's use of myth and mythical images and symbols is very complex and it is hard to say where the myth can be isolated from the whole design. In this study, an attempt is made to identify a few patterns, and pre figurative motives from Vijayan's oeuvre, which justify his being labeled as a mytho-grapher. They are the themes of etiology, journey, paradise, the fall and the search for a guru. A few recurring images such as winged serpents, dragonflies and Krishna, are also analyzed. 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 (4).

Ravi was stricken by the disease, because he had not got himself vaccinated. Maimoona asks him why? "I wanted to experience death" he replies. Ravi seduces Maimoona. She warns him "You shouldn't while this disease is on you. Nallamma is your mistress. And she is a very jealous one" (125).

Ravi's fall from grace and his initiation into the sins of incest is narrated in styles that resonate with mythical metaphor and symbols:

The covenant ended when his stepmother, his Chittamma arrived. At noon she had her siesta inside, and Ravi sat alone on the verandah not wanting to watch the sky,

uninterested in his toys. Those were his Cinderella days, a period of orphan hood; one day turning away from the hollows of the sky, he looked towards the miraculous horizon. It was then that they came riding the golden surf of the mirage-the winged and diademed serpents, calling him to play (5).

Vijayan uses the image of the serpent as a biblical symbol of sex and sin. In the passage quoted above, winged serpents symbolize Satan. The sexual impulse of Ravi is expressed through the image of the serpent. He reads a letter from his childhood girlfriend Padma. "The winged serpents rose in the mirage ' and beckoned to Ravi with anxious passion".

Creepers entwined like mating serpents". But Vijayan's use of 'winged serpent' as a symbol is ambiguous. It sometimes can be a 'gentle being': "A Winged Serpent? The sunlight flooded Ravi's memory. A winged serpent with a diademed head, riding the mirage for a lonely child? 'Well, my children,' Ravi said, 'don't throw ones at the water demon. It is a gentle being. That day Ravi told the children the story of the lizards. In times before man usurped the earth, the lizard held sway. A miraculous book opened, the children saw its pages rise and turn and flap. Out of it came mighty saurians roves slowly in deep canyons after the dull scent of prey, and pterodactyls rose screaming over their nesting precipices. The story was reluctantly interrupted for lunch; after hurried morsels the children raced back to school and huddled around their teacher. The pages: rose and fell again . . . Long before the lizards, before the Dinaurores, two spores set out on an incredible journey. They came to a village bathed in the placid glow of sunset. 'My elder sister' (said the little spore to the bigger spore, 'let us see what lies beyond'. 'This valley is green,') replied the bigger spore, 'I shall journey no further 'I want to journey,' said the little spore ' I want to discover. 'She gamed in wonder at the path before her. 'Will you forget your sister?' asked the bigger spore. 'Never', said the little spore. 'You will, little one, for this is the loveless tale of karma; in it there is only parting and sorrow (19).

In *The Legends of Khasak*, the 'journey undertaken by Ravi is a pilgrimage, a forgetting, an expiation for sins committed, a penance. "A journey that prolonged over numerous births, "No, Not on this journey of many lives, this journey of incredible burdens. Let me reach my inn, the village called Khasak" (9).

The image of journey is repeated several times in the novel like a refrain: "Ravi heard the whistle of trains, the dull clatter of rails, it was the journey again" (12).

Pilgrimage is a journey under taken by a devotee for expiation of his or her sins. For the devotee the journey is as sacred as the destination. For Ravi, however, who has no destination in life, the journey is as absurd as life. Ravi's pilgrimage begins from a railway platform:

The journey into the vast unquiet universe, watched by faces in railway compartments, tolerant and incurious . . . The names of the railway stations changed, their script changed. . . The roadway dust changed colour, sunrise and sunset changed places, and directions were lost in an assailing infinity. The journey took him through cheerless suburbs, through streets of sordid trades, past cacti villages and lost townships of lepers and ashramas where, in saffron beds, voluptuous swaminis lay in wait for nirvana. And at last, this respite, this Sarai in Khasak (21).

Many critics argue that in *The Legends of Khasak*, Ravi's existential angst is inexplicable. They feel that Vijayan was blindly mimicking a popular western fad. However, on close scrutiny, it will be apparent that Ravi's sense of guilt and existential despair is on account of his incestuous relationship with his stepmother. Ravi's childhood memories are of, an Eden world of bliss.

The house at Ooty; the intimate childish games with his mother, counting 'kalpakas': "Mother scoops him up in a rejoicing embrace. As she sets out on her last journey into the noontide mirage, she gives him this message--all this is your precious inheritance." Ravi's fall from the grace of his mother's love to the sin of incestuous love is sudden and narrated by Vijayan in succession without a pause. The next sentence in the novel is:

"I cannot face it," she says

"The sin"

"It is like dying".

Ravi's incestuous affair with his step-mother is only hinted at:

"Chittamma," he says, "let me go to my room." She bars his way. Ravi tells her sternly: "Put on your clothes".

Ravi searches for his mother or rather his mother substitute in numerous affairs beginning with his stepmother. The inevitability of his fate is spiral in nature. The more Ravi tries to escape from the inevitability of his guilt, the more engrossed he becomes in his sin. He proceeds to take to bed almost any woman he comes across. They include Maimoona, Chand Umma, the prostitute Kodachi, his childhood friend Padma and a sanyasini. He tries to escape from his sins by going on a pilgrimage which takes him to Khasak but that does not end there. He tries to drown his grief in drink. Finally realizing that he cannot escape either from this remorse or from his sins, he succumbs to his 'karma' and welcomes death.

What Ravi yearns for is angelic love--pure, unbounded, unimpeded a love, which he believes he got from his mother. And he desires and searches for that love in his stepmother, and numerous casual love affairs that he has; but such a love is not permitted to a man. Ravi can find it only in death-the perfect consummation of love. Ravi is simply demonstrating the longing of mankind for an oneness with something somewhere: the irony is that he should pursue it in incest and death, themselves the symbols of man's fall from wholeness.

There were wandering tamarind merchants and their climbers and settlers, who came from Koomankavu and elsewhere, and the harvest overhead was rich, yet few dared to climb up. For the trunk was covered with slippery lichen and the canopy infested with venomous ants. But if the climber had a chaste wife, the Devi would turn the lichen into firm footholds, and the ants would make way.

Ravi goes to have a 'darshan of the Devi at the shrine with enthusiasm: He thought to himself he was her kin, and would discover their twin hood in this intimate sanctuary. Then would he share his with her, the placental sorrow, generation after generation; as he thought this, the sorrow spilled over to become the sorrow of karma, it was the scar of the sinner, the orphan's pining, the despair of the one who thirsted for knowledge. (113)

Ravi is stricken by the disease when he commits adultery with Kodachi. He refused to be vaccinated because he wanted to die and to escape from the bond of karma. However his life is spared. As Thomas Mathew suggests "the vision of life projected by Khasak is that life is a meaningful absurdity. If viewed theologically Khasak harmonizes Christian concept of sin and the Hindu concept of karma." Appukili and Remedios are emblematic of the stagnation and regression, the failure to grow, which characterizes the incestuous family. Technically, Appukili was not the product of an incestuous but of an adulterous relationship. His un-married mother Neeli's adultery with her sister Kali's husband, Kuttappu. Appukili is physically deformed and mentally retarded. Appukili's shattered mind recalls the age-old biological argument against incest: the belief that the offspring of an incestuous union would be defective. The association of two themes like incest and idiocy has been widespread throughout the novel.

The last line sums up the philosophy that Vijayan was trying to elaborate in *The Legends*. Vijayan has succeeded in combining the theory of evolution with the story of the Genesis and the 'Fall' from the Bible in this brief myth. Vijayan develops the myth to express his concern of the destruction of nature by man: A girl with silver anklets and eyes prettied with the last line sums up the philosophy that Vijayan was trying to elaborate in *The Legends*. Vijayan~has succeeded in

combining the theory of evolution with the story of the Genesis and the 'Fall' from the Bible in this brief myth. Vijayan develops the myth to express his concern of the destruction of nature by man:

A girl with silver anklets and eyes prettied with suruma came to Chetali's valley to gather f lokrs. The Chempaka tree stood alone- efflorescent, serene. The flower - gatherer reached out and held down a soft twig to pluck the flowers. As the twig broke the Chempaka said, my little sister; you have forgotten me when came to Chetali's valley to gather flokers. The Chempaka tree stood alone- efflorescent, serene. The flower -gatherer reached out and held down a soft twig to pluck the flowers. As the twig broke the Chempaka said, 'my little sister, you have forgotten me! (53).

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