



**A PHANTASMAGORIA OF MYTHS AND LORES: AN ECOCRITICAL STUDY OF
THE LEGENDS OF KHASAK**

Nimisha.K.Jayan

Junior Research Fellow (English),
St. Thomas' College, Thrissur, Kerala

Abstract

Ecocriticism is a relatively new form of criticism which is gaining in significance due to the increased exploitation of nature. One of the main goals in Ecocriticism is to study how individuals in society behave and react in relation to nature and ecological aspects. Instead of adopting a utilitarian approach towards nature the need of the hour is a reevaluation of the relation between man and his environment. In brief Ecocriticism stresses the Wordsworthian view that going back to nature not as exploiter but as a friend; living in harmony with nature is the only solution to human wretchedness. The paper also analyses the deep and rich myths and folklores of Khasak which lends a supernatural aura to it.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Magic Realism, Postmodernism, Folklore, Myths

The Legends of Khasak is unparalleled and unsurpassed in Malayalam Literature. No discourse on Malayalam Literature is complete without mentioning O.V Vijayan and his magnum opus. Postmodernist in style, *The Legends of Khasak* heralded a new era in the history of Malayalam literature.

Khasak is a land fabricated by cobwebs of myths and folklores. Secluded from the civilized world geographically as well as culturally, people of Khasak lead a primitive existence. Here we see the intricate relationship of humans with the natural world; the palm groves, the twelve mosques in between which "the infinite time of Khasak lies stagnant", Arab tank, Chetali hill all bear an indelible influence on the mental makeup of the lives of its people and they derive their knowledge and worldly wisdom through the constant interaction with the natural world. They revere and worship the non-human world as they realize its destructive powers and unpredictable nature. The inhabitants of Khasak, humble in their origin and living with the knowledge passed down through generations understands the hierarchy of the greater cosmic world and play their parts considerably well enough. Even Ravi, the protagonist, a well-educated youth, a thinker and philosopher does not question the age-old values of Khasak. He never plays the role of an intruder and a reformer and instead of disrupting the natural order of Khasak, Ravi dives into its culture and fits into it. The air of Khasak infused with mythical and supernatural vibrations forms an apt background for Ravi seeking a *sarai*, a short resting place. Fed up with the humdrum of rootless materialistic urban



life Ravi sets out on a quest. But Khasak has more in store for him and he is pained by the tragic lives of the people and it is the fatalist and pessimist in him who cries out to Madhavan Nair that the disease that has affected us is nothing but “existence...civilization”

“Long before the lizards, before the dinosaurs, two spores set out on an incredible journey. They came to a valley 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 gazed in wonder at the path below 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.”

The little spore journeyed on. The bigger spore stayed back in the valley. Her root pierced the damp earth and sought the nutrients of death and memory. She sprouted over the earth, green and contended.

A girl with silver anklets and eyes prettied with surma came to Chetali’s valley to gather flowers. 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 !” (Vijayan 143)

These words which once struck a chord in our hearts still resonate every time we read it. The master cartoonist in O.V Vijayan condenses Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution in a few bold crafty strokes. Vijayan depicts how man has alienated from his own sister-nature. Nurtured by the same mother, sucking lifeblood from the same earth we grew up together but at some point of time we parted our ways and went in search of material pleasures. Caught up in the world of *maya* we fail to recognize our own kin and pose the greatest threat to it. We, today stand in the way of our sister as her enemy and exploiter.

Mollaka’s death from shoe bite shows the dangerous effects of the onslaught of civilization. Man has lost touch with the land in which he keeps his foot. Ravi when he first steps into Koomankavu feels that the whole world is slipping away under him. He probes for an anchor in life and unable to find it in this birth, hopes to find it in death. Lying in the Mosque of the Kings delirious with small pox, he craves to experience death and his lust for the ugly side of life is quenched for the time being.

Khasak is deeply religious but not secular. Its wooded dark and gothic world inhabited by spirits, jinns, *poothams*, gods and goddesses has an overbearing influence on its occupants. Even Ravi, the outsider cannot escape it. Sitting in the palm groves along with Madhavan Nair,



Ravi makes the muezzin cry which forms the height of all contradictions. Khasak has its own unique history and lineage. They trace their origin from the cavalcade of thousand and one horsemen. Their head sheikh sleeps on the crypt of Chetali hill and both Hindus and Muslims see him as their protecting deity.

In its myths, as in any other part of the world the chastity of women is very much stressed upon. They once worshipped palms as the flying serpents resided on it. As per the epic the palms bent for the toddy tapper to tap but as the wives of toddy tappers lost their chastity the palms ceased to bend. Another epic is the tale of *pothi*, the goddess residing in the tamarind tree. The spirit of a simple village girl raped by Britishers becomes *pothi* and she is worshipped as the goddess of chastity. Thus even their gods are anthropomorphic and detached from the cosmic world they are brought into the midst of the mundane mortal world. But interestingly the women of Khasak lead a life of promiscuity and unaffected by the norms of the society they live according to their own instincts. They cater to a hedonistic view of the world and do not try to negate their sexuality. Maimoona, the *houri* of Khasak, Kali, Neeli, Kesi, Kodachi etc. are all representatives of liberated womanhood who makes their destiny.

Words such as Immortality, *karma*, *maya*, previous birth, next birth are recurrent in the vocabulary of Khasak and they have their own interpretations and beliefs attached to it. Every existential problem seems to have an answer there. From the vendor who sees the tantalizing rain as *maya* to small children of Khasak everyone possess this knowledge. They are not in war with the world but accept life as it is.

In one of his classes Ravi stands perplexed at the question of his students, "What will happen to the soul of the lice of Appukuli?" They themselves give the answer... "It will come back." Death for them is the precursor of coming back. And death is not ugly but something beautiful for them. Appukuli who symbolizes the mental retardness as well as the naivety of Khasak is the constant companion of dragon flies-which is nothing but pre-natal memories. Appukuli links them to this enigmatic world. Whereas Herman Hesse's Sidhartha had to go on a long quest to reach the ultimate realization that "In every truth the opposite is equally true" (Hesse 112), the simple villagers of Khasak had an insight on the multi-faceted nature of the truth when they said "Many truths make up the big truth"

In the final act of Ravi happily giving himself to the snake to bite throws light upon his sado-masochism as well as his insatiable desire of merging with the cosmic world. Only the venom can purify him of the disease and the poison that is running through his veins-which is nothing but Civilization.



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