INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND TRANSLATION STUDIES (IJELR)
A QUARTERLY, INDEXED, REFEREED AND PEER REVIEWED OPEN ACCESS INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL
http://www.ijelr.in (Impact Factor: 5.9745) (ICI)

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 12. Issue 2. 2025 (April-June)

INTERNATIONAL STANDARD SERIAL NUMBER INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

Caught in the Cryptic Mesh: A Reading of *The Legends of Khasak*

Jiji. P.V
Assistant Professor
Department of English, Govt. Brennen College, Thalassery.

doi: 10.33329/ijelr.12.2.132

Article information

Article Received:23/04/2025
Article Accepted:30/05/2025
Published online:05/06/2025

Abstract

The legends of Khasak is the self-translated version of O V Vijayan's much acclaimed Malayalam novel, *Khasakinte Ithihasam*. Inspired by Thasarak, a village near Palakkad in Kerala, Vijayan's Khasak is hazy and occult. A cross-country jaunt to this rustic landscape defined by superstitions, myths and legends takes Ravi, the protagonist into the cryptic domain of timelessness. Ravi dwells in Khasak, hoping to live in his guiltless childhood memories and to escape his relentless fear of karma. But his incessant efforts to wallow in the past by disappearing into the primitiveness of the landscape ends up in disturbing encounters with his guilt. This study examines the unsettling and eerie experience called Khasak and the quagmire it creates for the protagonist through the theoretical lens of Maurice Halbwachs' observations on collective memory. The study demonstrates how the unique cultural ethos and the geographical isolation that contribute to Khasak's distinct collective memory keeps Ravi, the outsider at bay. Over time, Khasak weaves a web around him. In his acceptance of *Laya*, he loses his agency, surrenders his individual memories and transitions into a subject of shared remembrance. Through death he gets ingrained in the collective memory of Khasak.

Keywords: guilt, primitiveness, *Laya*, timelessness, individual memory, collective memory

Introduction

Ottupulackal Velukutty Vijayan, widely known as O.V. Vijayan, was a prominent political thinker and a pioneering figure in modern Malayalam literature. After a brief tenure as a lecturer in English at Malabar Christian College, Calicut, and Government Victoria College, Palakkad, he moved to Delhi in 1958 to work as a cartoonist and political satirist for *Shankar's Weekly*. Vijayan is best known for his debut novel *Khasakkinte Ithihasam* (*The Legends of Khasak*, 1969), a landmark in Malayalam fiction that introduced a new aesthetic and narrative sensibility. Over the course of his literary career, he authored six novels, several short story collections, essays, memoirs, and reflective writings, much of which he translated into English himself.

Vijayan's works have been widely analyzed through various critical lenses, including philosophical, ecocritical, postmodernist, structuralist, and postcolonial frameworks. Some of his most notable contributions include *Dharmapuranam* (1985), *Gurusagaram* (1987), *Madhuram Gayathi* (1990), and *Thalamurakal* (1997). *Khasakkinte Ithihasam*, initially serialized in the Malayalam daily *Mathrubhumi* before its book publication in 1969, remains a seminal work that marked a turning point in the evolution of Malayalam literature.

Translated into English as *The Legends of Khasak* in 1994, the novel transformed the Indian imagination which was distorted by the Eurocentric perceptions of the 'real' by capturing the nuances of multi layered Indian reality in the quasi-fictional village of Khasak. Even as his contemporary Malayali modernists grappled with the concept of India in the postindependence era, O V Vijayan chose to explore the rural community and its landscape in a way that was never done before. The novel is based on Vijayan's year long stay in Thasarak, a village near Palakkad in Kerala where he stayed after he was sacked from his workplace for his Marxist leanings. In the afterword to *The Legends of Khasak*, he writes:

I had grown up in the countryside, mountain country in fact, where my father had commanded a hill top camp of the armed constabulary. There were no good schools within manageable distance, and even the primary school of the Moplahs (Muslims) in the valley, which I had eventually joined, was a rundown outfit. And the climb up and down hill was too much for me – I was a frail child- so I had dropped out and sailed through my childhood on fairy tales. Destiny had been readying me for Khasak. (Vijayan 204–05)

This experimental novel was so widely read that Malayalam literature today is divided into the pre-Khasak and the post-Khasak phase. His was a writing against the obsession with socialist realist tendencies of his time and also against the issue of form and content in literary and social texts. Vijayan in the afterword to his novel comments about the structure of the novel and the change in Malayalam language brought about. He writes: "the book taught me that no language, however physically confined, however historically deprived, is left without spring heads of regeneration. There is as much narrative potential in Malayalam as in the imperial languages. Khasak has given that assurance to successor generations" (206).

Discussion

Set in the picturesque valley, far removed from the strains of urban modernity, Khasak is presented as an isolated hamlet that celebrates primitivism and challenges stereotypical notions about Indian villages. Time in Khasak evades all ontological questions about the reality of the present, past and future. "Twelve mosques in ruin, a desolate ring, round the village; in them lay stagnant the infinite time of Khasak" (Vijayan 18). The seeming transgression of the parameters of time and space takes the reader on an adventurous roller coaster ride across timelessness and placelessness. He, like Ravi, is overcome by a desire "to escape nothing…to be the sand of the desert, each grain of sand …to be the lake, each minute droplet …to be the laya, the dissolution" (Vijayan 193).

Nevertheless, there are palpable attributes that qualify Khasak for a non-illusory realm rooted in space and time. Koomankavu with its "immense canopy of trees and dozen shops and shacks raised on piles" (Vijayan 1) is not "unfamiliar" to Ravi, so is Khasak with its medley of sounds and scenes from which his erstwhile town is now remotely distant. Khasak is spatialized through the topographic detailing of a sleepy village located in a valley surrounded by the mountains of Chetali, with the Palghat pass offering the only means of access to this otherwise closed space. Caressed by the palm winds, coloured by festivities, covered with rough stony tracks lumbered by bullock carts, unravished by modern modes of travel, the people of Khasak are in no hurry, "Theirs was another Time, the duration of faster than-light tachaeons come home to rest" (Vijayan 207). A Spatiotemporal scaling of Khasak would place it in the times before the modern ideals of progress and logic had encroached in. It is

replete with mystic charm. As Ravi steps into this forbidden space, he is struck by familiar scenes, "mélange of sounds and sights-a mother calling her daughter home, the arcane name stretched out like a melody; whistling pigeons and hosts of other querulous perchers in the green; a water buffalo, its horns raised in alarm at the sight of strangers" (Vijayan 7).

A microcosm of India during pre-nationalist times, the village serves as a platform for diverse social, cultural and linguistic exchanges between the Ezhavas, the Rowthars, the Muslims, the Christians all of whom exist in harmony. One of the best instances of communal harmony is when Appu- Killi, the village idiot decides to trade his locks for the herds of lice multiplying in his knots. He is an easy catch to the Hindu barber who entices him with the prospect of marital bliss if he gets a tuft at the back of his head. However, he later concedes to the demands from his Muslim friends to shave it off and even gets converted into Appu Rawuthar. While the whole village debates his choice of religions, the Panchayat pronounces a final verdict that he may be allowed the liberty to choose; he can be Hindu, Muslim and Parrot all in one. The idea of community propagated by the novel is a far cry from the one in the totalizing National narratives which sought to homogenize regional, social and cultural differences. There was no quarrel between Hindu and Muslim gods in Khasak and they did not want to "set up the gods against themselves …to let them brawl" (Vijayan 74). Khasak is not a Hindu Nation, it rather boasts about a strong Islamic legacy that has survived generations. According to Milon Franz, "Khasak simultaneously tries to challenge the many-as one concept and the Brahminic tradition that defined national modernity in India"(112). Allah- pitcha Mollakka, seated in the *madrassa* teaches the children the saga of Khasak: "Long long ago…there came riding into their palm grove a cavalcade of a thousand and one horses. The riders were the Badrins, warriors blessed by the Prophet, and at the head of the column rode the holiest of them all- Sayed Mian Sheikh…Both the Muslims and the Hindus of Khasak look upon the Sheikh as their protecting deity" (Vijayan 11).

Nationalism is seen as a demonic modern force that threatens the primitive calm of the village, and questions its penchant for storytelling and narrative. In resisting its ideals, Khasak problematizes all metanarratives, those totalizing knowledge systems of the nation state that invalidate its micro narratives, its indigenous tales and memories about the past. One finds strong resistance to the nationalist agenda to introduce the District Board School in Khasak. The panchayat meets to address concerns about the new school and they refuse to accept one as they already have two – the *madrassa* where the Muslims were taught Koran and the *ezutthu palli* run for the Hindus. They suspect the school would function as the state's agent to erase their powerful memories and to atomise them into Anderson's socially constructed communities.

The struggle against these external power structures come from their fear that the source of myths, folk tales, legends and superstition all of which composed the memory of Khasak would be wiped out. Hence, they make persistent attempts to keep these memories alive through their narratives. It is through the oral narratives of Allah - pitcha, the unlettered local Khazi that the villagers learn about their descent. There are countless tales in Khazak , the most popular one about Sheikh Thangal who had once camped in Chetali hills with his cavalry. It is said that his faithful horse that lies buried in the palm groves rises from his grave to rescue the lost across the groovy mountain pass. Another is that of a deity named Pulikombathe Pothi, the guardian of the chaste that dwells on the tamarind tree and lets only husbands with chaste wives to harvest her fruits in abundance. Then there are tales about the palm trees that serve as halt points for serpents meandering across the skies, the dragonflies that bring memories of the dead, the silver crested fish that become the messenger of the Sheikh.

In Khasak there are no marginal identities, rather multiple voices and perspectives which remain distinct. There is Appu -Killi, the cretin who is neither man nor child, Kuttadan Poosari, the Oracle who smites his head in frenzy and "walks over a bed of live cinders" (Vijayan 133) possessed by the Devi who speaks through him, Maimoona, the houri who "turns her charms on her pursuers, reducing them to blushing juveniles" (Vijayan 25) and Kuttappu- Nari, Kuttappu the tiger who driven by "illicit

alcohol" dares to challenge the Sheikhs cavalry on the Chetali and eventually gets chased by the djinns. Through these numerous voices Khasak weaves a cryptic mesh for people in and out, trapping them in a quagmire from which escape becomes impossible.

Ravi seeks succour in this primitive Khasak far from the complexities of a modern world run by the idea of progress and development. When his bus halts at Koomankavu, the place seems familiar to him. In his recurring presentiments, he has seen himself in the desolate outpost beneath massive trees and the misty mountains. He wonders what Karmic debt brings him to this surreal world. He has given up a lucrative career in astrophysics and walked into this puzzling locale to run the District Board School. Impressed by his insight into the intricate connection between Astrophysics and Upanishads, he has been invited to pursue research at Princeton University. But Ravi chooses to relinquish this world. Haunted by a sense of guilt from his incestuous relationship with his stepmother, he had wandered across "cheerless suburbs…streets of sordid trades…cacti villages and lost townships of lepers and *ashrams* where, in saffron beds voluptuous *swaminis* lay in wait for *nirvana*" (Vijayan 94). As he picks Khasak over Princeton, he tries to seek comfort from an adult life burdened with guilt and *Parighatam*.

At the outset, he seems to be a misfit in this primitive world with his upper middle-class values and his rational mind. Vijayan himself says, He is no longer the teacher; "in atonement he would *learn*. He would learn from the stupor of Khasak" (206). In his constant interaction with the natural landscape and his socialization with the natives that changes overtime, he experiences fleeting moments of union between him and the others. As Ravi is gradually stupefied by the rusticity of the village, he hangs out with its people, drinks toddy, visits women, keenly listens to the colourful tales and finally repudiates with a nonchalance the normative theories on moral standards that rule the civilized world outside. The childhood memories that he cherished had been full of Devas that drank "the milk of the Kalpaka fruit, their elixir of immortality, and flung the empty husks down to the earth" (Vijayan 4). In Khasak he hopes to relive these childhood fantasies and to unlearn the sense of guilt that had once traumatized him.

His initial intention behind the journey to Khasak cannot be interpreted as spiritual. However, as he immerses himself in the magical reality of this place, he is lead into a world of self-discovery. Ravi realises that "every individual belongs to numerous… groups and therefore contains numerous collective self-images and memories" (Assman 127) and it is the legacy of these collective memories in a community that offer a *sarai* (a resting place) *to* the wretched minds. Khasak is no *sarai* for him, he will remain an outsider to the place and its people. In the context of Halbwach's observations on the social character of memory, Khasak's resistance to Ravi can be understood as the result of a tension between different social frameworks that underlie their experience. As Halbwachs observes, it is impossible for Ravi to remember his childhood in a "coherent and persistent fashion" outside his group contexts as his recollections are composed by other intervening experiences (Olick et al.11). The social framework of Khasak that intervenes in his recollections are defined by cultural practices, localised memories and an alternative non-linear sense of time, starkly in contrast with the subjective, modern experience of Ravi and his understanding of time as a linear entity. So, Ravi fails to connect with the collective experience of Khasak which is so replete with such unsettling tales of curse and death that it rattles him from his nonchalance and reminds him of the *Parighatam* called life. The *Parighatam* that he had tried to escape glees at him at the Kuttaadan Poosari's shrine.

"*Parighatam*", Kuttadan rages, "*Parighatam.*"

The encounter with the Oracle profoundly impacts his inner state. He falls sick after his stint with the oracle and loses his sense of reason. Ravi concludes that "the Galilean lenses have been tempting men with a "finite calculus… the earth is not round, but an experience of the fallible human mind". In his intimate moments with Padma, he confides," I want to be the Laya, the dissolution" (Vijayan 193).

The desire for Laya comes from the constant burden of *Parighatam* that continues to torment him. Weary and exhausted, Ravi is overwhelmed by a sense of the absurdity of human existence and the futility of struggle in life.

Conclusion

Whether Ravi consciously decides to die is a debatable consideration, but from the exhaustion and discontent that weighs him down towards the end and the resignation with which he encounters the reptile, Ravi's death seems to be his ultimate choice. This choice results in an annihilation of his individual memories that had held him from merging into the collective consciousness of Khasak. From a completely forgotten outsider, after death, he transitions into a subject of shared remembrance and his story woven into the larger narrative of Khasak will offer a sense of continuity to its Oral tradition. If we consider memorials and the act of memorialization as sustainers of collective memory, Khasak is no misnomer. Although there are no formalized rituals of memorialization in Khasak like the annual ceremonies of commemoration as in other cultures, oral narratives on figures like Sayed Mian Sheikh, locations like the Chetali hills and the mosque and on spirits and deities deeply rooted in the collective consciousness of Khasak make it a memorial site and Ravi's death contributes to the memorial quality. He will be a figure ingrained in their collective memory; his tale would be retold through generations to come.

In conclusion, Ravi's death, while abrupt, suggests his merging with the cyclical order of the land. From a rational self, tortured by linearity, he slides into a cryptic underlying domain of fate and predetermination that defies rationality. Bitten by a snake, one of the primordial forces of nature, Ravi returns to the earth from which he had begun. Khasak inexorably sucks him in.

Works Cited

Anderson, Benedict R. O'G. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso, 2006.

Assmann, Jan, and John Czaplicka. "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity." *New German Critique*, no. 65, 1995, p. 125. *Crossref*, https://doi.org/10.2307/488538.

Franz, Milon. *The Legends of Khasak: A Postcolonial Reading*. Authorspress, 2017.

Mohan, Anupama. *The Country and the Village: Representations of the Rural in Twentieth-Century South Asian Literatures.* 2010.University of Toronto, PhD thesis. https://utoronto.scholaris.ca/server/api/core/bitstreams/2ee414c9-5ee3-49bb-890a-81360fe2de7c/content

Olick, Jeffrey K., et al., editors. *The Collective Memory Reader*. Oxford University Press, 2011.

Tota, Anna Lisa, and Trever Hagen. *Routledge International Handbook of Memory Studies*. Routledge, 2016.

Vijayan., O.V. *The Legends of Khasak*. Penguin, 1994.