

Of Imagined Spaces and Realities: An Archetypal Reading of *the Legends of Khasak*

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Abstract

The Legends of Khasak is O V Vijayan's recreation of his own iconic Malayalam novel *Khasakkinte Ithihasam*. It is a literary work which has achieved a cult status in the history of Indian Literature. It has been studied from different perspectives, yet is so multi-layered that it holds scope for newer readings. This paper seeks to look at the novel from the angle of Archetypal Psychology and explores the myth-making in the novel as the creation of an imagined reality where healing takes place. It touches upon concepts like polytheistic myth and *mundus imaginalis*, besides attempting to read the text as quantum fiction. It tries to explore the different myths, archetypes and symbols which the author has, consciously or otherwise, made use of in the work.

Keywords

The Legends of Khasak, Mythological Criticism, Quantum Fiction, Archetypal Psychology

The rustic charm of 'Khasak' has enchanted the collective psyche of Malayali readers as an imagined space so beautifully crafted, lively with myths that seem to touch upon some ancient chord within their minds. The rendition of the work in English, though not a verbatim translation, could maintain the effect produced by the rural landscape well. The work, like a myth, retains a timeless appeal as it addresses the consciousness of the readers, both individual and collective. The writer weaves an intricate web of relationships in the novel. He

brilliantly mixes deep philosophical questions with the story, which is intense as it mixes myth, reality and the author's personal experiences. The existential angst of a human being is meticulously explored in the text.

The novel features the protagonist Ravi's time spent at a rural village in Kerala. He, haunted by the guilt of having had a sexual relationship with his stepmother, leaves his studies and bright academic future midway. He tries to seek comfort in spirituality and lives in *ashrams* but cannot find peace. After a sexual tryst with a *swamini* at an *ashram*, he leaves to become the teacher at a newly established single-teacher school at Khasak, a remote village. Khasak offers another level of reality to Ravi where he exists with detachment amidst a motley mix of characters. Allapicha the mullah, Madhavan Nair, a tailor and communist, his uncle Sivaraman Nair, Nizam Ali the Khazi, his beloved Maimoona, her husband Chukru and his daughter Abida, the retarded man-child Appukkili, Kuppu the toddy-tapper, Kuttadan the oracle, the widow Chand Umma with her kids, and the little girl Kunjamina, among many others, populate the quaint village of Khasak. The village is protected by Sayed Mian Sheikh and the ghost of his horse, Mariamma, Nallamma and the goddess atop the tamarind tree. When his beloved Padma finds him in Khasak and makes him promise to return with her, Ravi elopes again but while on the way, offers his foot lovingly to a baby snake which strikes him. The novel ends where Ravi calmly waits for the bus, lying down.

A basic understanding of Mythological and Archetypal Criticism is imperative in this study. As academic disciplines, Mythological Criticism studies recurrent universal patterns underlying most literary works and Archetypal Criticism is a type of critical theory that interprets a text by focusing on recurring myths and archetypes in the narrative. *Encyclopaedia of Literature* defines myth as: "A usually traditional story of ostensibly historical elements that serves to unfold part of a world view of a people or a practice, belief or natural phenomenon" (794).

Mythological criticism studies how a text evokes a universal reaction from all readers. As a form of literary criticism, it makes use

of Carl Gustav Jung's theories of the collective unconscious, archetypes, and primordial images in analysing literature. Archetypal Criticism deals with archetypes which are similar ideas, motifs, and images found in many different myths. They are normally defined as "universal symbols". Though no longer widely practiced, archetypal literary criticism still has a place in the tradition of literary studies. Northrop Frye, in *The Stubborn Structure*, claims that:

...mythology as a whole provides a kind of diagram or blueprint of what literature as a whole is all about an imaginative survey of the human situation from the beginning to the end, from the height to the depth, of what is imaginatively conceivable. (102)

Jung's theory of the collective unconscious is of prime importance in the application of mythological criticism in *The Legends of Khasak*. Khasak is a primitive land which abounds in myths and legends. It forms a part of the collective unconscious of the people. The legendary origin of the ancient village named Khasak is associated with religion.

Long, long ago, in times now unknown to man, 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...the horse the Sheikh rode was old and ill...When the old horse could go no farther the Sheikh signaled his warriors to stop...the faithful animal died and was buried in a palm grove. (10)

The tale of Sayed Mian Sheikh's old horse which died in Khasak and turned into a benevolent spirit which helped the children and the aged is a reflection of the nature of the people of Khasak. They help each other. They feel the presence of Sheikh as their guardian. The story is passed on to younger generations by Allapicha, the mullah of Khasak, as part of religious study. It thus forms a part of the psyche of Khasak. Religions co-exist in the village. All of the villagers believe in the unity of Gods. The Muslims believed in the power of Nallamma, and the Sheikh was considered to be the guardian of Khasak even by the Hindus.

There are myths about hedge lizards and dragonflies. Hedge lizards sucked the blood of children through air and hence it is considered evil. They believed that evil spirits, when exorcised, rode on hedge lizards to exile and hence used it in exorcism. Dragonflies were considered to be the memories of the dead. These myths suggest that the folk of Khasak did not confine themselves to the living world. They offered feasts to their ancestral spirits once in two or three years to appease them. They never believed that death is an end to life, quite obvious of a tribe who trusts in a spirit as their village deity.

Chastity myths also find an important place in Khasak. The myth of the tamarind tree which can only be climbed by those men whose wives are chaste suggests the importance the people of Khasak attach to chastity.

It happened in the long lost time of Khasak, but it lived on, a brooding, avenging sorrow. The great tamarind tree which stood on the edge of the burial marsh was witness to that sorrow. Old beyond measure, Khasak believed the tree wouldn't die until it was redeemed in some way. It was beneath this tree, in that lost time, that an old, widowed astrologer and his daughter had built their hut. A company of white cavalry came there in search of water for their camels. They killed the old star-watcher and raped the daughter. They left her to die on the marsh and went their way towards the mountains, but as they went up the foothills scorpions crawled into their battle fatigues and black cobras bit the camels. Camels and riders perished in the wild, and the loam of the mountain settled over their bones. The dead girl rose from the marsh and made the tamarind tree her abode. Worshipped as a Devi, she was the guardian of the chaste. The tamarind tree grew to enormity and, despite its great age, bore fruit in abundance...few dared to climb up...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. The men did not want to be brought to the test (103)

The myth brands an innocent woman, Chand Umma, unchaste. Her husband fell down from the tamarind tree. Khasak isolates her. Ants, symbolic of communal life, suggest how the husband of an unchaste woman would be treated by the society. The venomous ants that devour him are, thus, the one-sided codes of morality in a patriarchal society. The myth of the palm tree is also related to chastity. It is believed that:

When flying serpents rested on palm tops during their mysterious journeys ... the tapper made an offering of sweet toddy to please these visitants. He left flowers at the foot of the palm for the clan's well-being. In those times, the tapper did not have to climb the palm bent down for him. It was when a tapper's woman lost her innocence that the palm ceased to bend. (109)

Thus, the fact that no one dares to climb the tamarind tree and the tale of the palm tree suggests that the people of Khasak have the fear in the loss of chastity of their women.

Another myth of Khasak is associated with journey. Ravi used to lose himself in the image of a journey during times of his lonely and pensive mood. In the chapter titled "Once upon a Time", Ravi thinks about life as a journey.

Soon it was dark, and the fantasy returned, the fantasy of the journey. The seedling house became a compartment in a train, and he the lone and imprisoned traveler. Dark wastes lay on either side; from them fleeting signs spoke to Ravi. (48)

Khasak is a land of inertia. Except the *Pandarams* (a migrant community), the people of Khasak seldom leave the village. The *Pandarams* believe that Gods come riding the east wind and taps awake the mendicant of Khasak. It is a call hard to resist and they go on journeys. Thus the people of Khasak support their beliefs with myths and legends. In the novel, the journey archetype pervades throughout its length and breadth. Unlike the quest motif associated with journey, the journey in *The Legends of Khasak* is synonymous with life or destiny. Ravi, the protagonist, views his life as a journey initiated by a strong pang of guilt for cheating his father. For him,

Khasak is just a 'sarai' or inn where he can have a transient sojourn. Ravi tells the story of the journey of two spores to his students.

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 farther.

I want to journey, said the little spore, I want to discover. She gazed 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.

The little spore journeyed on. The bigger spore stayed back in the valley....

A girl with silver anklets and eyes prettied with surma came to Chethali's valley to gather flowers. The Champaka tree stood alone...

As the twig broke the Champaka said, My little sister, you have forgotten me! (61)

The spore that stayed became the flora and the one that moved on became the human race and forgot the bond. Allah Picha Mollakka, the Mullah of Khasak, is often described as the wayfarer. His life is also viewed as a journey and his sore toe symbolises his hardships. It hurt at first, later became malignant, and the Mullah died of it. Thus, journey forms an important archetype in the novel.

The myth of rebirth is also present in Khasak. The story of a girl named Kunjuvella who possessed memories of her previous birth testifies their belief in rebirth. For them, even disease becomes a ritual. They believe that small-pox is the boon of Nallamma, the Goddess. They believe that she suckles the children to death. She is also viewed as the jealous mistress of the sick men. Thus, the myths of Khasak

help to provide a dark and ancient ambience to the place. It is reflected in the lives of its people. Rebirth is as difficult to face as death. It holds within not just the memories of the struggles and difficulties of our own physical birth and growth, but also the challenge of becoming the unknown future, the dark possibility, the new. The symbols commonly associated with rebirth are cave, egg, spring, tree, the cross, dawn, emerging out of the sea, snake, bird, seed, green shoot from a dead branch or trunk, phoenix, drinking alcohol or blood red wine, flame, pearl and the womb. In the novel, some of these symbols are made use of. Nizam Ali spends his days in a cave after he proclaims himself the Khazi of Sayed Mian Sheikh. It symbolises his rebirth from an ordinary human being to a mystic. The festival of Onam is depicted in the novel and it stands for spring time. It makes Ravi think of his lost childhood and in his mind he becomes a child again. Thus, in a way, he is reborn. Dawn is a powerful symbol used in the novel. It makes Ravi philosophise the nature of human destiny. It reminds him of his father. He gets into a realm of mind far removed from the mundane life. Snake is used as a symbol of rebirth in the climax of the novel. Ravi fondly gives his foot to a snake and gets bitten. It may be his way of ending one journey and beginning another into the unknown world. The snake bite is a window opening out from the world of guilt.

An archetype is a pattern from which copies can be made. It is a universal theme that manifests itself differently on individual basis. According to Philip Wheelwright in *Metaphor and Reality*, archetypes are universal symbols which are:

those which carry the same or very similar meanings for a large portion, if not all, of mankind. It is a discoverable fact that certain symbols...recur again and again in cultures so remote from one another in space and time that there is no likelihood of any historical influence and casual connection among them. (111)

Archetypes fall into two major categories, namely characters and situations (symbols). Some of the archetypes relevant to this study are described below.

The archetype of the spider has a long history in human consciousness. Native American symbolism sees the spider archetype as the keeper of the past and its connection to the future. In the novel, Ravi, when he kills spiders, is symbolically trying to kill his past which is tainted with guilt. In India, spider is the weaver of the web of *Maya*, or illusion. In the web, it stands as the centre of the world. By killing it, Ravi affirms the impossibility of his escape from his past by indulging in the illusory nature of Khasak.

The Horse archetype throughout the ages has been closely linked with our inherent, primal drives. Jung thought the Horse evokes intense feelings and unbridled passion buried deep inside the psyche, the forces that he called 'the shadow self'. Maimoona, the beauty of Khasak, is compared to a sacrificial mare whom none could lasso, save in dreams. "Often Maimoona turned her charms on her pursuers, reducing them to blushing boys. She was the sacrificial mare no one could lasso." (*The Legends of Khasak* 25) She, like the horse, evokes intense feelings and unbridled passion in the men of Khasak.

The Water type is the Philosopher who illuminates the hidden, exposing new understanding, dispersing mystery, dispelling ignorance. As the keeper of ancestral remembrances and visions, water enunciates our hopes. It symbolises the mystery of creation, birth-death-resurrection, purification and redemption, fertility and growth, spiritual mystery, infinity and eternity. According to Jung, water symbolises the unconscious. Water, as an agent of purification and redemption, is seen as rain in the novel. It also symbolises the birth-death-rebirth when rain falls on the dying Ravi.

The rain, nothing but the rain. White, opaque. The rain slept, it dreamt....The waters of the Timeless rain touched him. Grass sprouted through the pores of his body. Above him the great rain shrank small as a thumb, the size of the departing subtle body. (203)

Chukru, the Diving Fowl, commits suicide in a well. For him, water is a way of redemption from the sin of driving his daughter Abida away from home.

The snake was one of the most widely used symbols associated with insight and healing, forbidden knowledge and spiritual awakening. It is also a symbol of the *Kundalini Shakti*, the cosmic feminine energy that ignites and fuels our spiritual awakening process. The snake is a well-known symbol for sin and temptation. When the Mullah sees Nizam Ali for the first time, he is hunting for snakes. It symbolises the Mullah's attraction towards the feminine boy. The image of the diademed serpents riding the mirage and calling little Ravi represents secret or forbidden knowledge. It prophesies his relationship with his stepmother. The snake that bites Ravi initiates him into a new and unknown life. Ravi seems to find the lost feminine presence through the snake bite.

The palm tree is a solar symbol in which the head, with the fronds, resembles the sun. Sun symbols are predominantly masculine in their energetic tone. In alchemical traditions, the palm tree is a symbol of androgyny as it possesses the perfect integration of both male and female attributes. Khasak is a land of palm trees and toddy tappers. Kuppu, the toddy tapper, calls the palm trees as his 'black mistresses'. The Temperance law prohibited the brewing of liquor and Kuppu lost his occupation, rather his vocation. It reduced him to a mere gossipmonger. Darkness symbolises knowledge in *The Legends of Khasak*. Chukru's moving towards the darkness of the depth of the well and Madhavan Nair's story of the blind guru assert the fact.

It is to such a setting that Ravi comes to, seeking solace. He considers it a *sarai* or an inn where he can rest for a while. Why does Ravi go to Khasak? In *Myth and Reality*, Mircea Eliade speaks about the motif of the *regressus ad uterum* (to the symbolic womb of life). The village of Khasak, with its dark antiquity, is like the womb and Ravi tries to escape from his sin by regressing into it. He feels a familiarity to the place when he reaches there. Why was the village, with its myths and quaintness, waiting for him? How does he go there? It is where the concept of Archetypal Psychology comes into play.

Archetypal psychology, developed by James Hillman, focuses on the psyche (soul) and the *archai*, the essential patterns or fantasies that enlivens all life. Jung talked about the psychological therapeutic function of myths. Archetypal psychology is a polytheistic psychology

which postulates that myths shape as well as are shaped by the human minds. Archetypes become gods and unconscious fantasies materialise as myths. It influences the psychic life of individuals.

In *The Legends of Khasak*, the village with its multiple myths become therapeutic to the protagonist, albeit in an escapist way. It becomes *mundus imaginalis*, an imaginary realm where healing of the psyche takes place. In Latin, the phrase means an imaginal world between intelligence and sensibility where imagination and the unconscious live. Ravi creates Khasak in his mind as an imagined reality to heal his troubled soul.

Ravi is a brilliant scholar at a premier institute in the country, studying Astrophysics. His work combining elements of the subject with the *Upanishads* has fetched him the coveted opportunity to pursue his higher studies in Princeton University. A scholar like him would certainly be familiar with the intricacies of quantum mechanics, a branch of science dealing with multiple realities. Guilt takes him through spiritual wanderings and he presumably spends years at *ashrams*. Khasak can be an imagined parallel reality Ravi conceived, a realm abundant with myths, where reality is multiple. When read from such an angle, the novel acquires newer interpretations.

The bus that brings Ravi to the narrative and the one he waits for at the end becomes metaphors of imagination which takes him from one reality to another. Kooman Kavvu, the imaginary place at the end of bus route, where Ravi feels a familiarity to, and the *naraka padam* (picture of hell) on the wall of a shop he visits are constructions of his mind. The place is described as being protected by the old trees, symbolic of the absence of his father in his life and his concerns over his health. Ravi's sense of guilt is reflected in the picture of hell he sees there. The imaginary place he constructed is pregnant with symbols that reflect his life. Ravi's saffron cloth fetches him respect but the way he gets it shows his disbelief in seeking spirituality in *ashrams*. The old man who comes to carry Ravi's luggage is an example of the guide archetype and introduces him to Khasak. Ravi's childhood was rich with myths and tales. His mother used to tell him stories about celestial beings who throw the husks of *kalpavriksha*

(sacred tree) down to earth. After the death of his mother, Ravi led a lonely childhood and it was then that diademed serpents came to lure him out to play.

The people and myths of Khasak are reflections of Ravi's own psyche. It has contrasting elements, like the Mullah and the Khazi, the fundamentalist and the communist, seductress and innocent maiden, etc. Truths are many in Khasak, like how realities or possibilities are in quantum physics. Khasak is, at the same time, inert and changing. There are primal passions there, along with rebirth and renewal. There is the return of the dead as lice and dragonflies. There is a man-child who is stuck somewhere in his path of growth. Ravi joins Khasak with the loveless tale of karmic bonds.

Like a superimposed quantum state which holds all possibilities, Khasak welcomes Ravi. He becomes a part of it, the land that lies beyond the borders of guilt. Like any quantum state, Khasak holds Ravi within till Padma comes to the narrative as an observer. There was also the threat of suspension he faced, which can be read as the battle of ideals within his mind. Ravi has to choose a reality and he promises Padma that he would return with her. Padma symbolises the opportunities awaiting him in the real world. The world, with its definiteness, is not something Ravi can tolerate as it is a world where his father and stepmother live. In the real world, he is a guilty son who cheated his father. Ravi offers his foot to a baby snake which strikes him and he lies there, waiting for the bus. Ravi is in two minds and he may be unsure about exiting his imagined space.

The concept of 'quantum fiction' entered literature decades after the publication of the novel. Though all the characteristics mentioned as features of quantum fiction does not hold true for the novel, it has a layer of meaning which can be read along those lines. Thus, to conclude, the novel can be read as an instance of myth-making where an imagined space was created as an alternate reality to heal deep wounds in the psyche of a character.

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