

THE LEGENDS OF KHASAK: A STRUCTURALIST APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

An exploration of The Legends of Khasak, (translated by O. V. Vijayan, who also wrote the Malayalam original version Khasakinte Ithihasam) through a structuralist perspective is attempted in this paper. Structuralism is the approach that infers that elements of human culture must be understood by way of their affiliation to a broader, all-encompassing system or structure. The paper works to discover the structures that underlie the narrative of the novel, about sin, penance, salvation and restoration.

Set in Khasak, the narrative progresses through the experiences of Ravi, the protagonist. Building upon the philosopher, Simon Blackburn's, outlook on structuralism that phenomena of human life are not intelligible, except through their interrelations. This study reveals Ravi's relationships with the characters. On the first layer, the inner conflicts of his mind are exposed. On a deeper layer, they reflect how each of these characters are involved in the past, present and in the future of Khasak and how they are all indispensable components of the soul of Khasak. The circle of life and about the infinite clash of myth and reality are the different layers that the structure of the novel reveals and that in turn are things that humans do, think, perceive and feel.

Ferdinand de Saussure's distinction between 'langue' and 'parole' is studied with reference to the alterations made in the language and tone structure throughout the novel. Vijayan has refined the language and penetrated into the essence of words to find the inherent truth in it. Saussure's argument that the "sign" was composed of both a signified, an abstract concept or idea and a "signifier", which is the perceived sound/visual image is explained in association to the myths, dreams and desires, fate, coincidences, ideologies, sex, architecture and struggles of everyday life in Khasak.

The original novel Khasakinte Ithihasam literally revolutionized Malayalam fiction and in the golden jubilee year of its publication, a structuralist reading of the translated version is attempted, so as to bring out the layers of complexity hidden behind the simplest words and events make this book a classic.

KEYWORDS: Culture, Language, Myth, Reality, Structuralist

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INTRODUCTION

A novel that created waves in the Malayalam literary world, the one that is considered to be a wall that divides Malayalam literature into traditional and modern, and also the one that set on fire a world of imagination for its readers – that was

Khasikkinte Ithihasam written by O. V. Vijayan in 1969. The same novel was translated into English by Vijayan himself in 1994 and named *The Legends of Khasak*.

The Structuralist Approach

Structuralism is a method of interpretation and analysis of aspects of human cognition, behavior, culture and experience that focusses on relationships of contrast between elements in a conceptual system that reflect patterns underlying a superficial diversity. Structuralist theorists are interested in identifying and analysing the structures that underlie all cultural phenomena — and not just literature. Structuralists had got the notion that everything could be analyzed in terms of a deep structure from the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. He came up with this idea that language is a ‘sign system’ made up of unchanging patterns and rules. The structuralists who were influenced by Saussure took that deep structure idea even deeper: If underlying patterns or structures govern language, they said, does it not mean that underlying patterns or structures shape all human experience.

Structuralist thought is central to the way we approach reading and talking about great books. When it comes to literature, structuralist theorists care about discovering the structures or rules that govern groups of literary works. So, when we talk about the narrative elements of a novel, for example — things like plot, character, conflict, setting, point of view — we are borrowing the structuralist idea that there are certain principles or structures that can be found in all novels. Structuralism is all about determining sets of opposites and using those to figure out deep patterns underlying the structure of pretty much anything. It is about understanding those underlying patterns that govern how we behave, how we speak and how and why we write literature.

The simple answer is that many of the theories that came after structuralism first developed as critiques of structuralism. Some scholars and academics looked at structuralism and decided it was not their perspective, and then when they began explaining the problems with structuralism ended up with a whole bunch of new fun theories that built on structuralism but went beyond it. So, regardless of whether we agree with structuralists or not, we have to thank them for one thing: their ideas led to an explosion of many others, possibly better, definitely more adventurous branches of theory.

Human societies are characterised by patterns of relationships (social relations) between the individuals, who share a distinctive culture and institution. A given society may be described as the amalgam of such relationships among its constituent members. Insofar as it is collaborative, a society can enable its members to benefit in ways that would not otherwise be possible on an individual basis; both individual and social (common) benefits can thus be distinguished, or in many cases, found to overlap. More broadly, and especially within the structuralist thought, a society may be illustrated as an economic, social, industrial, or cultural infrastructure made up of varied collection of the individuals. In this regard, society can mean the objective relationships people have with the material world and with other people rather than the individual and their familiar social environment.

The pattern that is woven into the story is not one, but many, brings to life a great many things. The geography of Khasak, “the immense canopy of trees, with its shops and shacks, all raised on piles”, “the mud houses lost in the green of planted vegetation, pulses and plantain, and gourds which ripened on thatches”(Vijayan 2) and also the “melange of sights and sound” (6) that the novel awakened in the reader is one of the many layers that are revealed.

“a mother calling her daughter home, the arcane name stretched 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; the swift-flowing

brook, its banks aflame with flowering screw pine; a flight of complaining crows rising in the distance like pterodactyls into the crystal arches of the sun” (6–7).

The other significant landmarks of the landscape of Khasak are the Chetali mountain, “ its crown of rock jutting over the paddies below”(7), the Twelfth Mosque, called the Mosque of the King,” its walls and roof covered with picturesque disfigurement, the mosque exuded the dismal well-being of an antique”(18), the Araby tank, a pond of crystal water, the crypt from which the Sheikh rose to protect the living and the dead of Khasak, the great banyan, the lotus pond and the ballads that filled the air carrying the legends of the place in them. Also, the heroic periods, its torrential winds and its banyan breezes were a part of the experience that life in this quasi-fictitious place offered to Ravi, the protagonist. The great tamarind tree that stood on the edge of the burial marsh had the spirit of a young girl, who was the guardian of the chaste. The palm grove that stretched without end, the twilight, neither sunrise nor sunset could resolve...all these forms, the framework that the novel is set in. This is the first layer or the outer covering that strikes the reader. The vast panoramic splendour of Khasak that is described in the best of Vijayan’s language is a feast to the eyes as well as the soul. The rich tapestry of images that he manages to weave take the reader on a journey into the wilderness and pristine beauty; and each hour of the day, from the sunrise to the sunset is gloriously described along with the sights and smells that make reading the novel a wholesome experience.

The second layer is the man-made layer that comprises of the Mosque and the Madrassa, the astrologers’ Ezhuthupalli, Aliyar’s tea-shop, the District Board School and the many houses, some tiled and the others thatched. Next one is that of the interesting characters that Khasak abounds in. From the once well-off and well-known feudal lord Sivaraman Nair to the cretin Appu-Kili, there are many weird and quaint people, both men and women, who fill the pages of the novel. Madhavan Nair, the tailor, Aliyar, who owns the tea-shop, Maimoona, the bewitching beauty of Khasak, Chand Umma and her children, Kunjamina, Thanka, Thithi Bi, Thanga and many more...

Particularly appealing are also the smaller stories and individual fates, scenes from the lives of these common people, who come alive and seem marvellously uncommon on these pages. There is also a mix of the supernatural spirits and haunted locales, but it is woven in naturally; beliefs and superstitions that make sense in this small world but are not too deeply analyzed.

Contrasts abound in the book - modern world intruding upon tradition, strangers mixing with locals, but Vijayan does not make it a book about these contrasts. It is this remarkable village-world which takes everyone, including Ravi into its embrace (and just as readily lets them slip free, if need be) — that is the centrepiece of this richly populated work.

Literature is a collection of narratives that seem to be dissimilar on the surface but are actually governed by underlying rules and structures, which they all share despite their superficial differences. The contrasts are used to dig up the structure underneath. An author does not really matter as an individual — it is just some faceless being who produces narratives that reflect the deep structure of literature. A reader is someone who works on uncovering and analyzing the deep structures that govern literary works. Readers are way more important than authors because they are the ones who can arrive at an understanding of the deep structures of texts.

Its interweaving of myth and reality, its lyrical intensity, its black humour, its freshness of idiom with its mixing of the provincial and the profound and its combined wordplay, its juxtaposition of the erotic and the metaphysical, the crass and the sublime, the real and the surreal, guilt and expiation, physical desire and existential angst and its innovative

narrative strategy with its deft manipulation of time and space together that created a new readership with a novel sensibility and which transformed the Malayali imagination forever.

The various experiences and incidents that take place in the novel spin a web of emotions. It is interesting to realize that the different incidents are perhaps reflections of alter egos of people and their inner struggles. The constant references of Ravi's self-imposed alienation, his social position and his past, and the way of life in Khasak give rise to a larger platform of conflict. Such subtle and mysterious conflicts are the ones that make this book a masterpiece.

Ravi, the protagonist, lives at two levels, a mundane, instinctive level of lust and longing and a transcendental meditative level of detachment and spiritual quest. He is haunted by a sense of guilt for his past incestuous relationship with his stepmother and his desecration of an ashram by committing a sin with a yogini that prompts him to leave the peace of that shelter and walk into the blazing sun of Khasak to run a single-teacher school in that remote village. An intellectual who had tried to correlate astrophysics and upanishadic metaphysics and was all set to go to the United States for higher studies, Ravi, was driven by his shame and came to Khasak to expiate his sin. He is an alien among the rustic folk, seeing them with a kind of philosophical detachment even while mixing with them at the level of everyday experience, but here too, desire overwhelms him and at the end of a series of events, facing the threat of suspension, he keeps his word to his beloved Padma to leave Khasak. He lies down in calm detachment in the white monsoon rain, waiting for his bus, affectionately watching the blue-hooded serpent that had struck him, withdrawing contentedly into its hole surrounded by the new-born grass.

According to structuralist theorists, there is some sort of structure underlying all cultural phenomena. Language has a deep structure, families have a deep structure, literature has a deep structure. *Langue* is a French word referring to the deep structure (or grammar) underneath language. It is in charge of the infinite variety of sentences, utterances and phrases that are, on the surface, different from one another and *Parole* is a fancy French word that refers to specific utterances or speech acts. *Paroles* may be different on the surface, but they are all governed by the same 'langue'. The grammatical structure that underlies all of these sentences is the 'langue', whereas the various utterances are 'paroles'. The *paroles* may be different, but the structure beneath them is the same. The same goes for other grammatical structures, but the point is that various forms of parole, no matter what aspect of a person's life or cultural surroundings they are referring to, are based on the same set of linguistic rules. Basically, Saussure is making a distinction that is central to structuralism. On the surface of language, there are differences, but beneath those superficial differences, there is a common structure.

The dragonfly is the signifier, which is a marker that refers to a specific concept. In almost every part of the world, the dragonfly symbolises change, transformation, adaptability and self-realisation. The change that is often referred to has its source in mental and emotional maturity and understanding the deeper meaning of life. The dragonfly's scurrying flight across the water represents an act of going beyond what is on the surface and looking into deeper implications and aspects of life. The dragonfly moves with elegance and grace and is iridescent, both on its wings and body. The magical property of iridescence is also associated with the discovery of one's own abilities by unmasking self and removing the doubts casted upon his/her own sense of identity.

The concept that the dragonfly refers to is related to its life as a nymph. It flies only for a fraction of its life. This symbolises and exemplifies the virtue of living in the moment and living a life to the fullest. The eyes of the dragonfly symbolises the uninhibited vision of the mind and the ability to see beyond the limitations of the human self. The signified refers to the dragonfly that is a symbol of happiness, new beginnings and change for many centuries.

The sign is the “ridge stretched before him becoming infinite, spanning recurrence and incarnation” (Vijayan 106). These lines from the novel talk of Ravi’s experience, as he “walked over the ridge and a million dragonflies sallied forth into the bland sun overhead”. More lines that is made up of both the signifier and the signified. “Memories of the dead and the dead pining for miraculous reprieves. Ravi walked beneath the canopy of little wings. Khasak lay dreaming all around him” (107).

The one-teacher school that Ravi, the protagonist of *Khasak*, conducts alone is a symbol/sign. In *Khasak*, there are two schools, where the Mullah taught the Koran and the ‘Ezhithupally’, literally meaning ‘the house of writing’, run by a family of hereditary Hindu astrologers. The aim of those two schools are two-fold. In the ‘Ezhuthupally’, there are no students from outside the Khasak, and the authority of the school was struggling hard to save the school from closing down when Nizam Ali, a person from Khasak, visits his village again as the self-proclaimed *Khaliar* (Khazi in English). The mullah and others fear that he would destroy the old order and the new school overthrows the hallowed myths. The mullah was against the school. The man who taught lessons at the Ezhuthupalli was against the school, but Ravi is unaware of the battle. He often wondered “what karmic bond had brought me here? What purpose, what meticulous pre-determination?” (Vijayan 43).

Binary Opposition

According to structuralist linguists, binary oppositions organize language because so much of the world is understood based on what it is not. The language of *Khasak* is a mix of Tamil and Malayalam and this sets a peculiar context, which is extremely challenging to express in a translation, while retaining depth and essence. It is indeed the magic of language that gives a mystic and mysterious element to the novel. The Dalit community in the village does the manual work and there are various subcastes. For example, Kuravu, the student character belongs to the Thottiya caste, who are from the ancient martial clan. They roam the villages with their performing monkeys to make a living. The school entry details of Kuravu exemplify the status of their people in *Khasak*. It goes the following way – C. Kuravu, son of Mr. Chenthiyavu Thottiya, prominent monkey trainer. (Vijayan 44). Their language has no script, but this scriptless language helps them to penetrate into the forest depths of Chethali. The other students like Chathan and Parekkadan keep away from letters taught by Ravi, their master. They have their own oath to the mountain God. They do not want Ravi, their master to unlock the mystery attached to their lives. Ravi is the outsider in this place, but he easily fits into the scheme of things here.

But school is only one part of life in *Khasak*. Vijayan builds up to that first school-day, but then allows school-life to blend in equally with other parts of daily village life. Similarly, later, a school inspector's visit is much anticipated — only again to prove less significant than feared. *Khasak* is a place full of anti-climax.

Conflicts abound and personal and professional relationships constantly change. Solutions are provincial but effective, such as when the town idiot, the lovable parrot, Appu-Kili, is converted to Islam. “The parrot was to be allowed the freedom of both religions. For certain days of the week, he could be a Muslim. For the rest, he could be a Hindu. If necessary, Hindu, Muslim and a parrot all at the same time” (43).

There are major and minor crises and several personal tragedies. Nothing is wallowed in, acceptance ultimately always prevailing. From the easily circumvented imposition of (alcohol) prohibition to the spread of lice to a more serious smallpox epidemic, the locals oppose, suffer and endure together. Ravi is among those who contract smallpox; while many of the locals had got themselves vaccinated, the supposedly modern Ravi had not. “I wanted to experience death” is the

explanation he offers — a rare open display of weakness (though here at least once that can be excused due to his delirium).

It is Ravi who learns the most over the course of the book, though Vijayan does not present the book as an educational journey. Commendably, in many of the episodes, Ravi is, at best, a peripheral presence. There does come a point, where Ravi has to admit to his students: "I do not have the answer" -- and naturally his students do, regaling him with the legends of Khasak (and all the lessons these offer).

At the end — the death of the mullah, a crisis that rallies the locals around Ravi, and Ravi confronting his own past — is the end of the book and how he artfully meets his own fate. Running away from demons from his past, Ravi is enmeshed with the lives of those that run the village lives that are both alive and imagined or conjured, whenever needed, and those that are dead. The village is host to many layers of rituals, myths and eccentricities. The characters in the book circle each other's lives, peripherally, or inextricably at times. Ravi and those he meets do not find respite from the spirits for whom Khasak is an age-old home, nor can they find solace in the many parallel realities.

Captivating and appealing, Vijayan's novel *The Legends of Khasak*, is also amazingly reminiscent of "an interminable journey, mystic and wonderful" (Afterword, Vijayan 206). Vijayan has brought abundant life in the pages, both the characters and the background - the natural (and even supernatural) surroundings - are clearly represented. The book, now five decades old, continues to have a strong following and a lingering influence.

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