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NARRATOLOGY OF LANDSCAPE- A STUDY ON O.V VIJAYAN'S 'LEGENDS OF KHASAK'

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ABSTRACT

The paper titled, 'Narratology of Landscape- A study on O.V Vijayan's 'Legends of Khasak' reads the text as part of landscape literature where Vijayan's design of the landscape contribute immensely to the development of the plot. Khasak with its lush green ambience acts as a cosmos of legends and myths. Life of Khasak is deeply rooted in the legends it carries. One cannot resist but be a part of them and Ravi who comes as a stranger to the land is taken by its beauty and beliefs. The text communicates through the landscape of 'Khasak'; the stories being substantiated each moment by the interference of the nature. The paper analysis the role of landscape in the narratology of the novel by analysing its relation between the inhabitants, the recurring images and the legends it creates.

Keywords: Landscape literature, Narratology, Khasak, Legends, Setting

Introduction

Landscape literature analyses works based on the landscape which act as the setting of the work. According to Collin's Dictionary, *The landscape* is everything you can see when you look across an area of land, including hills, rivers, buildings, trees, and plants.

Characters often live in the setting. The communication between them and the landscape is often shown explicitly in order to convey the undeniable truth that man is not different from his surroundings. People 'live' in their surroundings- the nature, the architecture (buildings, houses, churches, temples), even the path of the streets, the colours of the shops etc is a reflection of them. The scope of landscape has been explored by many writers. For instance, in Emily Bronte's 'Wuthering Heights' the characters acquire life from the nature(moor) around them. The setting provides the mood and eventually is a reflection of the inhabitants. Thomas Hardy's Wessex is another powerful representation of the role of landscape in the lives of men. One can visualize the characters of Jane Austen walking through the moors lonely, enjoying the tranquility it affords. Landscape is not merely the geographical features; it includes everything that contributes to the growth of a person. Characters live in an era or a period which in fact is communicated through the setting/landscape descriptions. The deliberate use of landscape by authors is part of their methodology of making the work memorable. Hannah Kent author of 'Burial Rites' says that,

The skill in writing landscape is to capture it in concise, startling references,
well placed within narrative, that accumulate to create a pervading presence.

Landscape besides being the setting, also represents the social, economic, political and psychological conditioning of the characters. They act as markers through which in-depth character analysis is made possible. Robert Lawson-Peebles has put it like this:

“Descriptions of the environment are never merely empirical. They are strategies which encode the interests and concerns of the writers as well as the physical nature of the terrain, the climate, and so on.”

On studying a work based on the landscape, one must think beyond the visual effects it provides. For instance, the architecture described can be read based on the socio-political scenario. The Gothic literature of the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries often work on the premises of awe and fear which is instilled by the combination of architecture and grave atmosphere. The climate, wilderness, lonely moors etc add to its effect. The Gothic architecture and landscape is often perceived as the representation of suppressed emotions where the reader undergoes catharsis and emerges as cleansed. The narratology of landscape is therefore the design of the author in communicating his ideas profoundly and studying the landscape of a work involve analysis of the social, political, cultural as well as economic scenarios.

O.V Vijayan's famous novel, 'The Legends of Khasak', tells the story of 'Khasak', a valley lying in the foothills of the Chetali hill. Khasak, which is a place of mystic beauty instills the memorability of the text by its vivid descriptions and its relation with the inhabitants. The place with its legends including that of mosque creates the ambit of the novel. Vijayan incorporates the rusticity of Khasak with the elements of gothic, in order to create the mood of the text. This is done by the description about the old and degraded Mosque of the King, waterfall and the galloping of the horses in the lone nights and by the depiction of the creatures that hide among the leaves and the shades of the lush green canopy of trees. O.V Vijayan has created Khasak with the most distinguishing features of a rustic village with houses having thatched roofs, the small teashop which is a typical scene in the villages of Kerala, the feudal households and granary, the mosque, the liquor selling huts, the tailoring shop etc.

Khasak is a unique place where myth comes to life. The characterization of the novel caters to this. Here the wisdom inherited by the modern man stands no chance. Ravi who was a student of physics forgets the logics of rationalism and gets imbibed into the myths of the place. This is evident when he goes to Kuttadan (a native who cures the diseases through chants and prayers) to get rid of his smallpox, though in the beginning he rebels against this. Vijayan's design of the novel encompasses not just humans but also the nature inhabited by them. The lives of the people are labyrinthine with the beauty and myths of Khasak. Its geography allows them to have a life secluded from the outside world which in fact is a bliss for them to revolve around the myths created.

The Oneness of Nature and Man

In Khasak everything is set in the dark shades of forest. The gods and goddesses are native. The rituals cater to the ignorance prevailing. Khasak has the unmatched power of bringing everyone to its legends. Landscape actively takes part in the narratology as everything in Khasak has life, even the wind tells the story. Here humans and nature are not separate. 'Appukili' stands as the best example. He is neither human nor a creature. But the combination of both, just like his name (meaning Appubird). He loves the dragonflies which is supposed to carry the memories of the past.

In this crowd stood a dwarf, holding a leash of yarn at the end of which fluttered a green dragonfly. It was hard to tell his age, his torso full grown, hands and legs stunned, his face large with horsey jaws.(8)

The creatures of Khasak play a vital role in the lives of the people. The chameleon and the lizard or the snake which was searched by Nizam Ali- everything is interconnected. The galloping horses in the legends are everywhere reminding the fate of everyman who is to undergo the pangs of living, substantiating the belief that the longer you suffer, the closer God is to you. The oneness of nature and its creatures can be traced from the story of the two sisters, when the younger returns to the valley after many years and break the twig from the Chempaka tree, the elder sister transformed as the tree, reminds her that she is forgotten by the sister.

Khasak As Ravi's Destination

The place turns out to be the destination of Ravi's search for the meaning of life. The nature communicates with him. Ravi on stepping to Koomankavu is welcomed by the natural wilderness.

"The morning star rose. On either side of the footpath, tree and shrub and crag seemed alive in the thinning mist, like breathing embryos..." (1)

On entering Khasak, he is imbibed into the serene beauty of Khasak. He hears the call of the *maniyan* (a bird) prophesying rain, sees the Chetali hill and is taken in by the dark shades of 'Khasak'. The journey to Khasak is in a way his quest to salvation, to find out the meaning of life.

"For a moment he had a frivolous impulse to play the mystic, he smothered it. *No, not on this journey of many lives, this journey of incredible burdens. Let me reach my inn, the village called Khasak*" (6)

The journey to Khasak triggers Ravi's self-condemnations; his guilt and shame are subsequently revealed. Khasak brings out his emotions. He gradually starts to develop a deep relation with the place. His sense of belonging to Khasak forces him to return to the place defying Padma's request to stay with her. His anguishness and fraility is burdened upon Khasak and his unwillingness to get parted from Khasak, makes himself killed at the end by allowing the snake to play on his foot.

Ravi lay down. He smiled. The waters of the Timeless Rain touched him. Grass sprouted through the ores of his body. Above him the great rain shrank small as a thumb, the size of the departing subtle body.

Ravi lay waiting for the bus. (203)

The landscape Images and symbols

Vijayan has made use of many images in the text. The image of the dragon flies which are supposed to carry the memories of the past is often shown in association with Appukili. He loves to catch the dragonflies. Here the author allows him to be a part of the memories which dragonflies carries. The image of Ravi's mother sitting in the verandah and showing him the sky with the stars, reminds of the affection of a mother for her child. But the recurrence of the image of the sky and the stars reminds Ravi of his loneliness and his loss of innocence. It evokes the guilt in him (of sleeping with his step mother thereby cheating on his father) thus preventing him from going back to his home. The image of the snake (serpent) which was once searched by Nizam Ali and finally seen biting Ravi, is used by the author as a tool to force one's stay on Khasak. Nizam Ali, who comes to Khasak as a wanderer, was seen catching the snake. He eventually becomes a part of Khasak by the interference of Mullakka. Ravi on leaving Khasak unwillingly allows the snake to bite on his foot thus making him a part of Khasak forever. The image of lice is another powerful tool used. When Kunjamina asks Ravi whether lice have souls, he is speechless and says "if we have ." and then stops abruptly, hinting that they too have souls. Nizam Ali is shown contemplating on the role of lice when Allah Picha Mullakka dies. He is convinced that lice are like the 'seers', who can see the coming of death. The image of the pond is another thing. The pond near the Mosque of the King is meant for religious bath, to cleanse and purify the sins of the devotees before entering the mosque. But Vijayan uses the pond for Maimoona to bath before making love with Nizam Ali and Ravi in the premises of the mosque. Here he uses the image of the pond to challenge the concept of sexual interaction and the freedom of a woman to do so. This can be read as a way of expressing one's freedom to choose the partner irrespective of the social norms. The pond which is used to cleanse oneself is portrayed as something that conspires with the 'sin' of Maimoona, thus challenging the whole concept of what is 'sin'. The legend of the horse and the ghosts of the kings and their crew is again preserved by the old and demolished mosque, the landscape (mosque) preserves the beliefs allowing everyone to be a part of it, just like letting Nizam Ali and Ravi live in it ;and by throwing out of the place by haunting with fear as in the case of Kuttappu who flees out of Khasak challenging the ghosts, ends up in delirium and dies at the end.

The most powerful symbol used by the author is that of the Mosque. The mosque stands demolished but still is a life giver to many. It is a silent witness to the love of Nizam Ali and Maimoona, but parallelly protects the beliefs of people like Allah Picha mullakka too. The mosque strongly rooted in the legends of Sayed Mein Sheikh

and his horse, protects Khasak from the outside world. It stands in close communion with the nature. The shrubs and creepers in the dense forest act as its acquaintances. The Mosque of the King stands as a manifestation of Khasak's legends, unquestionably defending it.

Conclusion

O.V Vijayan's 'The Legends of Khasak' is a typical work of landscape literature. The narratology is something that is deeply rooted in the landscape-the thatched houses, old and demolished mosque, the small teashop etc shows the vulnerability of common rustic people. But Khasak allows them to live their life, protecting them, with its legends. The story progresses through the experiences Ravi has in Khasak. Vijayan's strong belief about the oneness of man and nature is reflected throughout the text. The text encompasses the marginalized too-the voices of women, the pangs of the lower class and the under privileged, the helplessness of the disabled ones etc. Khasak is different from the outside world where people live secluded from their surroundings. Here culture, formed out of the strong background of 'beliefs', keeps everyone together. Khasak with its omnipresence controls everyone and evades the class as well as religious distinctions. The close communion between nature and man allows self-transformation as in Ravi who comes to Khasak as a stranger, finally transforms himself as a native. His knowledge and rationalism faded away and he succumbs to the legends of Khasak and finally turns out to be a part of it-his soul is made to rest forever in his "inn, the village called Khasak".

Vijayan has created the characters in close relation with the landscape of Khasak. The story gets revealed through the interference of 'Khasak' which encompasses the humans, the lush green forest, the small huts, the old mosque, school and much more. Khasak can be perceived as a place where man and nature live without boundaries. The freedom which is challenged by the society is often achieved in conspiracy with the landscape of Khasak. On the contrary, the beliefs and morals of people are seen protected again by 'Khasak'.

The Legends of Khasak is in a way a text where the landscape speaks more than anyone else. From the beginning till the end the landscape has a pervading presence in the lives of the characters or in other words 'khasak' decides on one's fate who steps into its territory. O.V Vijayan has made use of the setting well- a village in the mid twentieth century which has little space for modernism, is portrayed as the destiny of a science student thereby pronouncing the fact that man is inevitably a part of the nature and that he cannot resist the instincts of being a part of it.

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