

O.V. VIJAYAN'S *THE LEGENDS OF KHASAK* AS A GEO-NARRATIVE

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Abstract

Geocriticism is an analytical framework which explores the spatial aspects of literary texts. It studies the representation of geographical or fictional spaces in literature drawing upon multiple vantages like Postmodernism, Post colonialism, Spatial Studies, Culture Studies, Ecocriticism, and Geography. Geo-narrative/s, a concept operational in the field of Geography, is understood as stories or narratives of lived experiences in a given geographical space, facilitating a qualitative comprehension of its existence and the exercise of cartography. Therefore, within the purview of Geocriticism, a literary text with spatial dimensions may be considered as a Geo-narrative. As the title suggests, O.V.Vijayan's novel *The Legends of Khasak* comprises a series of legends informing the readers about the intriguing existence of the fictional village called Khasak. Its narrative strategy not only establishes Khasak as a real space, but also fuses the physical with metaphysical space in the postmodern sense. Accordingly, this project aims to view O.V.Vijayan's *The Legends of Khasak* through a Geocritical lens, focusing exclusively on indentifying the text as a Geo-narrative.

Keywords: Geocriticism, Geo-narrative/s, Cartography, and Legends

Geocriticism may be defined as a critical practice which investigates the interface between geographic and literary spaces. Influenced by the connotative understanding of space affected by the theories of Postmodernism, Postcolonialism, and Poststructuralism, it holds that all space is permeable, be it geographic or literary. In studying the representation of space – real or fictional- in literature, it indicates how these spaces interact, complementing and informing each other, and in doing so smudge the apparent boundaries between them.

The methodology of Geocritical analysis was expounded by the French critic Bertrand Westphal in his seminal work *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces*, translated by Robert Tally, another proponent of Geocriticism from the United States. It focuses on four elements:

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- (1) Multifocalization, in which many different points of view are needed to establish the literary space; (2) Polysensoriality, in as much as the space may not be perceived by vision alone, but also smell, sound, and so on; (3) Stratographic Vision, in which the *topos* is understood to comprise multiple layers of meaning, deterritorialized and reterritorialized; and (4) Intertextuality, such that all textual spaces necessarily encompass, “interface” with, or relate to other spaces in literature and in reality. (Tally 134)

Other methodological discussions on Geocriticism available in Robert Tally's collection *Geocritical Explorations: Space, Place, and Mapping in Literary and Cultural Studies* also align with Westphal's theory.

Having understood the premises of Geocriticism, it may be concluded that a geocritical reading of a literary text maintains an interdisciplinary approach to the study of space therein. And in this process, Geocriticism challenges the meta-narratives of space and geography, and emphasises the credibility of paralogical discourses like myths, legends, literature in the study of a given space. Geocriticism also pries with the egocentrism, pertaining to the author or reader, in the various modes of critical analysis by holding the space within the literary text as its point of entry. As a result, multifarious concepts and critical exercises borrowed from different disciplines operate within the framework of Geocriticism. One such terminology, among others, is Geo-narrative/s belonging to the field of Geography.

Geo-narrative/s is an integral part of the Geographic Information System (GIS) and enables the “analysis of narrative materials such as oral histories, life histories, and biographies for the qualitative study of a given space, its visualization and mapping” (Kwan n.p.). In this process, geo-narrative/s becomes crucial in exploring unknown terrains and in turn allows their cartographic representation, thereby perpetually altering and questioning the existing boundaries of geographical space. Thus, it conforms to the basic assertions of Geocriticism and gains relevance as a tool for literary analysis under the purview of the critical practice.

Accordingly, this project intends to subject O.V. Vijayan's novel *The Legends of Khasak* to a Geocritical analysis. Considering that Vijayan's narrative technique involves the use of legends to illuminate the readers about Khasak, the fictional setting of the novel and by extension to further the plot, this project aims to identify spaces - geographic and literary. Further, it seeks to indicate how the complex web of narratives employed in the text mark Khasak as a regional space and map literary spaces. Consequently, it aspires to establish the novel as a geo-narrative.

The Legends of Khasak (1994) is O. V. Vijayan's translation of his debutant fictional enterprise in Malayalam titled *Khasakinte Itihasam* (1969). Within the frame narrative of the apparent protagonist Ravi, his guilt ridden arrival at Khasak and further experiences therein, the novel combines a series of minor narratives which inform the readers about Khasak and its life. Thus, the reader partakes in the journey of Ravi, right from the moment he arrives at the Koomankavu bus stop, and moves along to traverse across the regional and literary spaces that Khasak offers.

At the very outset of the novel, one finds Ravi alighting at the Koomankavu bus station, crossing the Mountain Chetali to finally reach the village of Khasak remotely situated in the valley. Here, Vijayan very consciously leaves signposts for the reader to locate the unfamiliar terrain of Khasak with reference to the city of Palakkad. Thereafter, the author allows the narrative to digress into a sequence of tales to describe the various locations in Khasak. For instance, the rock crypt on top of the Chetali Mountain is described as the resting place of the horse of Sayed Mian Sheikh, the protecting deity of Khasak. Similarly, the ruin of the Twelve Mosques is considered the incomplete edifice of the pagan deities being thwarted by the demon spirits, and have ever since stayed haunted and an abandoned site in Khasak. Further, the Araby Tank is believed to be haunted by the spirits of the *kabhandas*, ancient warriors, who visit the site to bathe their unhealed wounds. Even the tamarind tree covered with slippery lichen and infested with venomous ants carries a story about how it came to be possessed by a female spirit, now worshipped as the guardian spirit of the chaste: "If a climber has a chaste wife the Devi would turn the lichen into firm footholds, and the ants would make way." (Vijayan 44) Owing to this, the tree remained untouched and all its bearings wasted. These stories are intricately woven in the daily life of Khasak as it shapes the belief system of the place and lends meaning to its life.

Thus, from the perspective of Geocriticism, these stories can be considered crucial in land marking Khasak as a world in itself, flanked by the rich canopy of trees and hills and sharing borders with other villages like Kalikavu and Yakkara in a distant valley. It also provides an internal mapping of the village; the palm groves, the lake, the *madrassa*, the *ezhuthupalli*, dwellings of the inmates categorically placed as per their caste, every site in Khasak is demarcated by these stories but in a "rhizomatic" fashion.

To add to the interest of a geocritical study, these stories also contribute to an understanding of the life of Khasak as distinguished from the rest of the world. For instance, the legend of Sayed Mian Sheikh explains the birth of Khasak and celebrates the Sheikh as the protecting deity of the place, revered by both Hindus and Muslims alike. And, as a result one finds a harmonious coexistence of these communities in Khasak- an improbability in the outside world which politicises religion. In addition, the frame narrative of Ravi and his experiences in Khasak bring out the contrast between the modern and primitive world. Both Ravi, a

graduate in Astrophysics, and the English Medium District School symbolizing the rational and modern world are looked at as agencies of evil spirits by the inmates of Khasak. Besides Ravi's initial scepticism about the practices of Khasak including the unscientific treatment provided during the epidemic; the stories of divine presence in trees and the consequent rituals of worship; reverence for dragonflies and hedge lizards that are believed to be the deceased reborn, distinguishes the internal world of Khasak from the external one that Ravi represents. Accordingly, the frame narrative and minor narratives in the novel function as spatial and temporal markers. Just like Ravi, the reader enters the world of Khasak to experience the boundaries of inside and outside, rational and irrational, modern and rustic.

Besides the geographical climate of Khasak, the narrative structure facilitates the mapping of literary spaces. Some stories in the novel rest in the memories and past experiences of the people in the place. Thus, just as with Ravi, they invite the reader on a journey across the mental spaces of many characters. The reveries of Chandumma and KuppuAchan, Abida's dreams about her flight on the Shiek's horse, and those of Ravi about his life stepmother expose the reader to the existential angst, sense of guilt, loss and urge to escape the physical space. Interestingly, it is the legends in which all these characters find their redemption. The people in Khasak believe that dragonflies carry the spirit of the deceased; in other words the idea of rebirth prevails upon the life in Khasak and therefore no one dies in the place. Ravi comes to Khasak to escape a world that symbolises his sin of incest.

However, he continues to be consumed by his guilt until he acknowledges the philosophy of rebirth against his rationality. It is therefore that Ravi allows a serpent to bite him at the end of the novel, hoping for a release from his sins and a renewed existence. Here, it must be noted that in following the stream of consciousness of the characters, the narrative not only moves across time but also suggests the existence of a metaphysical space. Thus, the novel delineates different realms - physical, mental and metaphysical - and moves across it within the framework of its literary space.

Another dimension of space that surfaces in a geocritical examination of the narratives is the fixity and permeability of space. For instance, Ravi comes to Khasak to change it with western education and a rational approach. However, he himself undergoes change and finds a resolution to his spiritual angst in the counter-science of Khasak, even the English Medium District Board School that Ravi launches in Khasak is seen to be subsequently abandoned. Moreover, the very stories of rebirth allow Khasak to remain untouched by even death; the population of the space remains invariable as the deceased are thought to be reborn as dragon flies and hedge lizards. The belief in Khasak that geographical space is a *serai* (a temporary abode) reinforces the fixity and permeability of space. Like with Ravi, Nizam Ali, and other characters in the novel, arrivals and departures are for living beings that can traverse across

space of any kind physically and through the narratives, and thereby only experience the space and not affect it in turn.

Conclusively, it may be said that it is the legends that help Khasak emerge as a place with “a distinct cultural and topographical profile” (Prieto 22). It does not describe Khasak in a conventional fashion that enables the reader to capture an image of the place all at once. Instead, it continues to sketch Khasak in fragments so that a mental picture of Khasak is not achieved by the reader till the end. Further, in being intricately woven to the daily life of the inmates of Khasak they are decisive in patterning the life of Khasak. It is these oral narratives that inform the very epistemology of the place, and serve as a site wherein the borders of physical, cognitive and spiritual realms merge. And, in thus authenticating the existence of Khasak with experiential narratives influenced by a counter-science peculiar to the space, the novel *The Legends of Khasak* by O. V. Vijayan as a whole acquires the characteristic of a Geo-narrative.

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