



Myth, Memory, and Postcolonial Identity in O.V. Vijayan's *The Legends of Khasak*

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Abstract

This article explores the postcolonial dimensions of O.V. Vijayan's *The Legends of Khasak*, situating the novel as a critical text in South Asian literature that reclaims Indigenous identity through myth, memory, and magical realism. This study examines how Vijayan critiques the residual impact of colonial epistemology—particularly through the character of Ravi, whose psychological journey reflects the alienation of the postcolonial subject. The narrative landscape of Khasak emerges as a cultural palimpsest, where suppressed oral traditions, folk spirituality, and cyclical time challenge the rationalism and historicism imposed by colonial modernity. Utilizing theoretical frameworks from postcolonial studies (Bhabha, Ngũgĩ, Smith), the article demonstrates how magical realism in *Khasak* becomes not a stylistic flourish but a narrative strategy of resistance. By foregrounding ancestral knowledge systems and disrupting colonial hierarchies of truth, Vijayan constructs a decolonial aesthetics rooted in the sacred and the subaltern. The article concludes that *The Legends of Khasak* is not only a landmark work of Malayalam literature but a vital postcolonial text that articulates a unique and spiritual path to cultural self-reclamation.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, Magical Realism, O.V. Vijayan, Khasak, Indigenous Knowledge, Decolonization, South Asian Literature, Myth and Memory

Introduction

Postcolonialism as a critical framework seeks to unpack the cultural, psychological, and political legacies of colonial rule, exploring how colonized societies negotiate their identities in the aftermath of imperialism. It interrogates the complex interplay between history, memory, and power, shedding light on the enduring effects of colonial discourse and the ongoing struggle for self-definition among formerly subjugated peoples. Literature becomes a vital space for this resistance, where narrative reclaims voice, space, and identity from the margins.

O. V. Vijayan's *The Legend of Khasak* situates this postcolonial inquiry within the aesthetic landscape of magical realism. The study foregrounds how the text deploys myth, folklore, and the fantastical to resist colonial historiography and articulate alternative realities rooted in Indigenous cultural consciousness. In the context of post-independence India, O.V. Vijayan's *The Legends of Khasak* becomes a

profound meditation on postcolonial identity. Through the protagonist Ravi – a character caught between Western rationalism and spiritual mysticism – the novel explores the alienation and cultural dislocation inherited from colonial education systems. Khasak itself emerges as a symbolic terrain where tradition, modernity, and metaphysical inquiry converge, reflecting the socio-political tensions of a nation struggling to define itself beyond the shadows of its colonial past.

This research article builds on the insights to further examine how magical realism functions as a powerful vehicle for postcolonial expression. It investigates how myth and memory intersect to reconstruct identities suppressed or distorted by colonialism, and how literature – particularly from the Global South – rewrites itself into the center of cultural discourse.

Literature Review

Postcolonial literature has long been a critical site for examining the ruptures and continuities created by colonial domination. Seminal works by theorists such as Edward Said (*Orientalism*), Homi K. Bhabha (*The Location of Culture*), and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (“Can the Subaltern Speak?”) have shaped the discourse by highlighting how colonial narratives have historically constructed the "Other" and how postcolonial texts resist and reframe these representations. These scholars emphasize the hybrid, fractured identities that emerge from colonial encounters and the need for decolonized epistemologies that are rooted in local histories, languages, and traditions.

Literary works from the Global South have responded to these challenges by reclaiming narrative space and by resisting Western realist modes of storytelling. Magical realism, as a narrative technique, has played a crucial role in this regard. Originally rooted in Latin American literature—most notably in the works of Gabriel Garcia Marquez—it allows for a blending of the magical and the real, offering a stylistic and political resistance to colonial rationalism. Alejo Carpentier’s concept of *lo real maravilloso* underscores this technique as an authentic expression of Latin American consciousness, where the marvelous is part of everyday reality, not a deviation from it.

This article attempts to offer a vital insight into how magical realism operates across cultural and geographical terrains, specifically in South Asia. By placing *The Legends of Khasak* in dialogue, the study extends the scope of magical realism beyond its Latin American origins, highlighting its adaptability to South Asian postcolonial contexts. The dissertation explores how the author uses magical realism to convey resistance – through myth, memory, and non-linear temporality – to dominant colonial narratives.

In the South Asian context, scholars such as Priya Joshi, Meenakshi Mukherjee, and Aijaz Ahmad have examined how Indian English and regional literatures reflect the anxieties of nationhood, modernity, and cultural authenticity. O.V. Vijayan’s *The Legends of Khasak* reflects the postcolonial dilemma of selfhood in a newly independent India. The novel critiques colonial epistemologies not by direct confrontation, but through a profound internal exploration of identity, spirituality, and alienation.

This literature review thus positions magical realism as both a stylistic device and a postcolonial narrative strategy. It reveals how Vijayan employ the form to reflect the complexities of cultural hybridity, historical trauma, and the urgent need for narrative sovereignty. It adds significant value to this field by demonstrating how magical realism not only decodes colonization’s legacy but also reclaims the narrative voice of Indigenous and subaltern communities.

Ravi as a Postcolonial Everyman

At the heart of *The Legends of Khasak* lies the journey of Ravi, a character shaped by loss, guilt, and existential conflict. His trajectory from educated urban elite to a wandering schoolteacher in a forgotten village represents more than a personal transformation—it is emblematic of the postcolonial Indian subject

confronting the contradictions of a fractured identity. “Ravi had fled from the serpents of his past. The passion of a love that was also a sin had driven him far from the city, the universities, and the intellectual promise of his youth.” Ravi is a “symbol of modern India's psychological conflict,” torn between a Western education system inherited from colonial rule and an innate longing for spiritual redemption. His move to Khasak is not merely geographical; it is metaphorical—marking a descent into the subconscious, where repressed cultural and ancestral memories reside. The village thus becomes a space of encounter between the post-Enlightenment rationalism of the West and the mythic, spiritual lifeworlds of the East.

Ravi’s inner turmoil resonates with Homi Bhabha’s concept of the “unhomely”—a condition where the colonized subject feels estranged both from the colonizer’s world and their own indigenous past. Bhabha's concept of the "unhomely condition" describes this precisely: "The recesses of the domestic space become sites for history’s most intricate invasions" (*The Location of Culture*, 1994). Ravi's personal trauma is thus a metaphor for the internal invasions of colonial ideology. The guilt he carries (over a taboo relationship and the suicide of his mother) further underscores the moral confusion imposed by hybrid cultural codes, a hallmark of postcolonial societies. Rather than provide easy resolutions, Vijayan allows Ravi to dwell in this liminal space, revealing the unresolved psychic scars of a colonized consciousness.

Khasak as Cultural Palimpsest

The fictional village of Khasak operates as a palimpsest—a layered cultural landscape where indigenous traditions, folk memory, religious plurality, and myth coexist with the remnants of colonial modernity. “Gods and spirits cohabited with men in Khasak. It was a land where children were born with the memory of their previous lives, and trees spoke to those who knew how to listen.” (Vijayan) Khasak is framed as a “microcosm of Kerala’s syncretic past,” reflecting the region’s complex history of caste, religion, and colonization. The villagers’ world is animated by oral traditions, animist deities, spirits, and omens—realities that defy Western binaries of the real and the unreal. By embracing magical realism, Vijayan does not offer fantasy as escapism but as a decolonial narrative strategy, one that validates indigenous epistemologies. The novel thereby resists the Eurocentric claim to “truth” and reinstates myth and spirituality as valid forms of knowing.

As in Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s Macondo, Khasak’s mythical logic becomes a way of reclaiming the past from colonial erasure. In both villages, history is not linear but cyclical; time folds upon itself, suggesting the continuity of ancestral memory over the fragmented timeline of imperial conquest. “Time moved in circles in Khasak. There were no yesterdays here, only a swelling present.” (Vijayan) Thangal insightfully compares this non-linear temporality to the magical realist mode, which disrupts colonial historiography and offers instead a worldview shaped by rituals, dreams, and community storytelling. Walter Mignolo, in *The Darker Side of the Renaissance* (1995), argues that coloniality of power operates by erasing local epistemes. The return to circular, sacred time in Khasak resists this erasure by validating indigenous modes of temporality.

“He was the village astrologer who had once spoken to the moon. When the moon stopped answering, he turned to silence.” (Vijayan) Magical elements like speaking to the moon are not treated as fantasy in the novel. Rather, they are normalized—a key trait of magical realism that Vijayan uses to affirm the reality of Indigenous cosmologies. Maggie Ann Bowers notes, “Magical realism offers an alternative worldview that challenges dominant (often Western) realist traditions” (*Magic(al) Realism*, 2004). It allows postcolonial authors to restore silenced spiritual and mythic histories.

Education as Epistemic Conflict

One of the central tensions in *The Legends of Khasak* lies in the role of education. Ravi’s arrival as a schoolteacher is met with skepticism, particularly by the religious elders who see formal education as a

threat to the existing way of life. “This is Khasak, sir... There are other sciences here, older than your Angrezi schools. The Mullah’s school teaches truths that your books cannot.” (Vijayan) As it is noticed, this conflict reflects deeper postcolonial anxieties about the role of colonial knowledge systems in eroding indigenous values.

The tension between Ravi and the local Mollakka represents the clash between secular, Western-style education and Islamic madrasa traditions—a microcosmic reflection of India’s broader postcolonial challenge: How can a nation forge modernity without abandoning its pluralistic spiritual heritage? Education here is not just about literacy; it is about epistemology—whose knowledge counts as true. Vijayan critiques both blind traditionalism and imported modernity, suggesting that neither alone can address the moral and cultural vacuum left by colonialism. This ambivalence is central to the postcolonial project, where identity must be reconstructed from the fragments of cultural loss.

Myth, Memory, and Resistance

In *The Legends of Khasak*, myth and memory are not ornamental—they are central to a project of postcolonial resistance. Through characters who speak to spirits, remember past lives, and interpret omens from the natural world, O.V. Vijayan constructs a reality that resists Western rationality and historical linearity. In doing so, he actively reclaims Indigenous modes of understanding that were suppressed or dismissed under colonial rule. “Old women in Khasak remembered stories not from books but from the rustle of wind, from the trails of ants, from the silence between raindrops. That was their history.” (Vijayan) This quote beautifully illustrates the oral, embodied, and ecological dimensions of memory in Khasak. The postcolonial narrative here is not interested in reproducing colonial historiography, but in telling history differently—through the body, through landscape, through intergenerational myth.

This is aligned with Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s decolonial argument in *Decolonizing Methodologies* (1999), where she emphasizes that storytelling is a method of resistance, a means by which colonized peoples remember and reassert their agency. Furthermore, Vijayan portrays myth not as fantasy but as a lived reality. For example: “In Khasak, men spoke of Nallamma, the she-deity who cursed the land. Crops failed not from drought, but from her anger. Disease came when the village forgot her.” (Vijayan) This interweaving of myth and reality reflects what Gabriel Garcia Marquez famously described as “*the extraordinary being part of the everyday*”—a foundational principle of magical realism. But in the postcolonial Indian context, it also functions politically. It reinscribes the sacred feminine, reinstates cosmology, and critiques the disenchantment of the world imposed by colonial modernity. Myth, in this context, becomes a tool of resistance, one that preserves identity where language and politics may have failed. Memory – oral, embodied, collective – functions as a counter-history, one that privileges ancestral knowledge and spiritual insight over colonial timelines and scientific determinism.

Conclusion and Key Insights

O.V. Vijayan’s *The Legends of Khasak* stands as a profound postcolonial text—not through overt political allegory, but through a meditative, mythic, and magical narrative that reclaims the epistemological space colonized by Western modernity. By situating the village of Khasak at the intersection of myth, memory, and resistance, Vijayan offers a radically different mode of storytelling—one that privileges Indigenous cosmologies, spiritual landscapes, and nonlinear histories as valid forms of truth.

Through the protagonist Ravi, Vijayan explores the postcolonial condition of alienation—a psychological and cultural dislocation rooted in colonial education and inherited guilt. Ravi's rejection of the rational, scientific world and his immersion into the spiritual terrain of Khasak is emblematic of a deeper search for cultural rootedness and a response to the identity crisis faced by postcolonial societies. This aligns

with Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity and the "unhomely condition," where postcolonial subjects are caught between the residual and the emergent, the colonial and the native (Bhabha, 1994).

The novel becomes an archive of suppressed voices, challenging the narrative supremacy of colonial history with oral tradition, mysticism, and ancestral wisdom. The use of magical realism further enhances this resistance. As Amaryll Chanady (1985) and Maggie Ann Bowers (2004) observe, magical realism disrupts binary thinking—real vs. unreal, modern vs. primitive—by allowing the co-presence of multiple worldviews. Vijayan employs this literary mode not as escapism, but as a political tool to decenter Enlightenment rationalism and re-center mythic consciousness as lived experience.

Moreover, the novel critiques colonial education as a vehicle of epistemic violence. Ravi's school is met with suspicion not because the villagers reject knowledge, but because they sense it displaces their own ways of knowing—an argument echoed by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o in *Decolonising the Mind* (1986), where he insists that colonial schooling serves to alienate subjects from their cultural roots. In reclaiming the sacred, the oral, and the mythic, *The Legends of Khasak* does more than reflect a postcolonial identity—it rebuilds it. The novel demands that we consider alternative histories and epistemologies, particularly those silenced by the colonial encounter. Its layered narrative resists closure, much like the ongoing process of decolonization itself—unfinished, spiritual, and deeply personal.

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