Navajyoti, International Journal of Multi-Disciplinary Research
Volume 4, Issue 2, February 2020

POLITICS AND UTOPIANISM IN INDIAN ENGLISH FICTION

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Abstract: This paper endeavours to textualize and survey the utopian—and political—impulse of postcolonial Indian English fiction, grounding conceptual categories of modernity, utopia and memory in works such as *The Legends of Khasak*. The paper also recognises utopian thinking as a political tool. In due course, the very nature of memory as recollection is explored and is revealed to be reconstitute and restorative which implies a political question of representation undergirding utopian thought. This study is further motivated by the need to examine imperialism's proximate relation to the novel as a form as explained by Edward Said; to this end, this paper examines the dynamics of the interaction between modes of life informed by imperialism and the utopianism exhibited by novels. This exercise opens up further avenues to understand the canonization of works such as *Kanthapura* and feminist utopian fiction such as "Sultana's Dream" —works that deal with postcolonial attitudes—in the light of utopian studies. In this sense the paper also leads to questions of pedagogical importance.
***Keywords*:** Utopianism, Indian Literature, Memory, Nostalgia, Pedagogy, Resistance

INTRODUCTION

Within the discipline of historiography, literary histories occupy relatively less room. Regardless of this want of representative size, literary histories share hegemonic power dynamics present in traditional historiography. In Malayalam literary history, it is O.V. Vijayan's debut novel, *Khasakkinte Ithihasam* (*The Legends of Khasak*), henceforth *Khasak*, which was privy to such a power-influenced remodelling of literary history: the work's best-known epithet is that it punctuated Malayalam literary history into pre-Khasak and post-Khasak. Written through the latter half of 1950s, *Khasak* was published in 1969 in its book-form; an English translation by the author himself appeared in 1998.

Exhibiting a "peculiar blend of mythic and the Marxist", mixing "erotic with metaphysical" and "crass with sublime", Khasak brought new sensibilities both formal and stylistic into Malayalam literary world (Mohan 95; K Satchidanandan as qtd. in Mohan 116). Chronicling the journey of Ravi, a young graduate sent by the government to open a single-teacher school at the eponymous village of Khasak, *The Legends of Khasak* is said to have ushered modernism into Malayalam literature. In the afterword for the English translation, Vijayan says that Khasak was an accident;

his intention was to write a novel upholding the communist cause—however, the execution of Imre Nagy in Hungary and the party's rationalisation of the invasion prompted Vijayan to turn away from their ideology (*Selected Fiction* 174). The result was *Khasak*.

WHY UTOPIAN STUDIES?

Khasak has spawned numerous critical reviews and discourses. With its unique flavour of philosophy and spirituality, the work is particularly effective in imparting affects to the reader. Its quasi-fictional setting and a magical-realist atmosphere changed the hitherto realist and progressive novels of Malayalam writing (Mohan 118). It was not just Vijayan's linguistic acrobatics or the narrative style which was new; it was his peculiar utilisation of the novel as a narrative device. In his later work, *Ithihasathinte Ithihasam,* Vijayan says that the novel in the west is primarily functional: they use it to narrate a story (*Ithihasathinte Ithihasam* 50). In the eastern traditions, he says, the novel is about conveying complete experiences to the reader. Such a mix of hermeneutics and phenomenology empowers the reader to partake in the author's self; perhaps it was this affective influence of *Khasak* which emptied criticisms of any constructive rigour and replaced it with emotionally involved readings.

What is at stake? Despite these unique characteristics, readings of *Khasak* and other works of similar calibre within Indian literature remain obsessed with postcolonial epistemes. While colonial vestiges—both psychological and otherwise—are realities which one negotiates through one's quotidian existence, there are several facets of such works which remain unexplored. Bringing together such readings, this paper is not merely an exercise in literary analysis but in sociological, political and epistemological engagements. Our aim is to upset the monolithic critical machinery which manufactures identical readings. Theorising the society in itself has become a way of social dreaming with later developments in critical theory (Levitas xi).

This paper endeavours to attempt a cross-disciplinary examination of utopianism present in Khasak: theorists of sociology, memory studies, modernity, ideology and postcolonialism, among other disciplines, has variously influenced discourses around utopianism. The paper is an exercise to bring together these discourses, enabling a dialogue which is pluralistic and lies beyond familiar tropes. In this process of enabling various disciplinary strands to interact, further avenues open up which precipitates broader questions of literary canonisation, which offer fields for further research.

POSTCOLONIALISM, UTOPIANISM AND KHASAK

Khasak is pronouncedly postcolonial while exhibiting themes from magic realism and existentialism. As Anupama Mohan points out, it can also be read as a response to the postcolonial national imagination (Mohan 3). Considering the formal origin of the novel, Edward Said commented that the novel as a cultural artefact cannot be thought of outside its relation to imperialism (Smith 1). The origin of imperialism itself, in turn, is fuelled by a utopian impulse (Ashcroft 14). Theorists of utopia have worked by and large through western traditions—Lyman Tower Sargent argues that studies of utopia "adhere to western academic models" (*Colonial and*

Postcolonial Utopias 223). Stemming from non-Judeo-Christian traditions, non-western utopias are only beginning to be studied. Although situated in the future, utopias are imagined based on the present. Hence the epistemes and grounds of being which are immediate to a society are fundamental to a utopian imagination. This implies that when the epistemology changes, utopia changes too. Khasak is situated as a postcolonial village where modernity is still making its first steps; the utopia Ravi pines to return to is pre-colonial and agrarian, removed from the present to the past as much as it has progressed to the modern future. It is the politics of such a utopia that we intend to discuss.

Ruth Levitas argues that the core of utopia is "the desire for being otherwise" (Levitas xi). The desire to opt for what is not present and is progressive which leads to a collective goal is common to all utopias. Such a circumscribing statement leads, more often than what is desired, to a static vision of utopias. Such 'blue-print' utopias where progress is teleological are imagined to exist in a state of perfection. However, static utopias tend to yearn for closure and thus close off possibilities for further dialogue and possible development. In contrast, 'process' utopias are open and do not resort to closed processes of meaning-making (Johns 20). Such preference to an open, 'work-in-process' utopia is fundamental for social change. The 'work-in-process' nature of these utopias belie an existentialist overtone—while this is argued to be detrimental due to the ahistoricising nature of an existentialist-humanist outlook, the dynamic function of utopias are reiterated by theoreticians (Johns; Ashcroft; Kilminster). The ability of utopian imagination to imagine a world beyond conflicts and rigid structural bindings are used in various literary forms ranging from feminism to science fiction and fantasy literature (Claeys). The ability to create a world comes from predicting it; Ravi's utopianism and Khasak's possibility of 'being otherwise' investigates the possibilities of the in-betweens between pre-modernity, myths and colonial modernity.

Khasak's version of utopia is based on specific spatiotemporal and ideological circumstances. Set in an ostensibly post-independence period, the village of Khasak exists in a state before colonial modernity has made its foray. Ravi, sent to Khasak to man the single-teacher school, brings with him the markers of modernity. His entry breaks the limbo in which Khasak existed: children run away from him, thinking he is sent by the government to vaccinate them. The traditional means of education which Khasak depended on is suddenly threatened by Ravi who has arrived to teach English. The almost-Gandhian life of Khasak has a facade of liveliness but deep down the village is disappointed and dysfunctional. The lives of most characters are fraught with deep-set poverty, illness and lack of purpose. The postcolonial nation which is represented by the village has failed in its utopian visions of the future. Its mission of modernising the lives of its residents stop at the porous boundary of Khasak where the Gandhian village meets the postcolonial nation which is "doomed to continue the oppressive function' of the colonial state (Ashcroft 4). Deeply individualistic in its modernist style, Khasak is about the utopianism of its protagonist—the village is a failure of hope, whose presence in Ravi's temporal consciousness is a reminder that utopias might be prone to failure but is an essential concept for social progress. Utopias might fail, but utopianism is necessary: it is a universal human characteristic (Ernest Bloch qtd. in Ashcroft 10).

In the transformation of the present society to a Utopian society, social harmony is considered to be the sustaining force. However, social harmony is understood to be provided by a central authority (Rothstein 7). This authority is questioned in Khasak. Appu-Kili, a character from the

novel, gets a haircut from a Hindu barber with a tuft which he later shaves when the Muslim boys from his class take him to a Muslim barber. Sivaraman Nair, the feudal lord of Khasak, is angry that Appu-Kili is converted. However, through a Panchayat, the majority decided that Appu-Kili will be Hindu, Muslim and Appu-Kili simultaneously. The social harmony within Khasak does not indicate stagnancy—instead it portrays progress. It represents accommodation and adjustment within Khasak without a figure of authority. Common critique of social harmony, based on social inertia, is that the society will be impenetrable for agents of change. Utopias are unprepared for uncertainties (ibid.). A society created with values that hold at the present might become irrelevant; nature's unpredictable characteristics could startle a balanced society. Discussions on utopian impulse contest features such as an imaginary and creative force that is essential in the utopian planning of a society (Karl Popper as qtd. in Clark 21). However, we also know that modernity thrives on innovation and creativity within scientific thought. Therefore, Khasak can be read as suggesting that utopia is embedded within modern notions of dialectical progress.

In this way, utopias may appear to suggest that they are products of particular epistemes. On the other hand, utopias, when considered as a universal characteristic, implies an ahistorical and essential basis for such imagination. Manuel and Manuel, who categorised utopias according to their historical specificity, inquired into the seemingly ahistoric nature of utopias, concluding that although transhistorical, utopias are always found in a "specific context, social and psychological" (F.E.Manuel and F.P.Manuel qtd. in Kilminster). Ravi's utopian imagination which centres on Khasak as his agrarian utopia is not only contextualised temporally, as the previous paragraph mentions, but also psychologically. Having had an illicit affair with his step-mom and overridden with sin-consciousness, Ravi does not enter Khasak seeking closure: he treats Khasak as a temporary halt in his voyage seeking redemption. The catalytic function Khasak performs for Ravi is therapeutic. As Norbert Elias described utopias, Khasak is Ravi's "directional fantasy-images of possible futures" (Norbert Elias qtd. in Kilminster).

MEMORY, NOSTALGIA AND HISTORY

The existentialist undertone of utopianism in Khasak stems from the in-betweenness Ravi brings with him: while seeking Khasak's redemptive utopianism which its agrarian and pre-modern society promises, Ravi is simultaneously the flag-bearer of modernity and its anxieties. As Ravi walks to Khasak from the nearest bus-station, he sees the bus returning to Palakkad; in the wake of the bus, red dust rises and settles down on the mountain road. This road incidentally is being built for the construction of a dam nearby: the first symbol of modernity we encounter in the novel. The promise of systematised education, symbolised by the school Ravi runs, further announces modernity's foray into Khasak. It is with Ravi's entry that bureaucracy makes its first appearance in Khasak: the school inspector, documents and Ravi's sharpened awareness of the use of signatures—which is a reductive approach to one's self—are key examples. The bifurcation of nature into nature *and* humanity is another motif of modernity which the story portrays in various ways. Anthony Giddens characterises these motifs as institutional dimensions of modernity (Giddens 55). Ironically, these are the same maladies that Ravi tries to leave behind. In this endeavour, Ravi's dependency on Khasak as a platform to build his utopia is fuelled by not so much spatial circumstances as temporal. His memory—his past—serves as the basis from which he builds his future. In this sense, it is not the present which decides Ravi's utopia, but rather his past.

Ravi's tryst with the past allows us to look at nostalgia, which by its relation to memory shares epistemological territory with utopia. Ravi is deeply nostalgic. He frequently slips into reveries dreaming of his dead mother and remembering the stories he grew up listening to. Nostalgia, although primarily affective, has critical potentials matching that of utopias. Longing for the past often leaves one in the past, unable to act in the present. However, nostalgia is not always counter-productive. Swetlana Boym, in *The Future of Nostalgia*, argues that nostalgia, similar to utopia, can be therapeutic. While nostalgia might appear to be only reflective, recollecting the past, it is a much more complicated process. Boym identifies two kinds of nostalgia: reflective and restorative. Restorative nostalgia not only brings back the past, but also reconstructs the past, allowing one to relive it. Similarities between reliving the past through nostalgia and constructing an imaginary homeland through utopia seems to suggest that nostalgia and remembering the past is also a response to modernity. However, Boym puts forward the category of off-modern as a possible holder for the phenomenon of nostalgia which treats nostalgia as an offshoot of modernity and not as a response to it (24). Ravi's nostalgia also opens questions of reliability of memory itself—indigenous pasts are idealised and purified to impart authenticity. As Sargent notes, it stresses "closeness to nature, including flora, fauna and physical features like mountains and rivers." (*Colonial and Postcolonial Utopias* 213). While this question the authenticity of Ravi's recollections, it does not disqualify the potential of nostalgic and utopian thought. Rather it offers further dialogues between disciplines on the function and capabilities of utopianism.

MODERN UTOPIAS

The above discussions on matters of memory, nostalgia, historicity and its relation to utopia are primarily expository. Direct implications of literary utopias gains clarity upon an overview of certain theoreticians of utopia and their conceptualisations: Ruth Levitas on desire, Karl Mannheim on hope and Georges Sorel on collective action. Utopias, as mentioned elsewhere in this paper are orienteering devices for the society. While they might be Janus-faced, bridging temporal gaps, the liberative potential of utopianism is reiterated by many intellectuals, including Zygmunt Bauman, the theorist of liquid modernity. It is worth noting that many attacks against utopianism came from institutions of late modernity (Niezen 720). The theorists mentioned above influenced utopian studies in many ways, some of which are reflected in the arguments and expositions we made already in the paper.

Transcending reality is considered to be a prerequisite for all utopian thought—Alessa Johns argues that imagining something is the first step to thinking about it (175). Upon transcending reality, one must deliberate on the direction utopian imagination must take the society ahead. Many entities that constitute a society are common to most utopian traditions: one example would be myths. Georges Sorels's proto-utopian method for collective action is based on the power of myths—he argues that myths, as they are involved with emotions than the intellect, are better at inducing collective action for social change (qtd. in Mendel 210). An example would be the accounts of people who believed Gandhi was super-human and would face incoming fire. Mannheim on the other hand was concerned about the structural basis of utopianism. While he believed in utopia as anti-status-quoist—which was Satchidanadan's opinion of *Khasak*—he advocated utopianism as based on hope (Mohan 116; Mendel 209). Ruth Levitas, on the other

hand, initially argued for a utopianism based on desire. She argued that focus on hope would imply that utopias would come to fruition only when they are realised—since utopianism is an impulse, desire for social transformation would be a better basis (94). Lyman Tower Sargent, building up on the argument of Levitas calls utopianism 'social dreaming'. Moreover, he identifies utopianism as a tool for combating ideology. He says, echoing Ernest Bloch, that it is a human tendency to dream for better societies (Ashcroft 10; *Contemporary Political Ideologies* 10). Later, Levitas would call Utopia not as a goal, but as a method. She names it IRoS: imaginary reconstitution of society (xi). Culling down from this rather diverse sets of theorisations, one realises that although there are motifs which distinguish theories, social change through collective action, both realised and imagined, is a shared aim across the spectrum. Khasak's and Ravi's creation of utopia share this impulse.

THE STATE AND UTOPIA

Rothstein argues that utopianism is understood as the idea of progress which is a collective political program (3). Satirical and often critical utopias have repercussions on the present society. In this sense, utopia is not an unreachable perfect ideal world but a transformation of the here and now, the present society. The implication utopianism has is a structuring of human desires and needs (ibid.). For a satisfied subject of the State, no better imagined worlds are possible (Rothstein 4). However, these thoughts are problematic as the contemporary world is embroiled with hardships and tribulations such as poverty, environmental degradation and greed. A just state must balance the vices and virtues of the society. Each part of the society works for the wholeness of a just society. This transformation into a just society fulfils desires of everyone with a restraint on irrational desires (ibid.). However, the resulting question will be that of potential for competitive desires between sections of people (Rothstein 5). In the beginning chapters of *Khasak*, readers are provided with the clear discontents between Mollakka and Sivaraman Nair in the matters of formal education for the children. Mollakka is afraid that formal education will result in degradation of religious faith in the children. At the same time, Sivaraman Nair wants his endeavour to start a school to succeed. Our notions of progress are shaped by the values and ideals held by individual social agents (Rothstein 6).

In the Indian context, the 1960s and 1970s were considered as the decades of development and progress. Green revolution had commenced and dams were being constructed across the country. The five-year plans emphasised on education, agriculture and alleviation of poverty and Minimum Needs Programme was introduced. However, the government faced fiscal challenges and political instability which affected the implementation of the plans ("A Short History of Indian Economy"). In the world literary stage, corresponding to the fall of hope in reality, there was a resurgence of the utopian spirit (Rothstein 15). The conception of utopia was pertinent to the progress as envisioned; as we have discussed already, Khasak being an agrarian utopia.

Utopian criticism includes both internal criticism and external criticism of the text (Clark 16) . Utopia thrives on opposition and paradoxes (Rothstein viii). Internal criticism points to these internal contradictions in the society (Clark 16). By creating a utopian Khasak Vijayan satirizes the presence of rivalrous philosophies present within the society. Utopianism places idealistic actions in an imperfect world of the local rather than universal (Muschamp 29). Muschamp argues that utopia weaves subjective perceptions within the objective reality of experiences (32). Clark states that external criticism compares and contrasts contemporary society with another designed

society. Constantly, the reader is allowed to notice criticisms of the reader's society through utopian arrangements (16). To be able to notice similarities and discontinuities between one's society and the utopian society makes him aware of the shortcomings of his socio-political system. This is a functional political intervention as it suggests alternative ways of living (ibid.).

The expansion of imagination that utopia allows is a tactic to question the satisfaction of the here and now. It challenges assumptions of an inescapable present-day society (Clark 17). By making the utopia realistic and closer to the lived experiences of the readers, Khasak's sensual immediacy defends the possibilities of a better future. Moreover, this realist utopia highlights the plausible means of achieving the ideal (ibid.). In Khasak's universe religious divides, religious faiths and myths are real concepts. By placing Khasak within the region of Palakkad, the characters' experiences are authorized. By allowing Khasak to be an agrarian and premodern utopia, the author hints at an alternative means of reaching the present rather than by the path history recorded.

Realization of utopianism through the concept of messianism allows us to understand the utopian world as a socio-political endeavour (Rothstein 8). The formation of utopian Khasak seems to be a violent process; it involves discontinuation of the old order and breaking away from history (Rothstein 10). The individual motivation to form a better society that takes off from an already existing oppressive or unequal society is marked by a figure of Messiah (ibid.). Messianism caters to the conception of the first social agent that brought out the framework for the utopian society. Khasak as a utopia constructs transfigurative desires on individual aspirations (Benhabib 60). In Khasak, it is Sayed Mian Sheikh. He is considered as the protecting deity of Khasak and the people of Khasak are believed to be the descendants of the thousand horsemen who were with Sheikh. Ravi's entrance in Khasak is also messianic. Ravi's account of Khasak is that of an observer, a trans-subjective view that represents the conflict between systemic violence and experiential knowledge of Khasak characters (Benhabib 12). Through this analysis, utopia can be realised as a humane irony that celebrates self-contradiction (Richard Reinitz as qtd. in Marty 53). Khasak highlights the features of utopia such as negative hermeneutics of exposure and remoteness from the present (Marty 53). This paper examines utopia as a political paraphernalia within the discourse of Indian writings.

CONCLUSION

Utopian impulse is not limited to works such as *Khasak* in the Indian literary landscape. Celebrated books which came out during the Indian independence movement, especially during the first-half of the nineteenth century exhibit a fundamentally utopian orientation. Works such as *Kanthapura* and lesser known works including science fiction with feminist overtones which were written during this era are not only among the celebrated works, but also mentioned in many programmes on Indian literature. However, it is imperative that we go beyond mere mentions and investigate the causes and structural features which made this happen. Cross-disciplinary analyses on a larger scale will help us delineate the causes and structural features responsible for the same. This paper is an attempt at orienteering ourselves in that general direction. An enquiry into the utopian nature of such works is also of pedagogical importance as explained; this paper also makes such avenues for further research visible.

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