Research Paper

Mythification of Gender Identity in Legends of Khasak

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Abstract
The paper analyses the application of myths for the construction of gender identity in the light of the novel Legends of Khasak by O.V.Vijayan. It also tries to investigate the possible reasons behind the creation of a particular myth in a culture. Certain meanings of knowledge are put across in the society using myths. The concept of Roland Barthes, known as 'Cultural Code' is used to analyse this property of myth. Later in the paper the concept of 'Difference' in semiotics is applied in the case of myths to analyse, how myths are being appropriated in each period to convey specific ideologies. Barthes compares myth to a 'sign' and attributes it the property of 'Second- Order Signification'. The study also tries to look upon the political intentions behind the perpetuation of each myth and emphasis the necessity of analysing myths to understand the discriminatory ideologies. Analysis of myths also helps in deconstructing what is normalized as truth in history.
Keywords: *Construction of myth, Mythification of gender, Female gender identity, Cultural Code, Second-Order Signification, Political ideology, Normation.*

Despite the augment of scientific enquiries and rational thinking, the society still clings on to certain social beliefs which date back to antiquity. Some prominent ideologies which are passed down through generations get normalized over a period of time through repetitive usage. These ideologies in turn results in discrimination and the subjugation of one group over the other. Ever since the advent of the research on social constructivism of reality people began to realize that, all that is seen in the society are man-made and thus can be changed. From then on the investigation to find out how these norms have been established in society took a new turn. And myths were found to be an effective tool used for normalizing certain unwritten rules in a society. The theorist Claude Levi Strauss suggested the necessity of studying various myths, especially in the cultural context in which they are created, so as to elucidate the underlying motive behind the creation a myth. He also suggested comparing myths across various cultures to deduce the basic elements of myths which he named as 'mythemes'. Scrutiny of 'mythemes' is helps to understand the discourse contained by them.

The novel *Legends of Khasak* by O.V.Vijayan was first published in Malayalam in the year 1969. The novel belongs to the genre of magical realism implicitly intertwined with the political and social historicity of Kerala. It talks about the metaphorical and existential journey of a young man named Ravi along with his new experience as a school teacher ina rural village called Khasak. *Legends of Khasak* is still one of the most celebrated Malayalam novels which is packed with several myths. Through a close reading, one can extract the underlying ideological elements within these myths. The comparative analysis of two myths in particular shows, how a specific trait is being attached to a group of people in society. The myth goes as follows:

The dead girl rose from marsh and made the tamarind tree her abode. Worshipped as a Devi, she was the guardian of chaste. . . . the harvest overhead was rich, yet few dared to climb up. For the trunk was covered with slippery lichens and the canopy infested with venomous ants. But if the climbers had a chaste wife the Devi would turn the lichens into firm footholds, and the ants would make way. (O.V., 103)

There is another myth stated in *Legends of Khasak*, which also emphasizes the same underlying belief regarding women's chastity in the context of toddy tappers; "In those times the tappers did not have to climb, the palm bent down for him. It was when a tapper's women lost her innocence that the palm ceased to bend". (O.V., 109)

From both these myths, it is evident that the quality of being chaste is attached to a particular gender. Faithfulness is ascribed as a feminine trait and symbol of a virtuous woman. Chastity is being perpetuated here as a rule that a "good" wife must follow for the good health of her husband. Over a careful analysis, one can

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clearly understand that the aim of perpetuating such a myth in a society is to constrain women from adultery. Attaching special significance to chastity only for women is social discrimination. This same concept of chastity is later used to construct a gender stereotypes. The quality of chaste came to be associated only with one particular gender and is made to be featured as a feminine trait. So in this aspect, what the theorist Simone de Beauvoir says about social construction of gender identity is very true. "One is not born, but rather become, a woman" (qtd. in Butler 35). The gender identity of a woman or man is formed through a process whereby which they procure feminine and masculine traits respectively. And myths play an important role in the social construction of gender identity. In the novel, the quality of being chaste is attached exclusively for women, and it is mythified so that it is sustained and passed on for a very long time. Therefore, mythification is a way to ensure the intended ideology is being established as a norm in society. Another interesting example that can be taken from the novel is a myth regarding the covering of women's head.

Her *tattan*, the traditional scarf with which Muslim women covered their head hair, had slipped; it hung limply behind her. This was apostasy. But the *tattan* was more of an observance; women's hair, if left uncovered, brought astral beings down in lust. (O.V., 25)

Studying this myth helps in uncovering the underlying discourse. The propagation of such a myth is to justify rape culture. Through such discourses and myths the sexual violence against women are normalized, and victims are blamed for their carelessness in dressing and conduct. A stigma or shame is attached to the victims of rape due to these illogical beliefs. Myths are constructed by attaching 'a meaning' to 'a form'. The theorist Roland Barthes refers to this meaning or the hidden knowledge as "Cultural Codes". Later on, the form is shed off, but the meaning remains in the society and are also carried on for generations. Chiefly through new myths appropriate for the time. Thus it can be said that myths are effective vehicles for certain discourses to be transported into a culture. Myths in effect appear to be natural, but they undertake the task of giving historical purposes a natural vindication.

Myths are equated to 'signs' as in semiotics by Barthes, as they help to communicate concepts and understand the world. So in Post-Structural perspective, myths are also highly unstable just like a 'sign' in semiotics. Endless connotations can be attached to a 'sign' as proposed by Jacques Derrida through the concept of 'differance'. Differance is the characteristic of any language, that its play of signifiers continually defers meaning. Therefore, the meaning of a 'sign' in some way is always missing from it. The property of 'differance' can be applied in myths as well, to create newer significations. This appropriation of myths is what Barthes calls as giving a 'Second Order Signification' to the existing 'signs'. In *Legends of Khasak,* such an appropriation of a myth can be seen. The instability of a myth is exploited by an individual named Nizam Ali to become 'Khazi' in the novel. Nizam Ali - an ordinary man suddenly becomes a dominant sorcerer by appropriating a myth of Khasak. This was done by Nizam Ali to escape from jail and attain power. All of a sudden he becomes the sorcerer of 'Saved Miyan Sheikh' by modifying and attaching a 'Second -Order Signification' to the myth-regarding the descendants of Khasak told by Allah-Pitcha Mollakka. In this way 'Khazi'- the Sorcerer becomes an authoritative figure and exploits the people of Khasak. Mythmaking and the appropriation or modification of existing myths is an ongoing process in each culture. The dominant discourses of a period in such a manner, gets converted into an ideology of an entire society, through the efficient utilization of myths. On a closer look at the intentions behind the creation of myths regarding the idea of gender roles and gender identity, a political ideology is evidently seen. The patriarchal ideologies are being established as the norm of a society to exert control and establish supremacy over women. It also helps men to exercise unchallenged power over other genders. Thus it can be concluded that myths are in a way used as shorthand to support the actions of powerful people and make them appear as normal in the society.

Therefore it is important to deconstruct the myths to reveal the underlying political ideology. It is also important to call for the changing of these constructed wrong discourses and misconceptions, especially regarding women. Stereotypical gender roles need to be unlearned. It is necessary because these constructed beliefs are still strongly prevalent in many societies, and it continues to obstruct women from attaining dignity. Some ideologies are so deep-rooted that even women are unaware of the atrocities being committed against them and perceive them as normal. By revealing the political agenda behind the creation of myths in various aspects and how institutions in a society exert hegemonic control; it can resisted to an extent. This awareness therefore, can help in fighting for social justice.

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