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Canon Mobility: A Study on Vijayan's *Khasakinte Ithihasam* and *The Legends of Khasak*

J M Meenakshi

Researcher, India;
jmmeenakshi777@gmail.com | <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-0881-2157>

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Abstract: The cultural adaptation and philosophical maturity are evident in the translated work, *The Legends of Khasak*, which was primarily written in Malayalam, and can be seen as distinct from its source text. This paper examines the significant philosophical and cultural shifts employed by O. V. Vijayan in revisiting his work, *Khasakinte Ithihasam*, twenty-five years after its initial publication. The focus of this paper is to examine how Vijayan adapted local myths, rituals, and social structures for a global audience. This paper is structured into three sections. Firstly, it begins with a brief overview of the literary and journalistic career of O.V. Vijayan, analysing how his first novel, *Khasakinte Ithihasam* (1969), marked the transition from the Romantic to the Modern periods in Malayalam literature. This section also provides an idea of Vijayan's place among the twentieth-century Malayalam writers. Secondly, the adaptation of local folklore, deities, and legends from the region for an English audience is examined. Key elements, such as idiomatic expressions, cultural references, and the portrayal of landscape, are examined to understand the balance between cultural fidelity and necessary adaptation. Thirdly, the paper analyzes the philosophical maturity and its paradigmatic shift from the Malayalam version to the English version by quoting specific instances from both texts. Special attention is given to how the novel's philosophical explorations, which reflect on the nature of existence, suffering, and enlightenment, are conveyed in translation. The paper concludes with a discussion on the reception of the translated work across cultures and the impact of translation on the global understanding of Khasak's cultural and philosophical heritage.

Keywords: Minor transnationalism; Thick translation; Cultural Untranslatability; Worlding; Canonization.

Introduction

Ottupulackal Velukutty Vijayan (1930-2005) is a renowned Indian literary figure, especially in Modern Malayalam literature. He has been equally influential as a novelist, short-story writer, journalist, and English-language political cartoonist. The Indianness observed in Vijayan's works lies in the choices he makes in weaving his characters, plots, and stories from myths, legends, folktales, and historical events. His literary and journalistic careers are a blend of their own. "He used the form and artifice of Indian Classical and Folk Tradition. He deals with the evils of caste politics, fascism, and biased treatment of women in his novels." (Jangale, 336)

At the age of 39, O. V. Vijayan entered the literary sphere of Malayalam novel with his debut *Khasakinte Ithihasam* (1969). This initiated a great literary revolution, cleaving the history of Malayalam fiction into pre-Khasak and post-Khasak, rather than Romantic and Modernist (post-Modernist, to be more specific). A comparative analysis of a few works from each period will help place Khasak as well as Vijayan among the twentieth-century works and writers, respectively.

O. Chand Menon's novel, *Indulekha* (1889), dealt with the decline of feudal, Brahminical culture in Kerala, which promptly explains the rise of the Malayalam novel, necessitated by the emergence of an educated middle class. Menon's *Indulekha* dramatizes a progressive woman's (Indulekha's) resistance to marrying a lecherous Brahmin Suri Namboodiri, who symbolizes the decadence of feudalism, its caste oppression, and polygamy. This set the stage for further structuring and re-structuring of the novel in Malayalam. As Dr. Thomas Palakeel rightly said, "Chandu Menon's *Indulekha* set the tone for the future development of the novel in Malayalam: novelists began debating social issues through their elaborate probing into the individual experience of characters who were drawn from contemporary society." (190)

The second major novelist of the period, C. V. Raman Pillai, penned his "Walter Scott-inspired historical novels about the Travancore dynasty, *Marthanda Varma* (1891) and *Dharmaraja* (1911)" (Palakeel, 190) towards the latter half of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. Both works, very much in the manner of Walter Scott's romances, elaborated a drama grounded in history and people with human emotions and realistic characters.

It is based on the light of the above-mentioned writers and their respective themes that we see and place O.V. Vijayan and his debut novel, *Khasakinte Ithihasam*. Although his novel exploded into the literary scene with a dark, brooding, and unsettling profundity, his writing was immediately identified as *athyadhunikam*, that is, ultramodern. Vijayan's later works, such as *Dharmapuram* (The Sage of Dharmapuri, 1985), with the central character Sidhartha modelled on Gautama Buddha, were regarded as a piece of work influenced by the existentialists as well as Jonathan Swift and Laurence Sterne. An integrated study of all his works would prove that:

The nascent postmodernist sensibility enabled him to bring out the essence of the pre-modern in a scorching, flaming narrative style, much to the confusion of the modern progressives, who claimed certainty in the matters of life and art. His

dissent to modernism was evident in his early short stories and parodies. (Palakeel, 195)

This paper does not solely intend to analyze the Malayalam version of Vijayan's *Khasak*, but also the much-celebrated translation, *The Legends of Khasak* (1974). "Translation exists either as a process or as a product, and the purpose behind it is always for 'other'. The existence of 'other' entails the existence of a translation." (Panda, 1) The fact that Vijayan self-translated the work after twenty-five years and that the philosophical idea pondered upon in the target text is entirely different, moreover, superior to the parent text are the two significant loci of this endeavour. The latter scenario can be better understood by analyzing it in conjunction with the concept of minor transnationalism, a term coined by Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih in 2005. Translation is viewed and understood as a key element in decentering dominant narratives, as it focuses on the lateral and emphasizes vernacular language. Translation etymologically means to "carry across." To quote Aditya Panda's lines:

Becoming what one is not is a translation. Getting what one does not have is an act of translation. Where there is no Shakespeare or Dostoevsky in a language, to present them in that language is a translation. It is not simply making the texts of Shakespeare or Dostoevsky available; it is the art of the person writing the philosophy and culture of Shakespeare or Dostoevsky. (2) Vijayan's effort is to globalize the cultural imagination through unique expressions, idioms, and long-forgotten memories of the Khasakians' "Sheikh." What Vijayan reminds his audience, both native and global, is that the act of translation is not simply bringing what is already existing within the words, but bringing a world to another world.

The adaptation of culture, folklore, deities, and legends from the region for an English audience is evident in the translated work, *The Legends of Khasak*. A few of which are the Islamic culturally significant thattan and the mythical beings, *the gandharvas*, being thoroughly detailed in a word-by-word manner by Vijayan. In the chapters titled "The Hour of Khasak" and "After the Lost Years," Vijayan explained these as:

"Her [Maimoona's] *thattan*, the traditional scarf with which Muslim women covered their hair, had slipped; it hung limply behind her." (25)

"Thithi Bi did not doubt that the flying *Gandharvas*, the sky-people, had sired satanic offspring in them." (25)

"The second story was the signal to all men that he was a *muthalali*, an owner of wealth. *Malika* meant a two-storeyed house, and from that he took the 'M' that was to precede his name, M. Attar." (31)

This depravity in the translated work brings in the words of Gayatri Spivak and her concept of cultural untranslatability:

I think the emphasis on languages is getting less and less important as the corporatized university goes toward globalized uniformity. The convergence of comparative literary studies and the social science methodologies we had hoped for a decade ago appears to have dissipated into various fundable directions, focusing on international civil society rather than research methods. Language

learning has also become instrumental to human rights work. In this way, the focused discipline of comparative literature has undergone transformations that may not always be beneficial. (1)

Although the cultural aspects are deprived of their innate connotations in *The Legends of Khasak*, Vijayan devotedly captured the entirety of the natural landscape and the mindscape of Khasak and its people, respectively. The former, that is, the landscape “Chetali,” a mysterious and sacred mountain range, in *The Legends of Khasak*, was captured with utmost sincerity by Vijayan, as he dedicated two paragraphs in the translated version, in proportion to a single paragraph description in *Khasakinte Ithihasam*.

As a cloud streamer moved away, a red roof tile gleamed through the dense greenery. Ravi was aware of a melange of sounds and sights – a mother calling her daughter home, the arcane name stretched out like a melody; whistling pigeons and hosts of other querulous perchers in the green; a water buffalo, its horns raised in alarm at the sight of strangers; the swift flowing brook, its banks aflame with flowering screw pine; a flight of complaining crows rising in the distance like pterodactyls into the crystal arches of the sun. (7) This is a perfect example of Anthony Appiah’s thick translation, a term he coined in 1993. The intention of Appiah has been met here by O.V. Vijayan, as the target translation went beyond literal word-by-word translation to capture the subtle cultural and historical nuances of Malayali folklores, myths, and legends. Thus, it helped the English audience get familiar with the source text and its cultural context. Thick translation is more or less concerned with the translator’s method of description. By adding comments and providing extensive background information in the translation, the translator makes every effort to construct the historical context of the source text, placing readers in the interaction between texts and social circumstances so that they can read, comprehend, and interpret more effectively. (Xiao, 82)

Thus, Vijayan, in *The Legends of Khasak*, created a world distinct from the primary text, *Khasakinte Ithihasam*, which was, at the time, familiar to the English audience. To put it simply, Vijayan refashioned the parent text to enter the world of literature, not just linguistically but also ideologically. Therefore, *Legends of Khasak*, to a limited extent, felt like it “belonged” in the target world. His self-translation is an act of worlding, where he makes the story intelligible to the target non-Malayali audience while simultaneously retaining and reframing regional myths and metaphysical inquiries. Because “translation is not simply bringing out existing writing in another language; it brings a world to another world.” (Panda, 1)

Worlding often functions as a precursor to canonization. That is to say, a translated work should be legible and ideologically compatible with the global reading publics before it can be canonized. Vijayan’s *The Legends of Khasak* is an epitome of this process, which underwent a crucial remoulding for twenty-five years before its birth.

The translation, *The Legends of Khasak*, had been ‘worlded’ as it moved across into the global literary canon both via literal translation and ideological reshaping. The

significance and receptiveness of the work aligned with the expectations of the audience of world literature, namely, existential themes, narrative complexity as a stream-of-consciousness, and mythic structure, among others. The critical loss of idiomatic density, nuances of caste, religion, and regional sacredness can be observed alongside global visibility and intertextual relevance.

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