Itihasam of/as Legend: Time, Space, and Narrative Consciousness in *The Legends of Khasak*

Arnav Gogoi[1] and Srinjoyee Dutta[2]

Abstract

> Truth is light splintered through a prism and that gave me the idea of the astrophysicist who turns away from the outer universe to the space within.
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> O.V. Vijayan, 'Afterword', *The Legends of Khasak*

The Legends of Khasak (1969) by O.V. Vijayan has enjoyed a cult readership in the Indian subcontinent. The dominant critical or scholarly strain has been to read it as a literary symptom of the postcolonial imaginary. However, this has restricted the thematic potentialities of the text. While it employs the conventional postcolonial contestation between modernity and tradition as its framework, it far exceeds the binary in the forging of a novel consciousness and form. Using this as the theoretical springboard, the paper will attempt an exploration of Vijayan's revisioning of the postmodern novel through the reconfiguration of the coordinates of time and space. This reconfiguration occurs through the lens of magic realism in so far as the experience of space – or Khasak as a site of the legendary – is conditioned by the experience of time. The aim of the paper is to look at the protagonist Ravi and his experience of the liminal boundary between history and myth, and the concomitant form of the novel through its reconceptualization of the Eurocentric theoretical paradigms of novelistic and epic time. This anticipates the emergence of a new spatio-temporal and narrative consciousness symptomatic of the fragmentary postcolonial condition.

Keywords: Time-Space; Postmodern Novel; Magic Realism; Epic; Narrative Consciousness

To consider a possible theorisation of what constitutes the 'Indian Novel' is to fight an uphill battle. Scholars have relentlessly participated in this daunting task of fitting this protean genre into a strict formal category. However, the novel's recalcitrance in the face of such scholarly enterprises has only protracted the problem. We are no closer to finding a definitive solution to this problem than the moment we first identified it. The closer we move to the problem, the more the problem recedes from our grasp. It is an incessant struggle for the fleeting, the transitory: a struggle in which the novel transforms into myriad faces, each different from the next one, resulting in a rich tapestry of novelistic expressions. It is this plethora of novelistic expressions that Aijaz Ahmad celebrates in his defence of the Indian Novel against Jameson's

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[1] Arnav Gogoi, Independent Researcher. E-mail: gogoiarnav10@gmail.com
[2] Srinjoyee Dutta, Independent Researcher. E-mail: srinjoyeedutta@gmail.com

classification of the genre of third world literatures as political allegories.[3] The presence of the multiplicity of religious and linguistic registers of the novel within the geographical boundaries of the country becomes a challenge to the critical eyes of the scholar, who sits down with their pen to delimit the borders of the novel. However, this is not to say that such a task is impossible, and can never be realized. What it requires is a possible return to the site of the formation of the category in which the novel can be safely housed. For, it is in this moment of formation that one witnesses an emerging crisis vis-à-vis the categorisation. A quick glance over the history of the novel in the subcontinent suffices, since its many stages – from the novels written in the spirit of a nationalist imagination in the nineteenth century; to the subsequent movement towards an import of European realism in the early twentieth century; and the eventual experimentation with magical realism and postmodernism in a post-partition era – point at the struggle of the novel form and its place in India. The primary concern is to locate an independent form away from its European roots.[4] This concern leaves the edges of the novel form frayed in the country, and allows for various experimentations. One such experimentation has been by the Malayali writer O. V. Vijayan, whose *The Legends of Khasak* (1969), originally published in Malayalam as *Khasakkinte Itihasam*, has gained rising popularity in scholarly circles.

Reading (of) *The Legends of Khasak*

As a symptom of the postcolonial imaginary (we call it a 'symptom' because of the general tendency to read all Indian literature of the twentieth century – especially post 1947 – as catering to explicit or implicit national concerns), *The Legends of Khasak* has been read and analysed through three dominant lenses – revivalist/nativist, postmodernist, and the hybridity/hyphenation model. Before we can conclusively determine how the novel revisions all three, let us look at what these theoretical positions have to offer. The revivalist or nativist strain has attempted to focus exclusively on the spiritual pivot of the novel as an epistemological dismantling of the colonial legacy, to foreground an 'Indian' system of knowledge that has *finally* been given its due. While one cannot discredit the foundational idea of the spiritual quest and awakening in the novel, this analytical framework seems rather simplistic, and easily palatable to the rudimentary east-west or orient-occident binary. On the other hand, the notion of hybridity or hyphenation has attempted to look at the osmotic transference and counter-transference in that binary, to complicate the socio-political and cultural milieu presented in the novel as that of a postcolonial nation and subject – one that must negotiate with these antithetical aspects to arrive at a non-singular, or *hyphenated*, identity. Makarand Paranjape situates the novel within the paradigmatic 'third space' of *Swaraj*[5] as indicative of both political as well as linguistic autonomy. He looks at the novel as necessarily postnationalistic in its foregrounding of this dialogic third space, which, through the protagonist who is "fleeing from the original sin of post-Enlightenment rationality" (2002-2003,123), is able to forge the said space as an "arresting anecdote to the grand narrative of nationalism" (2002-2003,124). He goes on to state that,

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[3] See Fredric Jameson. "Third World Literature in the Age of Multinationalism". See also Aijaz Ahmad's response to this essay in his book *In Theory* (1992) where he underlines the many problems surrounding academic scholarship on Indian literature, which fails to identify the multifarious nature of the novel form in the India.

[4] Meenakshi Mukherjee stresses this point in her essay "Epic and Novel in India", in which she argues that even though early writers borrowed elements from Western narratives into their own work, the practice was often a blend of existing strategies found in the oral traditions of the country, and the epics (Moretti 2006, 596-631).

[5] Paranjape takes from the concept of *Swaraj* as self rule/ home rule in M. K. Gandhi's seminal political treatise *Hind Swaraj*.

The makers of modern India—from Rammohun Roy to O.V. Vijayan—tried to rewrite the monolinguality of modernity and imperialism in our own multiple tongues and voices. The cacophony that ensued had the capacity of transforming modernity itself, rendering it polyphonic and chaotic. From the universe of rationality, the attempt was made to create a 'multiverse' of dissonant wisdom. (2002-2003, 126)

While Paranjape attempts to locate the polyphonic impulse in the novel, through the framework of *Swaraj*, he subjects this polyphony to yet again an overtly political concern wherein Indian modernity looks to the West as its inescapable other. Both these models – the former explicitly in its repudiation and the latter implicitly in its acceptance – base themselves on the inescapability of the dual existence of the postcolonial subject. Thus, Khasak, often seen as the imagined microcosm of the national, becomes the site, and for some, the triumph, of a civilisational ethos, and the reclamation of the erstwhile colonized Indian. However, the problem arises with a careful examination of the history of the publication, translation, and reception of the text. Before we move on to the third – far more viable – lens of postmodernism, let us briefly trace this history, and its role in the shaping of this 'classic' of Indian literature.

It is widely known that *The Legends of Khasak* is seen as somewhat of a watershed moment in Malayalam literature insofar as it carved out, and made way, for a radically different literary sensibility. The novel, replete with spirituality, magic realist imagery, and a quasi-Romantic strain, breaks away from its predecessors, which were shaped by an overtly Marxist political sensibility, and which sought to catalyse tangible socio-political change. Published at the peak of Indian modernism (*athyadhunikam*), it paved the way for literary postmodernism (*utharadhunikam*) in the Malayalam, and consequently Indian, imaginary.[6] M. Mukundan, in "O.V. Vijayan: Death and Afterlife of a Writer", claims that it

> … entered the literary scene gently, since no one had paid attention to it at least for five years following its publication. And then the word spread slowly: here's a great novel, which is nothing short of sheer magic, and which, later on, learned literary critics described as "the novel of the century" written in the Malayalam language. … At that time, the literary scenario in Kerala was replete with the detritus of socialist realism and the decadent romanticism . . . The style and content of the novel was a far cry from all fictional works written before. It discarded the concept of social engagement in literary production. However, it didn't discard romanticism. Instead, it recycled it. I would regard his writing in general as a work of discarded communism, recycled romanticism and redeemed spirituality. (2005, 226)

Towards a novel temporal consciousness

Yet, if one were to look closely, particularly at the English translation, what seems to lurk behind this magical plane of existence is a larger confrontation with a consciousness of a new novelistic form. It is a consciousness in which the coordinates of time and space are reconfigured to offer a fresh perspective on the novel in the Indian subcontinent. Such a tendentious reading of the novel warrants a closer examination of the text in the hopes of sketching an outline of this new consciousness. As the story begins, the novel immediately

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[6] The terms *athyadhunikam* and *utharadhunikam* have been taken from "Nation and Nationality: Concepts of Modernity and Nation in Malayalam Literature" by Manu Sudhakar Kurup as mentioned in "The Writer as Translator: Self-translation in O.V. Vijayan's *The Legends of Khasak*" by Sanju Thomas.

transports the reader into the magic of Khasak with its picturesque quality. We are told of Ravi's first reception of Khasak in the following manner:

> Ravi was aware of a melange of sounds and sights – a mother calling her daughter home, the arcane name stretched out like 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. (Vijayan 1994, 6-7)[7]

It is easy to fall into the trap Vijayan has laid for the reader in these lines. We could happily register the information as another instance of the idyllic characteristic of descriptions of nature (as one would find in Romantic and Victorian narratives). But we feel another emotion in this description resonating among the gaps in the series of images. This emotion is that of a resistance which both calls Ravi towards it, as well as pushes him away from its calling. We have only to look at words like "arcane," "querulous," "alarm," "aflame," and "complaining." One registers a tone of violence in these images as they become a complete whole in the mind of the reader – Ravi in this case. This violence robs Ravi of the ground of selfhood governed by the temporal present. For, the peculiarity of the image of the crows "rising in the distance like pterodactyls" informs us that we have already been introduced to a certain notion of a historical time. A time which comprises the foundation of myth. The "pterodactyl" is the site of this conflation of history and myth right in the beginning of the novel. Its sudden appearance in the composite image of Khasak suggests a moment of rupture in the narrative, where reason is bypassed in favour of the imagination. Ravi, along with the reader, witnesses the forming of the world of Khasak at this point. It is a forming which historicizes the narrative — we are caught in the violent clutches of time here in this forming. It is what Paul Ricoeur would argue as the moment of intervention in the plot which introduces Heidegger's within-time-ness in his theory of narrativity – a time which is historicized in its opening to the extensions of past-present-future.[8] We are sheltered in a time which becomes public – a time shared by Ravi, Khasak, and the reader – as it is now in a state of being-with-others:

> The narrative of a quest . . . unfolds in a public time. This public time . . . is not the anonymous time of ordinary representation but the time of interaction. In this sense, narrative time is, from the outset, time of being-with-others. (Ricoeur 1980, 188)[9]

This collective public time is the gift of the "pterodactyl" as it sets the tone of the novel from here onwards. In a typical postmodernist fashion, the end is already anticipated in the beginning. Ravi's voluntary acceptance of the snake bite at the end of the novel is already foreshadowed here.[10] His quest for his own self happens at this point as he ascribes a historicity to the text. The vast expanse of a remote history as myth (the word *itihasam* means history as well as myth, or legend) opens in front of Ravi. Time opens to the being of our protagonist. He finds himself placed in an inchoate temporality, which suggests a possible

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[7] Subsequent references are to this 1994 edition of *The Legends of Khasak*, and will be cited parenthetically by page number in the text.

[8] Paul Ricoeur's discussion of time and narrativity in his essay "Narrative Time" will be of central importance to this paper as the determinations of narrative will be fundamental to Vijayan's possible thesis on the genre of the novel.

[9] Subsequent references are to this 1980 article titled "Narrative Time", and will be cited parenthetically by page number in the text.

[10] The last section of the paper discusses this idea in detail.

becoming. He is closer to the centre of this temporality. He is safe here. In its violence. In the rupture. But what is this centre? Does the novel indicate such a presence in the narrative? Can we find, as Orhan Pamuk would say, the secret centre?[11] If one dares to broach this question, the novel immediately responds in the affirmative. As the paragraph, after the composition of the image of the idyllic landscape of Khasak, bears witness: "Behind Khasak stood the mountain, Chetali, its crown of rock jutting over the paddies below. Wild beehives, one waxed to the other, hung in immense formations underneath the rock, inaccessible to man" (7). Chetali is the key to our understanding of the centre in the text. It is that inaccessible fountain of temporality from which time flows into the landscape of Khasak. The mountain is the home of everything that makes the landscape what it is – Khasak. For, it is the origin of the people of Khasak who "trace their descent from those one thousand horsemen" of the legendary Sayed Mian Sheikh who "sleeps in a rocky crypt on top of Chetali" (11). It is the birthplace of the saga of this place.

However, the point that it remains inaccessible to humans should prove to be useful in our consideration of the new consciousness of the Indian novel as imagined by Vijayan. Throughout the text, the mountain remains a haunting presence in the margin from where it invites the characters through its oneiric quality. We are working within the schematic outline of narrative time in tales which deal with the notion of a quest. According to Ricoeur, such narratives rely on the dual presence of temporal planes, which allow for the trope of repetition to offer an alternative to what he calls *dechronologization* of time by structuralist theorists. By this, he means that the structuralist attempt to fit atemporal events within the chronological sequence of time can be avoided through the characteristic of repetition, or a possible mirroring of events. This mirroring is an inscription of the oneiric dimension of the tale onto the heroic dimension of the quest. Chetali parallels this duplication of the tale by providing an alternative strand of narrative which inscribes itself over Ravi's quest. In the light of Ricoeur's formulation, through Chetali,

> … the linear chain of time is broken and the tale assumes an oneiric dimension that is more or less preserved alongside the heroic dimension of the quest. Two qualities of time are thus intertwined: the circularity of the imaginary travel and the linearity of the quest as such. (1980, 185)

Ricoeur goes on to write,

> Nevertheless, the imaginary travel suggests the idea of a metatemporal mode which is not the atemporal mode of narrative codes in structural analyses. This "timeless" – but not atemporal – dimension duplicates, so to speak, the episodic dimension of the quest and contributes to the fairylike atmosphere of the quest itself. (1980, 185)

The duplication, which Chetali offers, bridges the gap between historical time and mythical time. We witness a unique blend of Bakhtinian epic time – closed in itself – and the novelistic time of becoming.[12] There is a synthesis of the opposition between the epic and the novel form. This prepares the inauguration of a possible new aesthetic of the genre of the novel.

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[11] Pamuk discusses the idea of novels in his *The Naive and the Sentimental Novelist*. According to him, novels harbour a secret centre, which gives rise to the illusion of a supposed meaning that the reader is required to seek. This seeking is central to the novelistic form as what "sets novels apart from other literary narratives is that they have a secret center" (25).

[12] For a remarkable discussion on the form of the novel in a Western context, see Bakhtin, "The *Bildungsroman* and its Significance in the History of Realism" (10-59).

Vijayan employs the "routine work of the fabulist" (207) to re-appropriate the western model of the novel form into the Indian imagination. He seems to be still working within the larger history of the novel form as it arose in the country. The landscape of the fabulous, of the fantastic, is reflective of the beginnings of the stylistic demands of the novel in India in the second half of the nineteenth century when,

> [e]lements of fantasy and intimations of history are inextricably knotted . . . Chronicles merge with legend, events lapse into magical happenings, and kings who lived once-upon-a-time cast their spell on those who ruled at historically recognizable periods over geographically precise areas. (Mukherjee, 'Epic and Novel' 2006, 606)

The tone is in keeping with the early novels – including the rise of Malayalam Literature – in which writers dealt with the larger issues of history, and the fashioning of a self.[13] The concern with history is at the heart of these narratives, and their larger imaginings would often involve the practice of highlighting the fantastic as a moment of fascination with the practices of the native landscape. They struggle to locate the centre in their own works, and manage to find it temporarily. The many histories of Indian literatures in their subsequent stages of novelistic determinations avow this position. [14] What is important here is that Vijayan's *Khasak* looks back at this origin in its formative stage, suggesting a reformulation of the form. Unlike most of these early novels (one must be careful to not use this as a blanket argument for all early novels), Vijayan is aware of the problem of this centre. Chetali returns *de jure*. The awareness of this irreducibility of the centre into a codified knowledge of meaning keeps the absence visible. Chetali is Vijayan's absent centre. The novel is suggestive in its technique of this awareness as in the episode with Nizam Ali who finds himself standing on Chetali's peak:

> Nizam Ali stood on Chetali's peak, gazing up, his hands free, and marvelous little beings rode past him in flimsy sky-canoes. Nizam Ali leapt up into the sky which seems within reach, and the next moment he was plummeting down through wind and cloud. (34)

An attempt to breach this pact of the absent centre, surely results in a "plummeting down through wind and cloud." It is the babel in its primordial state which intends to connect heaven and earth. Yet, this plummeting brings the novel back to its ontological determination of being in the time of the world. The time of Khasak is marked by both linear time of Ravi's actions, and the circular time of Khasak's mythopoeia. The characters in the novel exist in this reciprocal relationship between history and myth. The sacred is embedded in the history of becoming in the novel. One must admit here the reference to the thesis of mythical time by the Romanian philosopher Mircea Eliade.[15] What is at stake in Khasak is the coming together of the sacred and the profane in the moment of coming-to-be of the novel. The sacrality of the landscape retains the memory of this confluence –

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[13] See Thomas Palakeel. "Twentieth-century Malayalam Literature". Also, see Dilip M. Menon's "No. Not the Nation: Lower Caste Malayalam Novels of the Nineteenth Century" for a detailed discussion on the notion of self and its changing constitutions in early novels in Malayalam.

[14] Refer to the initial discussion in the paper.

[15] See *The Sacred and the Profane*. Eliade's study of the ontological problem of modern existence brought about a significant shift in the dialogue between his famous classification of the sacred (religious) and the profane (ordinary, worldly existence subjected to the vagaries of human time). The present paper avoids this distinction and its correlation to the novelistic form in Vijayan. The idea, rather, is to point at the possible origin of this distinction in the first place.

> It had happened in the lost time of Khasak, but it lived on, a brooding, avenging sorrow. The great tamarind tree which stood on the edge of the burial marsh was witness to that sorrow. Old beyond reckoning, Khasak believed the tree wouldn't die until it was redeemed in some way. It was beneath this tree, in that lost time, that an old, widowed astrologer and his daughter had built their hut. (103)

The tamarind tree becomes the site of a mythification in which is imprinted "the lost time of Khasak." It functions as the object of the sacred in the ordinary profane time of the world. The daughter, who has made "the tamarind tree her abode" (103) as a Devi after her death, exemplifies this historico-mythical temporality of the land. Similarly, the presence of the phenomenon of spirits in the novel makes sure that the reader is constantly reminded of the phantastic in their experience of reading the text. However, this presence does not warrant a religious diagnosis of the story as a reference to Eliade might imply. The intention is to show the synchronous existence of the two worlds of the sacred and the ordinary (it is better to avoid the word profane as it is a theologically charged concept in Eliade's lexicon). For, it is this synchronicity which begs the question of possibility in the novel. A possibility in the form of a certain becoming where the crisis of the novel is experienced. Another example from the text should clarify our thesis so far. The following description of Abida's escape into fantasy is a case in point:

> It was on such occasions that Abida slipped out of the house without catching anyone's attention, gliding like a spirit. Once she escaped and went into the grove of Arasu trees. She sat down beneath a tree and asked, 'Holy Sheikh, are you with me?' Suddenly the brook turned a deeper blue, and there was a rain of flowers. (65)

The presence of such elements of the fantastic points towards a "time lost" where the two worlds of temporalities affect the landscape of the novel. Owing to this possibility, one can read such experiences like, "She [Abida] mounted the horse-spirit, and together they raced in the wind, past forests and over seas" (65). The reader is not unsettled by this sudden appearance of the fantastic. Vijayan already prepares us for it from the beginning through the towering presence of Chetali. The centre in its absence promotes the elasticity of thought. Everything becomes possible. Khasak is still within the perimeter of the 'native' and not the 'nation' in its political imagination. It is closer to the Latin root 'natio' meaning where one is born rather than the political, administrative concept of the nation.[16] It only comes towards the end of the novel when the narrative announces the impending political climate of the land – "Kozhanasseri is all set to go red" (187). Vijayan avoids any further discussion on this matter which brings the novel back into the fold of memory. The time of the novel in its becoming. This becoming acknowledges the crisis of all possible formulations of the novel form. What comes to the surface is the crisis itself. It is a novel of crisis. A crisis of becoming that becomes a form unto itself. The novel here is closer to the point of its own origin. There is mastery of the attitude of anxiety which has been a concern for many Indian novelists.[17] Not just in terms of language, but also in relation to the novelistic form itself.[18] Yet, Vijayan moves past this

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[16] For a lengthy discussion on the history of the novel form in this light, see A. N. Kaul. *The Domain of the Novel.*

[17] See Meenakshi Mukherjee. "The Anxiety of Indianness", 166-186.

[18] Ulka Anjaria's study of Bibhutibhushan Bandhopadhyay's *Aparajito* (1931) underlines this anxiety of form as the protagonist finds himself at the crossroads in his attempt to write a novel. Such instances, although scant in the Indian scenario (Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* being another one) stresses the problem of the foreignness of the form, and its (non)adaptability in the Indian context. Yet, what they bring to light is the constant state of anxiety, which affected the novelists of the twentieth century.

anxiety in *Khasak* with what one could only call a complete submission to the crisis. Instead of repairing the frayed ends of the novel form, he lets them stay frayed into an openness that becomes the form itself. It is a consciousness of crisis which Vijayan celebrates as the advent of a new formulation. The character of Appu-killi in the novel bears witness to this. The stunted growth of this character parallels the nature of the form of the novel itself. In his capturing of dragonflies, this comic figure, which is reminiscent of Henry Fielding's definition of his own novels as "a comic epic poem in prose" (2004, 21), holds on to the memory of the epic in the world of the novel as it manifests itself in the everyday.[19] The character signals the nascent state of the novel where all the flux of life rages in its flow.

Consciousness in translation

Having established this new novelistic consciousness in *Khasak,* let us now examine how this consciousness spills over, and is impinged by a new dimension of public time. Before being published as a full-fledged work, it appeared as a serial in *Mathrubhumi Weekly* in 1968, while the English translation was published as late as 1994. Further, by Vijayan's own confession in the 'Afterword', and the critical scholarship – however sparse – that emerged post the publication of the English translation, it becomes clear that Vijayan's own life and his transformation from a card-carrying communist to a spiritual seeker of truth (as evidenced by his later works[20]) has impinged in more ways than one on both the form and content of the novel, especially the translated novel. The fact of the modelling of Khasak on the village of Thasarak, near Palakkad, in Kerala, where Vijayan stayed for some time with his family as a consequence of his sister's teaching assignment, is well known. But, more significantly, the journey of *The Legends of Khasak*, from its serialisation, its publication in Malayalam, and finally the publication of the English translation has been concomitant with the reshaping of Vijayan's own sensibility vis-à-vis the text. While the idea of an author's beliefs impinging on the nature of the story is understood and expected – most literary critics are wont to use this model in their analyses of any text – *Khasak* offers a singular problem in this regard because of two reasons: the self-translation by the author, and the time between the publication of the original and the translation.

Employing this as the springboard, we can further examine the postmodernist impulse in the narrative strategy of the novel as well as its reshaping of the Western paradigms of literary postmodernity. Thus, we begin by looking at two basic levels of narrativisation – one that is employed in telling the story of Khasak, as mentioned above, and the other its creation, recreation, and transcreation from being a serialized text to a translated one. The attempt is to examine the publication history and critical reception of the two texts, that is, the Malayalam original and the English translation, concomitantly. Sanju Thomas notes that the process of self-translation necessitates the reading of two texts, that is, *Khasakkinte Itihasam* and *The Legends of Khasak*, separately. While the 'story' essentially remains the same, Vijayan takes a lot of transcreative liberty with the English text, insofar as the "spirit" (Thomas 2019, 163) of the characters as well as the protagonist appears to be starkly different in the two. Ravi is a carefree wanderer in the former, while in the English translation he is plagued and burdened with doubts from the very beginning. The reason for this transformation is registered both in the changing ideological underpinnings of the author's life as well as an

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[19] See Kaul for a brief discussion of the role of the comic in the early stages of the European novel.
[20] Vijayan's later works such as *Gurusagaram* and *Thalamurakal* are often seen as the writings of a spiritual transcendentalist.

acute awareness of translating a text, suffused with parochial imagery and customs, for an English speaking readership. P.P. Raveendran claims that Vijayan's interventions in the English translation have been symptomatic of his "growing ideological closeness to versions of Indian metaphysics" through which the "possibility of a dialogic and compulsive misreading … has been denied to the text in the process of translation" (1999, 179).[21] Further, he elaborates on the minor episodic changes in the translation and opines that,

> Other minor changes which nevertheless do not drastically affect the storyline can be seen effected in parts of the narrative. But these changes pale into insignificance when compared with the fundamental way in which the world-view and sensibility embodied in Khasak have been altered in translation. It is an interesting case of the translator becoming an interpreter of the work being translated, in the process of which the translation itself turns into an interpretation of the original. It might also be treated as an instance of the later of the two Vijayans sitting in judgement on the early Vijayan. (1999, 180)

Raveendran allows the English translation its potential to be read from various lenses. He claims that no single voice has been given central status in the novel but states that this shift in the larger thematic of the novel has taken away its core radicalism. While his analysis of the novel and its translation is significant to our concerns in this paper, it is important to note that the narrative play in the novel continues to make its presence felt even with the overtly spiritual tenor which is a consequence to the exercise of self-translation. The 'event' in/of the novel does not lie in its role in the radical transformation of a literary sensibility but in the very ruptures that have led to its narrativisation, both in the arrangement of the 'plot', and its journey from a serialized to a translated text. By way of presenting an ineffable centre, or the lack of a binding logic that transforms a plot into a story, *Khasak* foregrounds the subsumption of the whole into part(s). The dual movement through time[22] – chronological time in which the reception of the novel has been deliberately altered by the author (through the initial publication of a fragment to the fragmentation in sensibility for the Malayalam and the English reader), and the achronological model of the narrative which has rendered all readings of the novel as always already fragmentary. This has been established by the reciprocal relationship between narrativity and temporality, both in reading the novel and in the reading of the novel, such that "temporality [becomes] that structure of existence that reaches language in narrativity and narrativity … the language structure that has temporality as its ultimate referent" (1980, 169).

Khasak then performs a third temporal historicality, that is, the accruing of simultaneous temporal frameworks in the stages of the reception of the novel. As a work that hinges on contingencies and its appearance in the public domain wherein "through recitation, a story is incorporated into a community which it gathers together" (1980, 176), Khasak's time and space seem to endorse the quintessential narrative Möbius strip. It seems to close in on itself, both as a cordoned off, self-sufficient space of the *sarai* as well as the looping back of Ravi's journey to the same spot in which he arrives. Yet, this closed loop of time and space also exceeds its closed cosmic circularity – the deliberate ambiguity of the ending which promises both death and salvation – or the lack thereof – as well as the title of the episode as 'The

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[21] These changes include the omission of a quarrel between Ravi and the Khazi over Maimoona as well as the replacement of 'Ezhavas' and 'Rowthers' with 'Hindus' and 'Muslims'.

[22] This time is a compounding of the previous concept of the oneiric and heroic dimension of public time.

Journey Begins', points towards a narrative spillage such that movement through the Möbius Strip of Khasak's idiosyncratic time and space never ceases.

Further, in keeping with the practice of recension in oral traditions, the narrative of the novel challenges both ratiocinated historiographic practices as well as postmodernism's dalliance with historiographic metafiction. While the novel might not be overtly metafictional insofar as 'self-conscious' postmodern narratives are concerned, the singular interaction of the narrative time of the novel with the exteriorized time of its publication further complicates the aforementioned spatio-temporal loop of the self-referential journey between the publication of the original and its translation. The poetics of its narrative combine both fact and event, or the verification of history and the veracity of the literary (Hutcheon 1988, 105-106) in order to craft an idiosyncratic narrative consciousness. Unlike the usual historiographic practice which moves from event to fact, the narrative consciousness of the novel performs the simultaneous double bind of fact as event and event as fact. It complicates historiographic metafiction's impulse to call into question "the implied assumptions of historical statements: objectivity, neutrality, impersonality, and transparency of representation" (1988, 92). Thasarak, now a site of pilgrimage for readers, writers, and philosophers alike, is as crafted as it is real, mediated, as it were, by the spatio-temporal crafting of Khasak and *Khasak*. Ricoeur's conception of agency or human action within the 'now' of the narrative synonymizes the character(s) and the author by way of the author's intervention in the reading of the novel and its public time. "The temporal dialectic" which elicits "a configuration from a succession" (1980, 178) is belied in the act of episodic structure of not just its narrative but also its publication(s). The 'whole' of Khasak or Khasak as a whole, thus, remains ever-elusive insofar as its origin and end continually shift in meaning, in the reader's imaginary and memory. Ricoeur writes,

> By reading the end in the beginning and the beginning in the end, we learn also to read time itself backward, as the recapitulating of the initial conditions of a course of action in its terminal consequences. In this way, a plot establishes human action not only within time … but within memory. Memory, accordingly, repeats the course of events according to an order that is the counterpart of time as "stretching-along" between a beginning and an end. (1980, 180)

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Khasak works with this repetition to be self-conscious in its temporal re-markings both inside and outside the text. It establishes fiction's capability of historicising the event, and negotiates with both absence and presence insofar as it defies one or the other to be the cornerstone of its narrative consciousness. The "ex-centricity" of historiographic metafiction, especially in opposition to the "types" of realist fiction (Hutcheon 1988, 114) is dissolved in the story such that the *ex-centrics are precisely the types* through which the narrative dismantles both lenses. The characters, with their singular sobriquets are, thus, real legends in themselves; they belong both in the order of myth and the order of the everyday.[23] The past, thus, is not merely "textualized" (Hutcheon 1988, 119), but the text is historicized. The postmodernist raconteurs (both the characters and the author) are not merely involved in telling what they know, but invariably involved in knowing or learning from what has been told.

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[23] Refer to the third section of the paper.

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In some ways, Khasak's metafictional impulse begins with Ravi's childhood in which he dreams of diademed serpents to negotiate with the harsh realities of his mother's passing only to be bitten by one at the end (or beginning?) of his journey. It is important to note here that the story both begins and ends in transition, and that the first storyteller in the novel is neither Ravi nor the residents of Khasak, but Ravi's mother. It is also the beginning of the intertwining of the erotic and the thanatotic, with his mother's death, his incestuous relationship with his stepmother, to his experience in Khasak where his own sense of morality is both confounded and purged by the forces of life and death. These forces are also replicated in the narrative, which continually evokes birth and death as the fundamental forces of Khasak's consciousness. The narrative consciousness is, thus, catalysed by a series of libidinal drives that perform transgressions of form and content insofar as one is caught both inside and outside Khasak's time, that is, "in the twilight of births and deaths" (85). It is the sting of the imagination such that Khasak is no longer a transitory space of rest, but an experience that offers ontological shifts in the protagonist's sense of self. Ricouer claims that,

> Memory, therefore, is no longer the narrative of external adventures stretching along episodic time. It is itself the spiral movement that, through anecdotes and episodes, brings us back to the almost motionless constellation of potentialities that the narrative retrieves. The end of the story is what equates the present with the past, the actual with the potential. The hero *is* who he *was*. (1980, 186)

It is not surprising, thus, that Ravi is both alive and dead at the end/beginning. Further, at a self-conscious level, the narrative gradually nudges the reader to find their own beginning and end – for instance, at the end of the story titled 'Misfitting Phonemes', the corpse of a lizard, an instrument of exorcism, is thrown into the "mould and marsh of a million endings" (132). This repetition is further confirmed by a series of returns, exemplified by the likes of Ravi and the Khazi, among others, who attempt to come back again and again to the point of beginning and end, caught as it were, in the "infinite time of Khasak" (18).

Thus, as a quasi-bildungsroman, the narrative does not offer a rite of passage for evolution but for self-discovery, for revelation. Ravi's 'growth' lies not in new learning but learning that has been in the 'here' and 'now' all along. This occurs through the affective temporal dimensions added to Ravi's sense of being with each character that he encounters, accrued further by his interaction with the author of the original and the translated text, as well as the reader(s). This confirms and layers our initial theorisation of Khasak's 'public time' as the time of being-with-others. Therein lies the forging of a new narrative consciousness that paradoxically documents an oral culture both in reading and writing. It is the 'recounting' of history through a variety of lenses, or truth as "light splintered through a prism" (207). Hence, the spatio-temporal framework in *The Legends of Khasak* becomes a co-efficient of narrative consciousness, insofar as it impinges on the characters, the author, as well as the reader. In that sense, the narrative works through a series of reterritorializations such that it equips the text with the possibility of differential sense-making practices. While the text might, at the outset, be an examination of *being*, what it foregrounds is a series of *becomings* in which the narrative shifts endlessly depending on renewed practices of space and time, such as the "the ridge [that] stretched before him [Ravi], becoming infinite, spanning recurrence and incarnation" (106).

Thus, in a "playful interface between being and beyond being" (207), the narrative consciousness of *Khasak* stands the test of time, of its own, of Thasarak, as well as that of its readers. Vijayan, while stating the difficulties of translation in the 'Author's Note', writes that he allowed "the narrative to depend on its own energy" (vii). We listen to the pluralities of becoming of this new consciousness of crisis as Ravi listens to the story *within the novel -*

> Ravi listened to the ballad of Khasak in her [Kunhamina], its heroic periods, its torrential winds and its banyan breezes. … Ravi looked deep into those eyes; the story would have no dying, only the slow and mysterious transit. He began in the style of the ancient fabulist.

> 'Once upon a time …' (46)

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