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O. V. VIJAYAN'S *THE INFINITY OF GRACE*: A STUDY IN PHILOSOPHY OF LITERATURE



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ABSTRACT

O. V. Vijayan (1930-2005) was a remarkable writer both in his native language Malayalam and English. His fictional writings are in Malayalam. Some of them have been translated into English by himself. By the time he passed away, he had become part of the collective consciousness of Malayalis. Such was the literary sensibility created by the writer by his first novel *The Legends of Khasakh* that modern Malayalam literature is often categorised into pre- Khasakh and post-Khasakh.

KEYWORDS

avdaita, philosophy of literature

RESEARCH PAPER

This article looks into the philosophy of literature in the novel *The Infinity of Graceby* O. V. Vijayan. This book forms the spiritual magnum opus of O. V. Vijayan. All his later books, both fictional and non-fictional, show the undertone of Vedanta which is tangibly dealt with in this work. The concept of philosophy of literature is treated in three ways. *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* gives three senses to the concept of philosophy of literature(678):

Firstly, the philosophy of literature means: 'philosophy of literature usually done by philosophers is more often concerned to place literature in the context of a philosophical system.' Secondly, it means philosophy and literature, i.e. "philosophy and literature taken to be distinct and essentially autonomous activities that may nonetheless sustain determinate relation to each other".

The third sense of philosophy of literature may be taken as: "the attempt to discover matters of philosophical interest and value in literary texts and that contains expressions of philosophical problems".

In this article philosophy of literature is taken in the third sense. The writer may write books to prove a point. But in the hands of a consummate writer, philosophical themes can be refreshingly enduring effect on the readers. Vijayan's artistic endurance was essentially philosophic, but he never sacrificed artistic excellence for that.

O. V. Vajayan's writings, especially later works, are tangibly permeated by spirituality. The main spiritual moorings of Vijayan are Vedanta philosophy, mainly *Advaita Vedanta*. Unlike the western philosophy which is predominantly intellectual, Indian philosophy gives equal importance to mystical insights too. Vedantic insights are as old as the Vedas themselves. But, as a formal school of thought, it was the last to emerge. The Upanishads, *Brahmasutra* and *the Gita*, called *prasthanatraya*, are held as the foundation stone of Vedanta philosophy.

Based on the entry in *A Concise Encyclopaedia of Hinduism Volume I* Advaita philosophy can be summarized along the following lines. (39-44); The word can mean the last of Vedic tradition or the end of knowledge.. Two greatest earliest exponents of Advaita are Gaudapada (7th -8th AD) and Shankara (A.D. 788-820). Shankara's commentaries on *prasthanatraya* and his independent works form the base of this philosophical system. Advaita means that which has no second. It is the non-dual state. It affirms that Brahman is the only reality and the world has no permanent reality. The Advaitic philosophy stems from the Upanishad teachings, which, in turn, can be traced back to the Vedic mystical hymns. Advaita further affirms that the individual souls are Brahman itself, which is the bedrock of existence. The world of multiplicity which is the day-to-day reality is the result of erroneous perception. It is called 'anirvacaniyakyati', the theory of erroneous cognition, which

defies definition. Shankara accepts three types of realities, namely , *pratibhasika satya* (apparent truth, illusory appearance) , *vyavaharika satya* (which denotes our day-to-day world experience) and *paramartika satya* (the highest truth which is the only thing that exists) .Brahmab, being without attributes and formless can only be described in negative way(*neti, neti –not this, not this*), But in positive terms, Brahman is described as *sat-cit-ananda*(*sat-that which really is, cit-pure consciousness and ananda-unalloyed bliss*)

It is *avidya*, that is lack of awareness of Brahman, that is responsible for the sorrows of *jiva* (the involved atman). When *jiva* is free of *avidya*, it gains liberation. It is not gaining of a new state but recognizing the already existing original state. Different schools of advaita look upon these key concepts from different perspectives.

Interestingly, *Astavakra Samihita.*, a subversive text in the advaitic tradition ends with the impossibility of asserting anything in positive terms.

"Where is existence, where is non-existence; where is unity, where is duality? What need is there to say more? Nothing emanates from me" (195)

While studying the philosophical depth of O. V. Vijayan's works, it will be imperative to look into the spiritual evolution that he underwent over his writing career, at least in brevity.

O.V. Vjayan began his writing and intellectual career as a communist and materialist. It has been rightly said that the depth of the inner being of an author gets reflected in his literary expressions. Mutation occurring in consciousness during the intellectual life an author can have strong bearing on his works. But gradually, Vijayan evolved into a spiritualist. It was an evolutionary process from a youthful existential angst to a realization of the organic oneness of the cosmos.

O.V. Vijayan's very first novel *Kasakhinte Idhihasam* (later translated as *The Legends of Khasak*) set in a sombre milieu with haunting characters was a classic both in form and content. The novel changed the very literary sensibilities of Malayalam and raised diction to the level of poetry with an uncanny easiness. Its hero Ravi, who wanders with his existential pangs, has attained a mythical status in Malayalam literature. This novel, while portraying the existential sorrow of the sin-smitten hero, contains vibrant seeds of spiritual redemption. We are not thrown into an intellectual vacuum typical of many western existentialist novels but, here , we have the subliminal message that , Ravi, the hero, has already set on his trans-mundane quest for his spiritual destination, unknown even to himself.

The spiritual undertones in O.V. Vijayan can be seen in his later works too. *The Saga of Dharmapuri* (originally *Dharmapuranam*) which employed his characteristic black humour productively and profusely and which was written against the backdrop of the dark days of the Emergency and which pinpointed the need for the germination of the dormant spiritual seeds

underscored spirituality on a different plane. A rotten polity with its resultant degradation in all aspects of life is portrayed in the novel. Siddhartha, the protagonist of *The Saga of Dharmapuri*, is a reminder to the fact that no tragedy remains only at the personal level. Spiritual vacuum in a society is created by soulless men. Some important parts of the book will make a good spiritual read.

His next novel *The Infinity of Grace (Gurusagaram)* marked the acme of his spiritual transformation in all its resplendence. It underscores the transcendental nature of human existence. The experiences its protagonist undergoes are poignantly portrayed. Eventually, he finds the answer to his existential problems. Towards the end of his life, he finds solace in the ultimate wisdom of which the seers of yore spoke. In a sense, the search of Ravi from *The Legends of Khasak* bears fruit in Kunjunni, who now stands prayerfully before the cosmic nature cleansed of his *karmic* stains. The author weaves the whole story by handpicking allusions and imagery from history, politics and mythology. The spiritual seeds in *Khasak* have germinated, sprouted and grown into a study, all - encompassing tree.

The central character in the novel *The Infinity of Grace* is a Delhi-based journalist from Kerala. One of his assignments was to report the Bangladesh war of liberation. Pained and exhausted by life, he looks for meaning in life, which compels him to look for a spiritual guru. During his search, he comes across many persons and goes through many excruciating experiences.

The novel whose prologue ends with an Upanishad mantra mainly moves through flashbacks. The Kunjunni's musings in the prologue put the theme of the novel in a nut shell. 'All things grow lucid, and lustrous in the grace of the Guru which wells everywhere.' (325) The novel begins with Kunjunni coming back to his ancestral home. Towards the end of his life, he gets to know the guru presence in his life. His first guru is his father, clutching whose hands he used to roam about his village when he was a kid. Even then, he was exposed to the intricacies of the ineluctable *karmic* bondage and its mysteries. This search continues until he meets his formal guru, swami Nirmalananda who was his childhood friend and whose insights into the Nachiketas episode from the Upanishad underpin the oceanic grace of Guru, after which the novel is titled.

"The quest and arrivals are both delusions of pilgrims' journeys; between them, the union of Guru and shishya was the perennial truth."(354)

Olga a Czech media professional mauled by her memories of her nation being taken over and crushed by the Russian Army is another Guru presence in his life. Many more persons on his journey become his guru. Even Lalitha whom he seduced becomes his gurus. It is ultimately his putative daughter, Kalyani, that becomes his final guru who teaches him the ultimate oneness of human existence and the futility of trying to decipher life by millions of binaries and dichotomies that tear up human life.

His estrangement with his wife, Sivani, is a catalyst which makes his life more contemplative. Their daughter Kalyani whom he loved so much was the bridge between their shaky lives. But Kalyani dies of blood cancer. It is only when Kalyani dies of the mortal disease that his wife Sivani reveals the life-shattering secret that Kalyani was not the daughter of Kunjunni. Kunjunni is stunned, and anguished. But, in an inner dialogue he has with Kalyani, she reminds him of the thousands of births during which they were father and daughter. It is our petty egos that prevent us from perceiving the wholeness and interconnectedness of existence.

The question of duality is an intricate issue in philosophy including the ultimate duality of the creator and the created. In a feverish dream vision, Kunjunni asks '*Dear God, he grieved, why do You hunt Yourself as the journey and the journeyer?*'... The voice of the Guru spoke again 'Open your eyes' (442)

Kunjunni was dreaming that he was the Garuda, the sacred vehicle of the Lord Vishnu. Vishnu and the ocean on which he was lying and Kunjunni's identification with Garuda were all now gone. He has an advaitic vision which becomes rooted in the aftermath of the death of his dear daughter towards the end of the novel. "He was a pulsating luminance, at once an infinitesimal seed and the infinite Universe, as he flew through the spaces of the Brahman." (442). The author here and elsewhere uses beautiful parallelisms with materials drawn from Indian mythology.

In the quotidian life experiences, we find it hard to go beyond dualities. Because the life is so cold and hard. Even the scientific insights of modern physics can have similar paradoxes here. The ordinary people who live in a brutal and solid world of endless binaries cannot accept the claim of the illusionary nature of solidity of matter. Michael Brooks in his book *The Big Questions; Physics* points out this difficulty :

"...But what you sense as the mass of the diamond is actually the result of a shifting, shimmering energy field that creates the weight of the quarks that make up the protons and neutrons in the nucleus of each carbon atom. In a sense, that diamond, that most solid of objects, does not have a permanent existence at all. As it rests on your hand, all that is happening is that a continuum of energy fluctuations are manifesting as solidity." (54) Elsewhere he describes solidity as 'the most convincing illusion you will ever experience' (56).

The Vedantic quest of Kunjunni is fulfilled by the insights he gets through his painful experiences. The novelist beautifully recreates the Vysasa-Suka episode in the novel in his enchanting language. The writer evokes the story of Suka, the son of Vyasa who, attained Samadhi in the fire of knowledge.

"In quest of ultimate wisdom, Suka came to King Janaka's palace. Seeing the lustrous celibate, Janaka was filled with love. The king went to Vyasa and said, 'If your son gains this last wisdom,

he will leave his body.”

Vyasa said, 'I have no right to stop my son.'

Then, as Brahman wills.' Janaka imparted the final wisdom to Suka. Suka blazed in its ecstasy, he abandoned the mortal coil, and was one with the primordial elements.

Great Vyasa, the sage, was a grieving father again. A father's simple, profound sorrow returned to him. He wandered through the elements in search of Suka.”(453)

Kunjunni is troubled by his feeling of estrangement with his daughter even for a moment due to false sense of pride. When he confides in his childhood friend Colonel Balakrishnan, now Swami Nirmalananda, the confessional statement made by Sivani becomes an ocean—an ocean of compassion and motherhood with sorrowing waves. Kunjunni asks Balakrishnan to initiate him into *sanyasa*. He can now transcend his ego and realize the spiritual significance of his inner dialogue with Kalyani.

Balakrishnan asks Kunjunni :

“Unni, are you not seeking a Guru?

I am.

Look, here is your Guru...”(453)

Here the Guru becomes not just a human person, but the graceful manifold presence of Brahman.

In a disembodied voice, Kalyani asks :

“Father, are you grieving?”

“I am, my daughter.”

‘Didn’t your Parikshit teach you about the eternity of life?’

‘He did.’ ‘Wasn't it only in this life that I was not born your child? Look back. Don't you remember? I was Suka and you were Vyasa, father.’”(453)

Here Kalyani alludes to Kunjunni’s pet cat who is dead and named after the puranic king Parikshit whose mortal fear of impeding death was assuaged by listening to the Bhagavata Purana. Now Kunjunni is enlightened by the vision of organic oneness of the cosmic existence. He realizes that separation from it, due to human ego, causes human sufferings. It is, thus, the advaitic philosophy that is underscored in the novel.

The novel ends with one of the most thrillingly poetical passages in literature. It sums up the theme and subtext of the novel. Kunjunni identifies Kalyani with Suka .Suka and Kalyani become one. And Kunjunni becomes another grieving Vyasa.

“On his journey back, Kunjunni, disconsolate, cried out, 'Suka! My son!’

Cosmic nature hearkened to his cry. He heard millions of leaf-voices, rivers and mountains were full of speech. Trees and plants, crystal springs and dumb stones answered reverberantly in Kalyani's

voice.

“Father! Oh, my father!” (453)

The treatment of advaita philosophy is done with incredible craftsmanship in the novel. The novel does not become preachy anywhere. On the other hand, the philosophy is woven subtly into the novel. At the end of the novel, all identities merge into a singularly unified movement, Even the dumb stone speaks in Kalyani’s voice. It is not mere intellectualization, but a transcendental vision of non-duality.

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Philo of Alexandria is a Jewish thinker who lived in Alexandria in the first half of the first century BCE. Whether he really was a philosopher is a question still debated at length. At the beginning of the Roman Empire, especially for the Stoics and the Cynics, the fundamental task of a philosopher was the construction of his own self. He did not want to get rid of logos but rather to place it clearly within the unique perspective of divine transcendence. Though he felt great admiration for Plato, his transcendence was not exactly Platonic, but rather of a God both absolutely unknowable yet very close to mankind. Nikiprowetzky (1977) inaugurated a new era in Philonian studies by affirming the centrality of the Law in the Philo's thought.