

## Translating Difference: Reflections on the Interface between Novelistic Discourse and World Literature

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**Abstract:** The present essay examines two moments from the evolution of the modern Malayalam novel, in relation to the reception of two classics in world literature, namely Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* translated into Malayalam between 1925 and 1927 and García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* translated in 1984. The translation of Hugo's novel energized the scene of Malayalam fiction by infusing new modes of representation and widening the intellectual horizons of writers in general, and novelists in particular. The echoes of *Les Misérables* could be heard in Malayalam fiction well into the 1950s. The struggles against colonial and feudal authorities in Kerala, provided a fertile context for the imaginative interpretation of Hugo's humanist vision. The paper illustrates this point through close readings of critical essays, autobiographical narratives and debates on the nature of translation. The fascination of Malayali readers with García Márquez has resulted in the translation of his entire corpus into Malayalam. Magic realism as pioneered by García Márquez liberated the Malayalam novelistic narrative from social realist and modernist dogmas. The colonial disruption of oral narratives, the consequent cultural amnesia and the struggle to reclaim one's forgotten past are themes that struck a chord in Malayalam writers of fiction. Through a detailed discussion of the novel, *Moustache* by S. Hareesh, the interface between novelistic discourse and world literature is mapped in the latter part of the essay.

**Keywords:** Malayalam literature, translation, difference, world literature, magic realism, caste, resistance

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In the realm of culture, outsidership is a most powerful factor in understanding. It is only in the eyes of *another* culture that foreign culture reveals itself fully and profoundly.

—Mikhail Bakhtin (emphasis original)

What does a literary work “say”? What does it communicate? It “tells” very little to those who understand it. Its essential quality is not statement or the “imparting of information.”

—Walter Benjamin

## 1

Translation is concerned with limits: the limits of language, knowledge, and imagination. Though languages are asymmetrically related in terms of historical development, power relations, and symbolic capital, difference is the site where languages meet and negotiate their reciprocity, mutuality, and incommensurability. Translation facilitates reception of new tropes, symbolic forms, and narrative modes, disrupting the prevailing conventions of representation and aesthetics. All this is made possible by the ability of translation to negotiate difference.

The present paper examines two moments from the evolution of the modern Malayalam novel, with reference to its history of translation. The translation of Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* into Malayalam, between 1925 and 1927, in retrospect, can be seen as a moment of rupture in the literary imagination of the Malayalam-speaking people, altering the templates of narrative to accommodate a cosmopolitan vision of history and society. With the unprecedented popularity of the monumental translation of *Les Misérables*, “world literature” was incorporated into the evaluative vocabulary of Malayalam, providing a critical perspective on the ideological function of literature in society. The translation of Hugo’s novel into Malayalam will be juxtaposed in the latter part of the paper with an analysis of the English translation of *Meesha* by S. Hareesh, a Malayalam novel translated as *Moustache* by Jayashree Kalathil in 2020. *Meesha* has become a contemporary Indian classic for its innovative narrative style and complex treatment of the oppressive nature of caste. At a deeper level, it is fiction about writing fiction and the power of fiction to transform reality. The novel revisits the 1920s when *Les Misérables* made waves in Keralan society. By invoking the tragic social divisions prevailing in Kerala during the reception of *Les Misérables*, the novel contests the Eurocentric role of “world literature” and its anthropocentric world-views.

The rise of Malayalam as a literary language happened during the time of political turbulence between 1650 and 1750, when the Portuguese and the Dutch were engaged in a tussle for the control of the Western coast of India. The Arabs had a strong presence in Kerala from the beginning of the Christian Era, since they had traded in spices with the kings of Calicut. As the European powers made their entry across the Western coast, the Arabs lost their dominance. By 1660, the Dutch had wrested power from the Portuguese, to be soon displaced by the British. By 1805, the British were firmly in saddle in Kerala, and gradually they brought the people under the control of an elaborate civil and criminal administration. The missionaries and the colonial administration collaborated on the reformist project of “civilizing the natives.” The advent of print and the setting up of English-medium schools were followed by the translation of the New

Testament (1829) and the publication of Malayalam-English and English-Malayalam dictionaries (1849). The emergence of prose-centric genres such as novel, short story, autobiography, lyric, and essay constituted a new readership whose horizon of expectations now widened to accommodate books in translation. Shakespeare's plays such as *The Comedy of Errors* and *The Taming of the Shrew* and prose works such as *Pilgrim's Progress* were translated into Malayalam in the latter part of the 19th century. Translation is a trope that helps us locate the nature of cultural exchange and dialogue during the colonial period.

In his essay, "The Language of Command and the Command of Language," Bernard S. Cohn has shown how the production of knowledge about India converted "Indian forms of knowledge into European objects" (21). The codification of India into colonial epistemological forms happened through selective forms of translation which erased "difference" as a marker of cultural and linguistic diversity. The ideological thrust of colonial control was the integration and homogenization of India. Tejaswini Niranjana has argued that the colonial forms of knowledge were deeply implicated in "strategies of containment" which perpetuated colonial domination in different kinds of discourses such as "philosophy, historiography, education, missionary writings, travel writing" (3). Thus, translation becomes a site of domesticating difference.

This is reflected in the missionary novels in Malayalam. Two examples will help us grasp their ideological thrust: the Malayalam translation of the Bengali novel *Phulmoni o Korunar Bibaran* (*The History of Phulmoni and Karuna*, 1852), written by Catherine Hannah Mullens, and *The Slayer Slain* (1858) written by Mrs. Frances Collins in English, and subsequently translated into Malayalam as *Ghatakavadham* (1871) by her husband. Both regard the novelistic narrative as a medium for evangelical moralizing. The sociological significance of these novels in the context of largescale conversion of members of the lower castes into Christianity, however, needs to be acknowledged. It was through the tireless efforts of the Christian missionaries that slavery was banned in Kerala. Conversion to Christianity became the only way of escaping the dehumanizing conditions of caste discrimination in a feudal society which was hierarchically organized around the caste structure. As the 19th century drew to a close, a new middle class gained visibility and power. The contradictions between their social aspirations and the political control of the colonial power structure resulted in a new set of social imaginaries. The rise of the social novel in the 1890s has to be understood in this context.

The breakthrough in the novelistic genre comes with the publication of *Indulekha* (1889) by O. Chandu Menon. Acclaimed as a literary classic, its complex negotiation of colonial modernity sets it apart from the earlier novels. Characters come alive on the page through nuanced portrayals, and the undercurrent of irony and humor adds a critical edge to the narrative of confrontations between tradition and modernity. Indulekha's ability to stand her ground against patriarchy, challenge customs and conventions, and articulate her position with clarity and conviction suggest that colonial modernity is being critically molded into a multivalent force shaping the content of everyday social life. The narrative of the novel embodies this social change by enacting a series of shifts: from a matrilineal joint family to a nuclear family, from a patriarchal feudal system to

a capitalist order (with its accent on individualism), and from a neo-classical Sanskrit-centered literary culture to a prose-centric, English-dominated literary domain aligned with the emergent public sphere. As a novel, *Indulekha* negotiates the content and form of modernity with a sense of ambivalence and caution. In its 18th chapter, we come across a long discussion on issues such as the importance of English, the need for political freedom, modern education, and the comparative merits of Hinduism and Christianity, while advocating the case for modernity in all walks of life. In the course of the debate, repeated references to Charles Darwin, Thomas Henry Huxley, Charles Bradlow, and Herbert Spenser demonstrate how the Enlightenment ideas of rationality are being translated and interpreted for the indigenous readership in the novelistic discourse. This dialogue is an instance of translation's teleology operating through the narrative structure of the novel. There are elements of the pre-colonial world which continue to shape the trajectory of modernity, particularly in the context of gender. The subject of modernity exists in a translational zone where the precolonial and the colonial contest as well as constitute each other.

By the turn of the 20th century, the novelistic tradition that began with the publication of *Indulekha* in 1889 loses its indigenous resources to renew itself. The social novel of the 19th century finds itself out of tune with the emergent reality of the 20th century. One reason the novel had failed to renew itself at this time in Malayalam was that Kerala did not witness any major socio-political movements in the period between 1890 and 1910, unlike in other parts of India. The stalemate in society prevented the novel from inventing itself. Franco Moretti, in his study of the English novel between 1700 and 1900, remarks:

For every genre comes a moment when its inner form can no longer represent the most significant aspects of contemporary reality [...]: at which point, either the genre loses its form under the impact of reality, thereby disintegrating, or it betrays reality in the name of form, becoming in Shklovsky's words, a "dull epigone." (63)

The inability to reimagine the novelistic form has aesthetic and artistic reasons as well. The novel needs new chronotopes and modes of representation to reimagine its formal features when it confronts a new socio-political reality. They can only come from outside. Bakhtin offers a valuable insight in his observation about the significance of "outsideness" in matters of culture: "In the realm of culture, outsideness is a most powerful factor in understanding. [...] A meaning only reveals its depths once it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning" (7). The critical gaze that altered the templates of the novelistic imagination in Malayalam during this crucial period was provided by the translation of *Les Misérables* by Nalapat Narayana Menon under the title *Pavangal*, which literally means "The Poor Folk." *Pavangal* was a monumental work, issued in three volumes, running to 2478 pages, between 1925 and 1927. The translation was based on Isabel Hapgood's English translation which Narayana Menon considered closest to the original.

The appearance of Narayana Menon's translation coincides with a period of decolonization of

translation in the wake of the nationalist freedom struggle. A major literary critic of the times, A. Balakrishna Pillai, who edited the journal *Kesari*, was instrumental in redefining the literary taste of Malayali readers during this period. He initiated a new phase of translations of creative works from languages like French, German, Italian, Spanish, and Russian. He found the French novel more complex in its vision and style and also more insightful of life and society than the English novel. He remarks that it is “the French and Russian approach to the novel that the Japanese tradition of novel writing has been following” while “the Malayalam novel, still in its infancy, is geared to the model provided by English” (qtd. in Raveendran 93). Among the authors who were translated into Malayalam during this era are Honoré de Balzac, Stendhal (Marie-Henri Beyle), Guy de Maupassant, Anton Chekhov, Henrik Ibsen, Franz Kafka, Marcel Proust, Bertolt Brecht, and Anatole France.

Hugo’s novel enabled the Malayali reader to reimagine the function of literature in life, or more precisely the role of the novel in contemporary society. The voice of the marginalized and the downtrodden acquired prominence in the following decades as the humanist vision as interpreted by Hugo shaped the social vision of a new generation of writers. Among them were prominent novelists of mid-20th century Malayalam, such as Vaikom Muhammed Basheer, Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, Keshav Dev, and Uroob. These words of Hugo addressed to his Italian publisher were repeatedly cited by critics in Malayalam, to convey his universal vision:

The sores of the human race, those great sores which cover the globe, do not halt at the red or blue lines traced on the map. In every place where man is ignorant and despairing, in every place where woman is sold for bread, wherever the child suffers for lack of the book which should instruct him and of the hearth which should warm him, the book of *Les Misérables* knocks at the door and says: “Open to me, I come for you.” (Hapgood)

Kuttippuzha Krishna Pillai, a contemporary critic remarked that “it was not a mere book, but a whole library,” and added:

This novel is not meant for those who seek pleasure from reading [...] Here we can see the darkness that rises from the divisions of nation, language and custom, and also the vision of light that transcends these divisive forces that segregate human beings. This novel has portrayed in detail the human and divine sides of life in such a way that it lays bare the passivity and delusion of the mind, along with the awareness and enlightenment of the soul. This is how the novel fulfills the supreme ideals of literature. (121)

The impact of *Les Misérables* was twofold: it made available to the Malayali reader a cosmopolitan perspective of human history through the medium of “world literature.” Secondly, it expanded the scope and scale of the fictional world beyond its provincial and domestic setting, widening its thematic repertoire by incorporating the larger questions of historical change and

revolutionary upheavals in search of freedom, social justice, and human dignity. The Malayalam novel would not remain the same after the publication of this translation; it marked a rupture in Malayali sensibility, altering its taste and temperament. M. Mukundan, a reputed contemporary Malayalam novelist whose command of French is as good as that of his mother tongue, writes in his preface to a new edition of Narayana Menon's translation: "The humanism, sense of justice and compassion that overflow in the novel overcome all its artistic limitations, and transform *Les Misérables* into a classic for all times" (xii).

Umberto Eco, while speaking of Hugo's last novel, *Ninety-Three*, suggests that it is about excesses: "What style could he adopt to tell of one, of many excesses? An excessive style" (280). This is true of *Les Misérables* as well. Hugo probed the deeper forces that shaped the historical currents. The novel is replete with chance incidents and unexpected turns of events. An impersonal destiny appears to be at work, using human beings to enforce its will. The barricades and the sewers become the setting for unexpected turns of events and momentous recognitions, bearing witness to the depth of human depravity and the sublimity of human compassion. The march of history is concretized in the everyday world of the common people, with multiple temporalities co-existing in the narrative.

The reception of *Les Misérables* in Kerala was mediated by the epoch-making events of the Russian revolution of October 1917, and the stirrings of the nationalist movement in India under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. India was swept into the ferment of the anti-colonial resistance movement during the 1930s and 40s. The rise of social realist fiction in Indian languages during this period owes its impulse to the founding of the Progressive Literary Association, which galvanized the popular anguish against the oppressive apparatus of colonialism, the exploitative regime of feudalism, and the regimentation of society along the lines of caste and gender. All this had a bearing on the reception of *Les Misérables* in Malayalam.

Hugo wrote the first version of *Les Misérables* in Paris between 1845 and 1848. He revised the entire manuscript and rewrote it between 1860 and 1862 when he lived in exile on Guernsey. The difference between the two versions, according to Mario Vargas Llosa, is "political, in that it shows the evolution of Hugo from a constitutional, liberal monarchist to a republican with radical and social-minded leanings" (12). Hugo's voice could be heard through the young Marius and the revised version glorifies the rebels killed on the barricade in Paris. Narayana Menon's translation of *Les Misérables* spoke to a generation of youth who found the republican ideas emancipatory. The monumental scale on which the narrative was conceived, with its digressions, diversions, reflections, and meditations, communicated the birth-pangs of a new society founded on social justice and love.

In his monograph on Narayana Menon, while discussing the reception of *Pavangal*, S. K. Vasanthan remarks that the conflict between the monarchists and the republicans had its echoes in the contemporary society of Kerala:

In *Pavangal*, those who support the Emperor like Gillenormand, and those who participate

in the revolutionary battle like Marius, are portrayed in detail. Though they belong to another nation and language, similar family conflicts between the older and the younger generations were a reality in Kerala. This partly explains the popular appeal of the novel among the readers in Kerala. (77)

While commenting on his indebtedness to Hugo, the well-known social reformist and writer V. T. Bhattathirippad wrote:

All that I learnt about literature has come from my repeated readings of Narayana Menon's translation. It inspires us to delve into the depths of the human mind and probe the turbulence and the agitation going on there. Amidst the blood-soaked darkness of violent wars and transitions of power, it reveals the bright sunshine of the human soul and lightning brilliance of truth. (9)

N. S. Madhavan, a well-known contemporary fictionist, describes Narayana Menon's translation of Hugo's novel as the first modern Malayalam novel and comments that there is none in Malayalam letters "who has not imitated, or has not been affected by this work" (71).

As translator, Narayana Menon adopted the method of literal translation while rendering Hugo into Malayalam. The comparative merits of "literal" and "free" translation were extensively debated in Malayalam in the wake of the translation's popularity. Kuttippuzha Krishna Pillai, the critic cited above, felt that the literal translation of *Les Misérables* greatly enriched Malayalam. He comments: "Since Malayalam lacks the vocabulary to convey complex ideas in all their subtlety, literal translation appears the right choice" (135–136). Another contemporary critic of repute, Kuttikrishna Marar published a defense of literal translation where he argued that translators have to convey the spirit of a work of art, and this is best served by literal translation, which should not be mistaken for "word by word translation." A great work of art will be universal and local at the same time, and no translator can exhaustively communicate the deeper meanings of a text rooted in its own culture. The function of a "literal" translator is to capture in words the universality of the text (33). Marar, who was close to Narayana Menon, obviously had his translation of *Les Misérables* in mind, while emphatically defending the merits of "literal" translation.

Martin Heidegger, in his essay "The Ways to Language" makes a distinction between "saying" and "speaking": "One can speak, speak endlessly, and it may all say nothing. As opposed to that, one can be silent, not speak at all, and in not speaking say a great deal" (294). Walter Benjamin seems to echo Heidegger's words when he says, "For what does a literary work 'say'? What does it communicate? [...] Its essential quality is not communication or the imparting of information" (253). Here is the essential paradox of translation as a creative process: that which is untranslatable alone can be translated. For Benjamin, translation is the site where the historical processes of literary and social formations become visible. Benjamin views translation as a "form" suggesting that it exists as an autonomous text. This means that "translatability is an essential quality of

certain works” (254). Benjamin further comments that “it means that a specific significance inherent in the original manifests itself in its translatability” (254). What comes through in the process of translation is “the innermost relationship of languages to one another” (255). The political subtexts of the translated *Les Misérables* speak to the lived reality of the speech community with its separate history and collective memories. Translation enacts becoming another as it unfolds its potential in another language and culture.

Narayana Menon was clear about the significance of Hugo’s *Les Misérables* for Malayalam. He grasped that the novel exceeded its story, plot, or treatment of history. What the novel says lies beyond its “translatable” surface. Benjamin uses the metaphor of the putting together the broken pieces of a vase to suggest how translation works:

In the same way, a translation instead of imitating the sense of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original’s way of meaning, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel. (260)

Literal translation incorporates the original’s way of signification, thus foreignizing the language of translation. The translation of *Les Misérables* did not leave Malayalam where it found it.

There is a passage in the third section of the seventh book, titled “The Champmathieu Affair,” which describes Jean Valjean’s mental state when he comes to know that an innocent man called Champmathieu has been charged with the crime he (Jean Valjean) had committed. An entire chapter titled “A Tempest inside the Skull” deals with the turmoil that rages in the mind of Jean Valjean. This particular passage given below captures the anguish and rage of Jean Valjean, who now sees his past catching up with him after reaching the pinnacle of success. The tone of this passage is reflective and meditative. It encapsulates the larger humanistic vision that the novel as a whole projects:

To make the poem of the human conscience, were it not only with a single man, were it only with the basest of men, would be to blend all epics into one superior and definitive epic. Conscience is the chaos of chimeras, of lusts, and of temptations; the furnace of dreams; the lair of ideas of which we are ashamed; it is the pandemonium of sophisms; it is the battlefield of passions. Penetrate, at certain hours, past the livid face of a human being who is engaged in reflection, and look behind, gaze into that soul, gaze into the obscurity. There, beneath the external silence, battles of giants, like those recorded in Homer, are in progress; skirmishes of dragons and hydras and swarms of phantoms, as in Milton; visionary circles as in Dante. What a solemn thing is this infinity which every man bears within him, and which he measures with despair against the caprices of his brain and the actions of his life. (Hapgood)



In the original, this forms an intertext which rises above the narrative of the story, constituting a moment of philosophical reflection. In translating this passage, Narayana Menon communicates something more significant than the context demands. The perception of man as an immense expanse of possibilities, constantly in the act of becoming, where the dividing line between the demonic and the divine cannot be absolutely demarcated, opens to the turbulent political context of Kerala of the early 20th century. Humanism is a defining force in the reformist and poetic discourses of the times, as evidenced by the works of Narayana Guru (1856–1928), the philosopher-poet, and Kumaran Asan (1873–1924), the first major modern poet of Malayalam. The words used in the translation carry unusual resonance as they speak to the native contexts of cultural and political turbulence. For instance, the word he chooses for “conscience” is *antakaranam* which in Malayalam would suggest “the inner self.” For words like “furnace,” “lair,” and “livid” he chooses words of Dravidian origin though words of Sanskrit origin are easily available. He is aware of the emotional charge the words of Dravidian origin carry in Malayalam. The choice of the word *antakaranam* in Malayalam carries many echoes as it was in circulation in the debates on reformist ideas about modernity. This word was central to the works of Guru and Asan. Udaya Kumar in his study of Asan comments that *antakaranam* is used by the latter as “part of a field of words denoting personal interiority” and “these words are deployed in a variety of senses, ranging from the flux of thought and the turbulence of emotions to the locus of inner reflection” (114). Narayana Menon’s literal translation has the ability to suggest a process of individuation in the modern subject in Malayalam.

In translating the word “transfiguration,” which Hugo/Hapgood uses to signify the mental transformation of Jean Valjean, Narayana Menon coins a new word which combines “soul” and “formation.” This coinage conveys the effect of Jean Valjean becoming a new human being. What Narayana Menon’s translation made available to the Malayalam language was the semiotics of “soul-formation.” The word points to the process of “becoming the other” by embodying “difference.” Narayana Menon’s translation enacts this process through its literal rendering of the original.

## 2

Literary forms are implicated in social formations. We have seen above how the cosmopolitan discourse of “world literature” played an enabling role in constituting the modern subject of Kerala. The novel has periodically reinvented itself in the last hundred years of Kerala history, alongside the twists and turns of socio-political transformation. Here we shall examine a novel by S. Hareesh titled *Meesha* which was translated into English as *Moustache* by Jayasree Kalathil. The novel’s use of magic realism to invoke the multilayered history of a village marks a stage of self-criticism in the evolution of novelistic discourse in Malayalam.

In her translator’s note to the novel, Kalathil describes *Moustache* as “a tale of magic, myth

and metaphor” in which Hareesh’s use of “magic realism reflects the land itself, and the lives built and rebuilt on the land” (xviii). Like Hugo in the 1920s, García Márquez became a pivotal figure in Malayalam towards the end of the 20th century. *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, which was translated into Malayalam in 1984, has remained a best-seller ever since. All the major works of Márquez have been translated into Malayalam. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* came as a revelation to the young writers of the 1990s, as it showed a radically new way of relating to the past of the colonized nation. As we enter the cycles of stories relating to the Buendía family in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, running into generations, we witness the saga of the family and the village, Macondo, merge into the history of the continent. García Márquez reinvented the act of storytelling by returning to the layered oral narratives of his native land. The theme of “solitude” that runs through Latin American literature, has its origin in the alienation of the land and its people during the long period of violation and subjugation in the hands of European masters. García Márquez provided an anchoring vision to decolonize the novelistic discourse for a new generation of readers. Once again, through the enabling role of “world literature,” Malayalam reinvents its narrative potential. The identities which exist in the repressed unconscious of the community are retrieved through the agency of translation.

*Moustache* is set in Kuttanad, which lies below sea-level, on the south-west coast of Kerala. The novel weaves the story of the land and its people into a complex narrative of multiple dimensions. The central character of the novel is Vavachan, a *pulayan* (lower-caste man) converted to Christianity. He happens to play the role of a policeman in a play presented by a wandering drama troupe in the village, where no such dramatic event has ever happened. Vavachan is given the role as the original actor does not turn up. He is chosen for his thick facial hair and dark skin, which together give him a fearsome appearance, appropriate for his role of the policeman in the play. He appears only twice in the play, and hardly speaks except for a guttural “Da” on his second appearance.

On stage, Vavachan is transformed into an otherworldly figure, instilling terror in the minds of the audience. All their collective memories of demons, spirits, and ghosts are projected onto the ten-headed Ravana-like figure before them, the multiple lamps casting his huge shadows across the back curtain. The narrative of the play is derailed by his larger-than-life appearance. On his second appearance, things get even worse:

A wave of absolute horror washed over the audience. Those who sat in the front rows fled [...] In the confusion, no one waited to see the last scene, or to find how the story ended. They ran all the way home with the sense of satisfaction of having seen the formidable pox-marked Goddess Kali in battle with the warrior Darikan in a performance of Mudi yettu. (Kalathil 37)

Obviously, for the people watching the play, the scene provides a moment of encounter with their own sense of insecurities and anxieties, as they live on the margins of a hierarchical society divided along caste lines.

After the play, Vavachan refuses to shave off the moustache and this precipitates an intriguing situation where he ends up leading a double life: as a man of supernatural powers in the popular imagination and as a starving destitute Dalit, constantly on the run, in real life. Here it may be recalled that in many parts of India, a moustache is a sign of aggressive masculinity and virility, and members of the lower castes are not allowed to keep a moustache. As recently as two years ago, there have been incidents of attacks on members of the lower caste for keeping a moustache. S. Hareesh's novel revisits the 1920s in Kerala, when lower castes lived on the fringe of society, condemned to physical abuse and starvation. Hence Vavachan's decision not to shave off his moustache challenged the prevailing power structure of caste affiliations. In the novel, Vavachan's life becomes the unending flight of a fugitive to escape from the hunting teams of upper caste men, supported by the police and the muscle men of the landlords.

Despite his reputation of being an awe-inspiring figure, he has no access to work or food. The novel describes harrowing and traumatic tales of caste violence—lynching, rapes, burning down of entire lower caste settlements. Vavachan and his father, Paviyan, escape attempts on their lives because they know the lay of the land, which is a maze of fields, canals, and narrow water-ways. The land here changes its appearance all the time, and one can lose one's way as it turns into a trap before your eyes without your knowing. Every house has fatal memories of encounters with crocodiles or poisonous fish.

Members of the Pulaya caste have mastered the art of survival through their long history of battles with the land and water. At one point, Paviyan sees a huge crocodile trapped in a thorny bush and listens to the crocodile's appeal to him. He cuts the branches and releases the crocodile. Soon he is seen riding the crocodile, along the canals, to the consternation of the boatmen passing by. The narrative abounds in such scenes of magic realism, where the animals and spirits manifest in real life in many shapes.

Lower caste men and women speak to the land and its animals as they share a common destiny. Their stories are embedded in the stories of crocodiles and fish. Storytelling comes naturally to them, as the act of telling stories is a way of sharing one's local knowledge which carries the clues for survival.

The digressive narrative incorporates the sprawling rhythm of the flora, fauna, and humans into a complex network of relationships. The novelist names the land in all its plurality. In the chapter "Snakes," he names the varieties of snakes that come floating along the waters during the great deluge. This chapter is set against the great deluge of 1924 when half of Kerala was submerged underwater after incessant rains for three weeks. Vavachan sleeps through most of the rain. When he wakes up, he finds himself surrounded by snakes of all shapes and colors that have floated down from the forests of the mountains. The translator comments:

The novel is as much the story of Vavachan/Moustache and the other inhabitants of this area as it is of its environment and biodiversity, its water, fish, birds, snakes, crocodiles, paddy, coconut, banana and tapioca. Hareesh's use of magic realism reflects the land itself,

and the lives built and rebuilt on the land [...] But Hareesh takes us to its underbelly, where hunger pervades, where oppression renews and rebuilds like the land itself after the floods. As Vavachan and his pursuers navigate its intricate waterscape, what emerges forcefully in this tale of magic, myth and metaphor is how the story of human beings' relationship with land has been fundamentally defined in terms of caste and gender. (xviii)

The novel reveals a liminal world, where land and water, human beings and animals, the living and the dead, the visible and the invisible, are constantly in communion.

In the popular stories that circulate about Vavachan, he assumes many names and dies many times, he waylays boats to steal their goods, he does impossible feats of superhuman strength, and women lust for his virile body. As the stories multiply, the real life of Vavachan becomes immaterial. The novel is about the way fiction is woven into the reality of our lives. People trapped in their impossible lives with no exit need fictions to reimagine a life of possibilities and alternatives. Vavachan provides them such an exit from their wretched lives, by opening up infinite possibilities of fictional metamorphosis. The novelist writes:

Each of us is made of the stories that are told of us. If we look carefully, we can see a train of murmuring stories following each person like a royal mantle follows an advancing king. Some people are not flesh and blood, but fully made up of stories. What is there to do when such a person—Moustache, for example—is killed off in stories? (215)

One can see the stamp of García Márquez in the metafictional elements in the novel. Vavachan keeps incarnating into many figures and forms in the collective memories preserved in the community. The oral culture has no closure, and can accommodate contradictions and paradoxes. The metafictional mode of “magic, myth and metaphor” is inherent in the orality of everyday living where stories change their outlines as they are narrated.

In the chapter “The Last Crocodile,” the history of crocodiles' co-habitation with human beings is mentioned. For centuries, crocodiles had ignored the black-skinned humans as they had enough to eat, and lived happily. The downfall of crocodiles began when an English man called Baker Saheb, who was born and brought up in Kumarakam, part of Kuttanad, set out on a mission to exterminate the crocodiles from Kuttanad. Earlier, another English man who was called Preacher Saheb had lived in the same area, observing and documenting the animals and birds. He had been the local correspondent of the *National Geographic Magazine* for which he took rare photographs of the local flora and fauna. However, the other Baker, known as Kariyil Saheb, was a sworn enemy of the crocodiles. There was an eighteen-foot muggler of a crocodile, known as the Kariyaat crocodile, who could swallow a person whole without cutting him to pieces. He was fond of eating women and that proved his undoing. The golden ornaments in his belly attracted lightning during the great deluge when ferocious lightning ravaged the land and water. By then, Baker Saheb had become addicted to killing crocodiles; the death struggle of dying crocodiles

drove him into raptures. In the massive hunt that was now undertaken with the support of the government, crocodiles were killed off in hundreds. When the race of crocodiles was finally wiped out, Baker Saheb began to suffer from nightmares “in which he choked on tough crocodile meat” (268). The lake was now motionless with no waves or tides, “quiet like a household where all children were dead” (268). This is a telling image that has resonance beyond its context.

But the last crocodile was waiting for his chance to pounce upon Baker Saheb. Along with its mate, the last crocodile stayed deep in the waters, without showing up anywhere near human habitation. His mate did not listen to his advice, and killed a laborer. Soon the people in the area hunted down her and her young hatchlings. Baker Saheb now took Moustache with him in his final pursuit of the last crocodile. Moustache knew that the eyes and the part under the throat were the most vulnerable parts in a crocodile’s body. He overpowered the crocodile without much difficulty by hitting those spots. It appears that the last crocodile yielded to Moustache, as he remembered one of his ancestors who was close to humans. Kariyil Saheb killed the crocodile by shooting it in the head after dragging him onto the land. Now that there were no crocodiles to hunt, he was out hunting birds with Moustache. As he picked up the fallen birds, Moustache felt a bullet coming for him. He dove into the lake and swam away to safety. In the folk tales about Moustache, there was mention of Baker Saheb’s wife falling for the charm of Moustache. Once the last crocodile was gone, Moustache—who belonged to water and land, like the crocodile—would not survive for long. The logic of the gun turns toward him.

*Les Misérables* was the story of a fugitive who lived an epic life through one of the most eventful periods of world history. Its translation from the world language of English into the vernacular Malayalam helped forge a cosmopolitan discourse rooted in humanism at a crucial moment in the evolution of the modern subject in Malayalam. This modern subject was founded on the infinite possibilities of the human world. The novel *Moustache* by Hareesh is about another fugitive, Vavachan, who is an alienated outcaste from the land of his own birth. He is reborn as a mythical figure through his chance appearance on stage in a play. The creation of such a masculinist fantasy is rooted in an anthropocentric vision of the world. In the episode of the last crocodile which we discussed above, the triumphalist view of a male-centered world is subjected to critique. The use of the word “moustache” in the title is ironic, as the novel brings out the dark underbelly of such masculinist notions of power. The lower castes have mastery in weaving fictional narratives and that is how they resist the reality of their oppression.

Both Vavachan, the lower caste figure, and the last crocodile share a destiny which is entangled with the land of their birth. The white man’s gun disrupts their natural habitat and its rhythm of life and death. The larger project of modernity which confines the domain of the human to that of instrumental rationality, will not allow them to survive together, as the animal is seen as the other of the human. This also makes the idea of the human complicit with the will to control the other and domesticate difference. In that sense, *Moustache* locates the repressed other of the humanist project in the outcaste figure of Vavachan. The magical realist narrative pioneered by García Márquez proves liberating in this context.

The last crocodile captures the liminal moment where the human and the animal merge into each other. In their essay “Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible,” Deleuze and Guattari remark that in “Becoming-Animal” what is real is “the becoming itself,” and “not the supposedly fixed terms through which that which becomes passes” (278). They point out that there is an entire politics of becoming-animal which is elaborated in assemblages that “express minoritarian groups, or groups that are oppressed, prohibited, in revolt, or always on the fringe of recognized institutions, groups all the more secret for being extrinsic, in other words, being anomic” (288). Vavachan’s minoritarian location helps him take on a political identity. He occupies the liminal space of the repressed other of the prevailing power structure. Vavachan merges into the threatened eco-system and the endangered marginalized community of people, when he becomes one with the last crocodile.

The moment of translation of a novel like *Moustache* into English marks a self-critical moment of writing-back to the grand narrative of humanism. The novel as a literary genre will have to reinvent itself as it enters the post-human age, where the primacy of the human is contested. *Moustache* gestures towards that possibility as its digressive narrative meanders through the collective unconscious of a community caught in self-threatening violence.

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