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The Grace of the Quotidian: Banality as Resource and Resistance in *The Infinity of Grace*

Bijo N Mathew[1] & Dr. K.M. Johnson[2]

[1]*Assistant Professor, Department of English & Centre for Research, Sacred Heart College (A) Thevara, Kerala*
[2]*Principal (Retired), Bharata Mata College, Ernakulam, Kerala*

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Abstract

Postcolonial literature was a pathbreaking literary genre as it helped undermine many of the universalist claims which Eurocentric discourses came up with. Rather than seeking validation from European literary models, it attempted to forge a form and theme of its own. Thus, it endeavoured to be counter cultural. Within the larger arena of Postcolonial literature, attempts have been made by several writers to embrace the sensibility of Avant-Gardism. While most postcolonial fiction overtly concerned itself with action and spectacle, energised by the anticolonial struggles and the decolonising mission which were underway, writers like O.V. Vijayan maintained a distance from such influences and introduced a novel aesthetic of banality in fiction. Banality and quotidian particularities, which are believed to breed boredom, have been extensively employed by these writers in their literary compositions. This paper seeks to investigate how banality and the minutiae of daily life, rather than forming boredom in the mind of the readers, energise the narrative in The Infinity of Grace.

Keywords: postcolonial, banality, boredom, Guru, historicity

Postcolonial literature emerged as a significant literary genre during the mid twentieth century, owing mostly to the anticolonial struggles and the decolonising mission undertaken by nations yoked to colonialism. When colonised nations began to 'write back to the empire', shockwaves of anticolonialism were sent through the very fabric of European colonial enterprise. The universalist claims made by Eurocentric discourses and the stereotyped images fashioned of the 'Orient' were taken up as major literary as well as critical concerns of postcolonial literature. Such an attempt, helped undermine the legitimacy granted to everything Eurocentric. Postcolonial literature, thus, transmuted itself into a countercultural as well as resistance literature.

In the periphery of the colonial empire, every colonial subject encounters an excruciating experience of banality and boredom. The essential sameness and barrenness of daily life in the margins of the empire, far removed from the metropolitan centre, becomes the breeding ground for this experience. When the periphery is juxtaposed with the metropolis, the colonial subject recognises the banality of his existence, as the centre for him seems to be one teeming with life and energy and the dwellers there have access to the fullness of life. Grand and spectacular events which are believed to be antidotes to boredom, according to the colonial subject, are the legacy of the metropolis. Constant disappointment consequent upon a colonial subject's intense yearning for the exciting life of the

metropolis and the banality of life which greets him each day, further plunges him into this state of boredom. According to Roland Barthes, "Boredom is not far from bliss: it is bliss seen from the shores of pleasure" (26).

The relationship between banality and literature has been conceived as adversarial and oppositional. Unlike feelings of pity, fear or anger, the experience of banality is non-cathartic as it does not lead to purgation and is conceived as a negative aesthetic. Moreover, banality, when employed extensively in literary works, incapacitates any kind of transcendence and drowns the reader in boredom. Since literature has the professed project of transcending banality and boredom, most writers maintain a deliberate distance from them in their process of literary compositions. This is despite the attempts made by a few writers to engage with banality and the quotidian in fiction. In most narratives, banality and quotidian particularities either forge a background or add colour to the narrative. The deployment of such details demands greater craftsmanship from the part of the writer, failing which the aesthetic charm of the work takes a heavy toll.

A relatively different approach to banality and boredom has been adopted by writers – especially postcolonial writers - who have hailed from the Indian subcontinent. While the wider spectrum of postcolonial fiction all over the world offers compelling images of spectacle and action in the form of violent outbursts, revolts, rebellions, struggles etc.; these writers sought to champion the banal and the quotidian, making it a novel aesthetic of literary modernism. Here, one comes across banality and boredom not primarily as non-cathartic affects, rather as a narrative and aesthetic impulse which fashions the narrative in fiction. Despite being a negative value, banality in the postcolonial writers from India, transforms into the kernel of fictional narratives. The relentless and interminable "play between desire and fulfilment, the imagined and real, the immediate and distant, the banal becomes a force that drives narrative" (Majumdar 12). Thus, in the Indian postcolonial writers, banality surfaces not as a matter of abjection, but one of celebration.

This paper seeks to establish, by engaging with one of the seminal works titled *The Infinity of Grace* by the renowned Malayalam writer O.V. Vijayan, "a cult figure … canonised by his admirers during his life time itself" (Mukundan 86), that a radical shift in emphasis - from the spectacular to the banal - can be traced in the literature of colonial modernity in India. The narrative in the novel is energised not by breath-taking, grand events of epic import, but rather through the banal and the pedestrian. Patricia Meyer Spacks, in her seminal work, *Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind* argues that banality and emotions such as boredom can greatly contribute to literary works and illuminate the impact of the text. The textual presence of those elements which are believed to engender monotony, "does not make a literary work itself boring: often quite the contrary" (Spacks 190). This theoretical stance finds an illustration in Vijayan's novel.

The Infinity of Grace may be deemed as a novel which preoccupies itself with the ontological and philosophical questions which have been plaguing human kind ever since its evolution. The Bangladesh War of 1971 serves as a historical background for the occurrences in the novel, while the history of Czechoslovakia and Poland gets entwined with it to formulate a historicity for the narrative. Despite such engagement with historical realities which could profusely feed the imagination of the writer to the extent of producing spectacular events in the narrative, Vijayan maintains a minimalistic aesthetic in fashioning his narrative by calling on the quotidian realities of everyday life.

The novel very closely follows the protagonist Kunjunni through his life experiences, questing for a *Guru*. It opens with the return of Kunjunni to the ancestral home of Melekkaadu family and his settlement "among the accumulated remains of extinct generations" (Vijayan 327). When the visitors and the relatives return after paying a short visit, Kunjunni feels alone and the banality of life surrounds him. This opens the floodgates of memory

within him and the readers are invited to travel alongside to distant war-torn lands and peoples.

The novel documents the subtleties of Kunjunni's spiritual odyssey through a series of quotidian experiences. During his childhood, *Guru* for him was none other than his own father. But, in the course of his life, his conceptualisation of *Guru* undergoes a sea change and finally finds its culmination in his own daughter Kalyani. Kunjunni, owing to his exposure to life's minuteness and magnitude realises that each and everything, whether animate or inanimate, carries in its fold a philosophy of life. Mani, the pet cat of Kalyani with whom Kunjunni plays, transforms into a surrogate daughter figure for him and he knows the presence of his daughter through the cat. This makes him really concerned about the cat and he reminds Shyamnandan Singh to bring "Mani's milk" (330). Later, as he enters Kalyani's room, he comes across a book with the drawing of a cat, under the table. He further wanders through the room in search of a scent, the scent of his child and the "colourful books, innocent drawings, the severed limbs of dolls" (379) all of which remind him of his child. In all these, Kunjunni has been trying to invoke in the present, the presence of his daughter who is spatially far away. Banal objects and gestures, thus happen to have profound significance in the novel.

Wars and their aftermath recur in the novel as one of the central thematic preoccupations of Vijayan. However, unlike many writers, Vijayan neither glorifies nor romanticises them. Heroism often attributed to a warrior does not receive a similar treatment in the hands of Vijayan as he reduces it to an "obscene joke" (342), through the portrayal of two characters – the pregnant wife of Gurpreet and Sahasrabuddhe's fiancée, who realise the falsity of the purported heroism of war. It is the same pacifist spirit in Vijayan which makes him introduce to the readers a character like Olga, the Czech woman who used to write about world revolution and later claims that "I have stopped writing about world revolution … I only write about handicrafts these days" (345). This clearly illustrates that Vijayan's interest lies not in grand events of historical importance, rather in the mundane realities of day-to-day life.

The Editor asks Olga if she remembers the death of Jan Masaryk, the national leader of Czechoslovakia and adds that he defecated on the sill while he was pushed from the window. According to him, this is a befitting gesture from the part of a revolutionary as leaders of revolutions and counter revolutions have nothing else to do in moments of terror. Vijayan's ideological stance against all forms of violent revolutions is evident when the Editor says, "all revolutions are excessive prices to pay. Only those who have actually paid the price, in one way or another, will understand this" (346). Two dominant rites which are inherent to every war and revolution, according to Vijayan, are rape and murder, and the same is brought under critical scrutiny through Olga's question, "will man ever be sated with these dark rites?" (349). Kunjunni responds to this by calling her attention to the ruins of war; "Look at these ruins; they are the insatiety of history. These are the ruins of many capitals, one foundation upon another" (349). Thus, the historicity of wars and revolutions is established in the novel not through overt portrayal of great conquests or spectacular episodes, instead by drawing readers' attention to the remnants of war or the minutiae of daily life.

Vijayan's propensity to uphold the quotidian is seen in his portrayal of the tragic life of his own brother Chinnettan, who was a revolutionary. Chinnettan's marriage with the "dark and strangely beautiful Neelamma" (376) who was a comrade from the scavenger class was vehemently opposed by his mother and she would not even permit her into their house as she was beneath them in class. To portray the class hierarchy and the attendant casteism in Kerala, Vijayan does not recourse to the feudal history of the state, but rather makes it palpable through the delineation of a slice of life from his own family. Chinnettan's and Neelamma's life and the untimely death which has befallen him owing to the revolutionary spirit in him "was the tangible lesson Kunjunni had learnt from the revolution" and for him it was absolutely painful to "know revolution at close

quarters, in real life" (377). Revolution, for Vijayan, is not necessarily a horrendous episode of history soaked in blood, but could even be a silent phenomenon of suffering and sacrifice. This conviction of the author is delineated when Kunjunni lashes out against Anton, the correspondent of the Soviet paper *Trud* and tells him that "your revolution is a folk-tale from long ago, our revolution is today's bloody sacrifice" (383). When Anton challenges him asking who he is to say that, Kunjunni replies, "Comrade Chinnan's younger brother" (383). Revolution, in the aesthetic landscape of the novel, thus manifests not as a spectacle or a cosmopolitan reality, but as a highly subjective experience.

Ordinary, everyday images in the novel, are often pregnant with great potential for transcendence. When Raicharan, assigned with the task of setting fire to the farmhouse of *Jothedar* Nimoy Sanyal and killing him, returns without accomplishing the task, Nripen the ideologue and faction leader of Tapaschandra asks him what happened. Raicharan replies that he has seen two cows in Nimoy Sanyal's shed and the calves drinking at their teats and "when [he] saw the milk's foam on the lips of those calves, [his] hands and legs went weak" (393). According to Vijayan, in the "convulsed Bengal of 1969, many Raicharans saw the pale foam on the mouths of calves, and were liberated" (393). Later in the small hut of Jugal, the sight of Bulu, the daughter of Jugal sleeping on the floor, clad in an old tattered sari results in tears flowing down the cheeks of Tapaschandra. "Like tides of monsoon rain, sorrow welled in Tapasa, wave upon wave, inexhaustible" (397). In another section of the novel we find Kunjunni and Kalyani stand watching the flight of white storks. The sight of the storks is epiphanic for Kunjunni and he begins to pray "O Gadadhara, my *Guru*, your storks are in the sky" (408). For him, they are the storks of Ramakrishna Paramahamsa. Kunjunni here undergoes a spiritual transcendence through the mere sighting of a phalanx of storks. These instances exemplify how the novel advocates the notion that the mundane and the ordinary can be means of spiritual transcendence and liberation.

During one of his visits to Muktidham, the *ashram* of Nirmalanandha, Kunjunni informs him that he is "sick at heart" as he finds it difficult to restrain his mind. Nirmalanandha leaves him alone by the lake and leaves for the hermitage. As he bent over the wild plants, he saw "insects, at their unceasing endeavours." He was surprised by their "flaming colours, sculptured horns and crowns." This filled his mind with curiosity; "Where did they go? Endless journeys. The burden of their shells." Then Kunjunni "sat on the earth to receive the Upanishad of the grass" (422-23). Soon he realised that the "insects were not journeying, but flying for life" (423) as they hunt one another. This microcosmic image of the fight between insects once again turns epiphanic for Kunjunni and grants him a deeper understanding and conviction regarding the reality of war and its attendant atrocities. This gives him a transcendental experience, and now the grass itself metamorphoses into a *Guru* for him and he bows to the grass, apologises to it and seeks its permission before trampling on it. Here Vijayan undermines the conventional conceptualisations regarding a *Guru* implying that some of the most banal objects can transform into agents of transcendence.

On the deathbed of Kalyani, Sivani reveals to Kunjunni that Kalyani is not his child, rather "Pinaki's daughter" (444) and this tragic realisation does not drown him in despair, though it occasions profound sorrow in him. When, through the voice of Kalyani, he realises that it is only in this life that he could not be her father and he was Vyasa and she was Janaka in their former life, he attains a kind of transcendence and comes to know about the eternity of life. As he calls out "Suka! My son", cosmic nature itself hearkens to his lament. Then "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). Here the child transforms into a *Guru* for the father, reinforcing Vijayan's endorsement of the quotidian.

Thus, a closer look at the novel reveals that it is rich in ordinary details, which do not serve an ancillary role of a background, but forms the very

kernel of the narrative. In framing his narrative Vijayan has resorted extensively to these quotidian particularities which are often deemed to be non-cathartic and here, they, instead of leading to boredom, function as a narrative impulse. Vijayan has successfully mapped out a narrative structure for the novel by deploying ordinary details pertaining to everyday life. Hence, unlike many other postcolonial novels, *The Infinity of Grace* stands as a testament to a novel aesthetic of banality and as one that resists the legacy of western literary discourses.

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