Bodhi International Journal of
Research in Humanities, Arts and Science

Vol. 10 Special Issue 1 January 2026
E-ISSN: 2456-5571

Transcending Banality: Reconfiguring Narrative Aesthetics in *The Legends of Khasak*

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

[1]Assistant Professor, Department of English and Centre for Research, Sacred Heart College (A) Kochi, Kerala

[2]Principal (Retired) Bharata Mata College, Ernakulam, Kerala

Open Access

Manuscript ID:
BIJ-SPL1-Jan26-ES-082

Subject: English

Received : 26.09.2025
Accepted : 03.01.2026
Published : 22.01.2026

DOI: 10.64938/bijsi.v10si1.26.jan082

Abstract

Postcolonial writers often maintain an incredulous and questioning stance against the grand, spectacular narratives of the Empire and hence tend to resist them. As an alternative, they seek to foreground the mundane and the banal in their works. Challenging the dominant western literary discourses that privilege spectacle and action, postcolonial writers reconfigure the ordinary and the quotidian into a narrative force. In literary compositions, quotidian particularities have been discerned widely as 'non cathartic affects' as they engender boredom in the mind of readers. But, postcolonial novelists from the Indian subcontinent, subverting the claims of Eurocentric aesthetic conventions, employ banal details in their literary compositions, with a view to capturing the lived realities of the people. Postcolonial writers' fascination for the quotidian, in turn, metamorphoses into an act of 'writing back to the centre'. The seemingly trivial, thus, assumes centrality in the works of these writers. This paper attempts to examine how The Legends of Khasak, by the renowned Malayalam novelist O. V. Vijayan, demonstrates a novel aesthetic of banality by underscoring the salience of the mundane and the banal. Foregrounding the quotidian, the novel reimagines fictional narratives both as a means of resistance and a site of innovation. The paper argues that the novel subverts readerly expectation regarding fictional narratives - that they should preoccupy themselves with spectacular events and grand episodes to be interesting - and furnishes a novel aesthetic of banality.

Keywords: postcolonial, banality, quotidian, legends, Khasak

Literary discourses have always had a fascination for the eventful. In order to satisfy the 'inquisitiveness' of the readers and to build suspense in narratives, writers often resort to spectacular events as it can easily propel the narrative towards a climax. "Events" which every reader anticipates in the perusal of a narrative, acts as conduit through which meanings get crystallised, facilitating readers' attention on the narrative and the course it takes. The ease with which writers can grab the attention of the readers makes "the eventful" one of the most preferred constituents in literary discourses. When a writer has a propensity to distance himself from spectacle and gravitates towards quotidian details in literary composition, his craftsmanship has to give a full play, as he might want to meet "readerly expectations" and arrest the attention of the readers. Such demands often trigger an urge in writers to quest for the spectacular, compromising the aesthetic charm banality affords.

Postcolonial literature, composed over time periods and across continents partakes of the legacy of championing the spectacular. Colonial invasion, anticolonial struggles, decolonising mission and the nation-building process that followed decolonisation, played a pivotal role in shaping the sensibilities of

postcolonial writers and hence the struggles and sufferings of the colonial era could never be detached from their works. Since postcolonialism, as per Homi Bhabha, has to play the role of a "witness to the uneven and unequal forces of cultural representation involved with the contest for political and social authority in the modern world order" (171), revolts, revolutions and rebellions would form part of it.

In postcolonial literary practice, depending on regional distinctiveness, writers adopt diverse, often ambivalent attitude to the portrayal of the extraordinary. While juxtaposing the rich, effervescent life in the 'Imperial Centre' with the drab and dreary life in the margins of the Empire, a realisation dawns on them; that life is capable of offering a plethora of exciting events. Such a possibility spurs them to reflect on the "mundaneness" of their life. The [post]colonial subject, they realise, in the periphery experiences a form of nothingness, which inevitably leads to boredom. The bored existence of a distraught individual is articulated by Estragon in *Waiting for Godot* when he says "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful" (43). It is the same vacuous existence, devoid of progressive elements that results in the raving, bantering and angry outbursts of the 'frustrated Messiah' – Jimmy Porter - in Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*. His 'empty life' forces him to articulate his frustration thus; "Nobody thinks, nobody cares. No beliefs, no convictions and no enthusiasm. Just another Sunday evening" (17). A similar experience is shared by people in the periphery of the Empire due to the uneventful lives they lead.

Postcolonial novelists, hailing predominantly from the Indian sub-continent seem to maintain an atypical approach to the "eventful" in their works. These writers, rather than focusing on the delineation of grand events of historical importance, channel their attention to provincializing universal experiences. Foregrounding the minutiae of daily life, they aspire to a new aesthetic in fictional narratives – an aesthetic of banality. While developing characters, especially in the bildungsroman tradition, subtleties and finer details are of utmost importance. Banality, when employed redundantly, might result in engendering boredom in the mind of the readers, suspending the possibility of aesthetic transcendence. According to Majumdar, "as a negative aesthetic, banality has an oppositional relationship with literature. The oppositionality is structured by a failure to fulfil the usual promise of literature to engage and entertain its audience" (4). Traditionally banality has been perceived as a negative aesthetic as it is disregarded as a creative force. Identifying the creative force inherent in banality, postcolonial Indian novelists have endeavoured to offer a creative aesthetic form to it in their works.

In the literary landscape of Kerala, O V Vijayan occupies a pre-eminent position as the most celebrated and widely read author. Vijayan "a skinny, emaciated old man … clad in a dhoti, with a brittle grey beard, and trembling fingers" (Mukundan 85) became a "cult figure, anonized by his admirers during his lifetime itself" (86). He rose to fame with his debut novel *Khasakkinte Itihaasam*, translated later into English as *The Legends of Khasak* which came to be considered as 'the novel of the century.'

Despite being a canonical work that revolutionised modern Indian fiction, the work does not seem to recourse to grand, spectacular events in framing the narrative. Set in Khasak, - a fictional recreation of Tasarak, a village in Palakkad - the novel revolves around the life of Ravi, a youngster plagued by the spectres of the past in which guilt, memories of dysfunctional relationship and existential angst emerge and re-emerge. Unsettling questions pertaining to life and its meaning torment his daily life in Khasak, where he teaches in a one-teacher village school. Khasak unveils itself before Ravi as a world brimming with myths, legends and folk beliefs and tales. The lives of the people in Khasak are punctuated by superstitions and are inalienably intertwined with oral traditions. In due course, Ravi begins to partake in the rhythm of life in Khasak, yet remains an outsider due to the haunting and agonising memories of the past and the unsettling questions for which he tries to seek answers. What captures readers' attention in the

novel is its engagement with the ordinary life of the people in Khasak. Overt portrayal of conflicts or spectacular events is seldom found here. Using quotidian particularities and minutiae of everyday life, O.V. Vijayan succeeds in forging an aesthetic of banality. Banality, in *The Legends of Khasak*, does not suspend the potential for aesthetic transcendence, instead energises an aesthetically compelling narrative.

The novel opens with Ravi's arrival to Koomankavu. Though, Ravi is a first-time visitor to this place, it does not seem an alien place to him. He had already seen "the benign age of the trees, their riven bark and roots arched above" (Vijayan 5) in intermittent premonitions. As Vijayan introduces Ravi for the first time, we find him alighting from the bus, clad in a saffron dhoti and this would probably carve an archetypal image of Ravi as an ascetic in readers' mind. But in due course, readers come to know him as an existentially tormented individual. Koomankavu unfurls itself before the eyes of Ravi as a place of banality. As Ravi sits on a bench in front of the shop to have sherbet, he looks around and finds that "the road ended in a circular patch of turf, encircling which stood the mounted shacks. Behind them were mud houses lost in the green of planted vegetation – pulses and plantain, and gourds which ripened on thatches" (6). The sighting of an old "phonograph with a little dog embossed on its horn" (6) opens the floodgates of memory in Ravi.

As part of preparing his dwelling place, Ravi herds away the cockroaches from the window sill and arranges his books on a newspaper there. In this scene, Vijayan provides the readers with the details of the books – *Gita*, Prince Thiruvankulam, Rilke, Muttathu Varkey, Baudelaire - with which Ravi came to Khasak and these specifics offer the readers an idea regarding the sensibility which Ravi carries. Similarly, the "framed and colourful pictures of Gandhi, Hitler and the monkey God, Hanuman" (10) with which Sivaraman Nair adorns the class room help readers understand him as a man of oddities. Subsequently, Khasak itself unfolds before Ravi as a place of oddities. When Allah-Pitcha, the Mullah makes Kunhamina promise that she would not go to the *kafir's* school, the readers have a chance to witness the idiosyncrasies in the lives of the people in Khasak. He makes her swear by the Sheikh, the Badrins, the prophet, by Mariyamma, "the Goddess of small pox, worshipped by Hindu lower castes who appeased her with toddy and obscene song" (17), by "the goddess on the tamarind branch and even by the snake-gods" (17) because he did not want to take chances. This scene throws ample light on the cultural distinctiveness of the region, which, despite its deeply-rooted religious sentiments, emerges as a secular space.

Vijayan's engagement with banality finds a beautiful illustration in the portrayal of the landscape of Khasak. It is in the dusty, barren land surrounded by hills, especially Chetali and bordered by palm trees that Ravi arrives. Moreover, Khasak is a place of dilapidated mosques. In the novel, Khasak does not emerge as an aesthetically fulfilling space; instead as one of banality and boredom. Life there is one of stagnancy and routine. That is why Ravi is apprehensive if children would "come back to dreary routine after that spell of freedom" (49) which they get during Onam holidays. The landscape of Khasak strikes a sharp contrast with the landscape of his home in the snowy valley in Ootty, situated among the coffee plants and wild flowers; and gently brushed by the breeze. "The land around the house was a generous expanse, a whole hillside …. Inside the house were sculptured wood work, carpeted flooring, hand-cut crystal, and a grand piano that had been silent for years" (77). For Ravi, it was a place of beauty and bliss.

Though the events in the novel can be traced back to the 1940s – the period of Second World War – the narrative does not digress into any of the spectacular events. To refer to the sea changes occurring worldwide, such as the birth of workers' unions, which have tolled the death knell for feudalism, Vijayan does not resort to the depiction of any of the historical events or revolutions that occurred as part of it. Instead, he parochializes it by situating his narrative in the regional landscape of Khasak. The formation of workers' union finds a

portrayal in the novel in the most customary way; "Then a small red board appeared on the door of Nizam Ali's one-room hut. Scribbled in tar across the red was this legend: *Koomankavu Beedi Workers' Union*" (28). Later we find the first procession in Koomankavu happening on twenty-first of January as part of observing the birth day of Lenin and hear slogans such as "*Inquilab-Zindabad*!" "*Anglo-American exploitation-Murdabad!*" reverberating in the air of Koomankavu (28), when Attar dismissed Nizam Ali. For Vijayan, the implications of these global phenomena in the local setting are far more important than the grandeur of revolutions.

Instead of employing aesthetically enriching images, Vijayan uses a series of banal images related to death and decay in the novel. They, while engendering repugnance in readers, help narrativize the lives of the common people. Vijayan gives the readers a glimpse into the pathetic life of Abida in which one finds her grandmother as blind and her uncle as leprous. The gruesome effects of leprosy are illustrated here, not through elaborate descriptions of them but through a single image of Abida's uncle; "sometimes on a cloudless evening, the villagers below would catch sight of him, seated among the ruins, his stiff, flat palms held out to take the sun" (42). Similarly, readers are startled when Vijayan introduces the blindness of Kuppu-Acchan, through the words of Madhavan Nair; "Kuppu-Acchan had lost his eyes – those two sentinels of fiction and scandal were now pits of blood, Devi's crushed crystals" (126). The shocking effect is not accomplished through the portrayal of spectacle or grandiloquent narration on blindness, but by engaging the readers with simple every day images and scenes.

The artistry of Vijayan in using banal objects with transcendental effect manifests in a sublime way in the portrayal of pox in Khasak. The horrendous, nerve-racking images of the epidemic, in the novel, metamorphose into an alluring image. The spread of the disease and the ensuant deaths are rendered in common terminology, using quotidian images. "Chrysanthemums. They blossomed everywhere, in Khasak, in Koomankavu, in the valley of Chetali; the wind bore their heavy scent" (122). To portray the village population affected by the disease, Vijayan relies again on ordinary diction and familiar sights and fruitfully evokes pity and fear in readers. The diseased bodies of the denizens of Khasak are sketched in the novel thus:

The village was one vast flower-bed. Nallamma strung garlands of pus and death, she raised bowers of deadly chrysanthemums; the men of Khasak saw her and lusted, the disease became a searing pleasure in which they haemorrhaged and perished. Little children died as she suckled them in monstrous motherhood. (124)

Here the narrative attests the transcendence of banality and the masochist in Vijayan unveils before the readers.

Death is one of the central motifs in the novel and its universality is accepted by Vijayan in a more or less resigned way an existentialist would do. Vijayan does linger on the theme of death for long. Adopting a streamlined approach, he utilises a series of commonplace objects in the narrative to drive home the irreparable loss which death brings about. Ravi's recollections of his mother's death are not infused with an acute sorrow which a son ought to feel on such occasions. "Many people moved in and out of the house that day, men who pruned the coffee bushes, nurses who assisted father in the plantation's infirmary, people he'd never seen before. The Palanquin was being readied; Ravi remembered the dirge, the perfume, the flowers and incense." (8). Despite being an existentialist, death, for Vijayan, is not an occasion to ruminate either on its ramifications or its philosophical undertones. Such a complacent attitude is further evidenced while the narrative attends to the death of Chukkru alias the Diving Fowl. Perching on the wall round the ancient well, Chrukku contemplates the plunge and begins to sing the lullaby composed years ago for the motherless Abida.

He dived into the well, and deeper, into the well within the well. The water was like many crystal doors and silken curtains. Chukkru made his way past crystal and silk, and moved towards the mystery that had lured him all his life. As Chukkru journeyed

on, the last of the crystal doors closed behind him. (60)

The potentially gory scenes, in the novel, through Vijayan's crafty assemblage of words, remains one palatable to readers without being overtly bloody and scary.

When Kunhu Nooru and Chandu Mutthu die due to pox and Madhavan Nair informs Ravi about the latter's death, in a very passive and indifferent way, he tells Madhavan Nair; "rest yourself" (130). The receptivity of an existentialist is evident in this scene. As the school reopens after the ravages caused by the disease, Ravi glances through the school register lying in front of him in which he has already underlined some names - the names of those who would no longer come to school. The names included Vavar, Noorjehan, Uniparathy, Kinnari and Karuvu. Though they would never come to the school any more, he has not crossed out those names because for Ravi, "the lines of green became the little windows of his temple through which he gazed, listless" (133).

Banal objects and sights often assume transcendental significance in the novel. When the Inspector arrives for the annual inspection of the school, Ravi strikes up a conversation with him. As they discuss the generalities of the school, Ravi notices "the black and silver stubble" (75) on the face of the Inspector. This ordinary sight turns epiphanic for him, taking him back in memory lane to his father with "tardy joints and unwilling tendons" (75). Similarly, a casual reference to the Christian college at Tambaram, triggers a cascade of memories in Ravi about "the beautiful campus, stretches of shrub and jungle in which hare and porcupine thrived {and} the residential blocks … clearings covered with grass, like carpets of priceless cashmere" (75-76).

The ending of the novel further reinforces Vijayan's aesthetic principle of banality. "In the steady down pour, a low dome of white opacity" (172), the reader finds Ravi returning from both Khasak and his own agonised existence. As he waits for the bus, he plays with the heap of sodden clods and a snake appears with its "flickering tongue" and its "tiny hood" and its fangs pierce Ravi's foot. Vijayan charts Ravi's anticipation of the imminent death in a subtle way; "Ravi lay down. He smiled. The waters of the Timeless Rain touched him. Grass sprouted through the pores of his body. Above him the great rain shrank small as a thumb, the size of a departing subtle body. Ravi lay waiting for the bus" (172). Vijayan does away with the sinister images of death and drives home its universality through a handful of quotidian images. Here, one may notice a divergent aesthetic sensibility shaping the narrative in the novel. Thus, *The Legends of Khasak*, stands as a testament to how O. V. Vijayan reimagines banality as an aesthetic category, which energises the narrative in fiction.

References

1. Beckett, Samuel. *Waiting for Godot*. Grove, 1954
2. Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, London, 1994.
3. Majumdar, Saikat. *Prose of the World: Modernism and Banality of Empire*, Columbia University Press, 2013.
4. Osborne, John. *Look Back in Anger*, Faber and Faber, London, 1969.
5. Mukundan, M. "O.V. Vijayan: Death and Afterlife of a Writer." *Indian Literature*, vol. 49, no. 2 (226), 2005, pp. 85–89. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/23346631. Accessed 12 Sept. 2025.
6. Vijayan, O V *Selected Fiction*. Penguin Books, New Delhi, 1998.