

# A Voyage from Emptiness to Amplitude with the Reference to Selected Novels of O. V. Vijayan

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## ARTICLE DETAILS

### Article History

Published Online: 16 Nov 2019

### Keywords

existence, existentialism, struggle, quest and enlightenment.

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## ABSTRACT

*It is a truth that life brings a lot of difficulties and dwindling, crisis and confusions and prejudices and problems to a person's life. And as literature is an 'imitation' of life, all these things occupy a prime position in literature. But only to state impediments don't serve the purpose, in life as well as in literature: resolutions to these problems are also obligatory. As problems and solutions, both are the reactions of outer world on a poet/writer's mind which find its way in literature, all of them provide the same as per their 'pattern' of body-brain system. O. V. Vijayan, as per the study of his life and novels, seems to have a spiritual bent of mind, especially in the later period of his life, prequel to which is believed as the struggle for understanding the nature of existence. Both the protagonists – Ravi and Kunjuni – in *The Legends of Khasak* and *The Infinity of Grace*, respectively, struggle, seek for and finally are shown as attaining the absolute Piece, Happiness and Truth. The proposed paper shows, highlights and also uncovers, if necessary, the untiring quest and craving, journey and progress and finally the stage of absolute Piece and satisfaction of both the protagonists.*

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## 1. Introduction

"He was free, free in every way, free to behave like a fool or a machine, free to accept, free to refuse, free to equivocate; to marry, to give up the game, to drag this death weight about with him for years to come. He could do what he liked, no one had the right to advise him, there would be for him no Good or Evil unless he thought them into being."

— **Jean-Paul Sartre**

The first thing in life of a person, as a child, is to become aware of or to experience one's existence. And, from the very beginning, a human being is free of doing his own works in his own way. The quote of Jean-Paul Sartre also mentions that a person is free to choose his own way to live life, and it is up to him how he thinks and how he behaves, along with the eternal fact - "character is destiny".

## 2. Existence and Existentialism:

To explain the word *existence* is a bit difficult as many philosophers gave different opinions for the same. But one primary meaning remains the same and that is "to be". Dictionary of Literary Terms and Theory relates the word Existentialism as "something active and rather than passive" and also defines as 'pertaining to existence' and 'predicating existence' (Cuddon, 294). The word philosophically applies to "a vision of the condition and existence of man, his place and function in the world, and his relationship, or lack of one, with God." (Cuddon, 294) The word "existence", in philosophic connotation, the way it is used today (as a philosophical term) was firstly used by Soren Kierkegaard. And he is believed as father of existential philosophy.

In the introduction of "The Philosophy of Existentialism: Selected Essays", explaining Hegel's views Jean Wahl says, "Hegel believes in universal reason", which means, for Hegel, unlike Sartre, there is some higher authority who can guide and

influence a person. Further he says that thoughts and feelings of a person are totally depended on the person's personality and the personality is equally meaningful as that occurs in a particular time and place for which Wahl uses the phrase "at a specific epoch in the evolution of the Universal Idea". Still another aspect for the term in Kierkegaard's view is of Absolute Idea for which he said that to understand any incident in a person's life, firstly his or her own self needs to be understood and then the totality or the 'Absolute Idea'. So these are different perspectives of Western Existentialists which are associated to the present paper. There are many other philosophers who have defined existentialism such as Hegel, Jean-Paul Sartre and Heidegger and many authors like Gogol, Dostoevsky and Albert Camus. They have shown existential problems and struggle of human beings in their writing/literature. But almost all such pieces of literature leave the readers in a confused state of mind and lead to absurdity, without providing solutions. Same as the literature occurs in real life for which Wahl expresses Kierkegaard views saying "by the dint of knowledge...we have forgotten what is to exist. He also refers to the passion of freedom in the behaviour of human being."

Sartre extends the concept of freedom to its extreme saying that "no one had the right to advise him". This sentence indicates strongly the concept of individualism: which is originally a product of Western culture, which has a strong influence of miserable wars; including two world wars, civil wars, invasions, period of great depression, falls and massive destructions of great nations, dynasties and civilizations due to, not only the natural calamities, rather more effectively through mortal causes. Going little deep in the reasons one acquires the roots laid hide underneath all the sour and bitter taste of world history where one perceives lust, anger, greed, attachment, jealousy and ego of human being (six disorders of human mind – 'Kaam', 'krodh', 'lobh', 'mad', 'matsar' and

'ahankaar' respectively). Now, when Sartre talked about existentialism deeply plunged in the concept of individualism, he has overlooked or has given less importance to the social (family bonding) and religious bonding of a person which, in Indian context, is simply unsuitable as in India along with almost all Eastern cultures, influence of one's family, relatives, religious and cultural beliefs play indispensable role in the every sphere, throughout a person's life.

Indian theories and literatures also discuss existential issues but it varies from Sartre's. Indian existential literature doesn't lead merely to absurdity, instead, also leads towards sublime. There are many literary pieces to exemplify the same but in the proposed paper two such novels have been taken into consideration: *The Leagends of Khasak* and *The Infinity of Grace* by O. V. Vijayan.

### 3. About Vijayan and the two novels:

Vijayan is one of the few regional writers in India who have translated their works in English by themselves. He worked as a lecturer, a journalist and a cartoonist and had received many awards, including Padma Bhushan in 2003.

*The Leagends of Khasak* revolves around the village, called Khasak, its dwellers. He has established and talked about the social milieu in the reference with its history and historical sense, religious awareness of the people, similarities and differences and political agendas of the people in higher position to exploit the former two aspects (history and religion of the people) to serve their own purpose. The novel starts with Ravi – the protagonist, arriving at Khasak and it ends with Ravi, dies from snake bite while waiting for the bus to depart from Khasak.

In the next novel, *The Infinity of Grace*, the time is of the crisis of India's war with East Pakistan to make it *free Bangladesh*. At Kunjunni's office also the atmosphere was affected by the conversations of war. To cover the reports of war, from his office, he goes to Calcutta. And he was also going to meet Sivani and Kalyani, his wife and daughter respectively. He stays at hotel Arathan's. When Kunjunni goes to Calcutta, he spends a very good time with Kalyani. They both were very happy being with each other. On many occasions, in the novel Kunjunni is seen in the memories of his daughter as she has been a very important part of his life. Different aspects such as freedom, belongingness, war, nature, history, life, death, existential suffering and spiritual growth and enlightenment have been analysed and discussed directly or indirectly through various incidents and on the whole, life of the character, in general.

### A voyage of Emptiness of Absurdity through the element of journey, memories, quest, questions, denial of worldly things and psychological struggle to Amplitude:

In both the characters, Ravi and Kunjunni, some elements of their nature are common. And those points only lead a reader to analyse and compare both of them in different ways. Through the outline of the story one understands that both of them undergo a social and financial crisis in the outer world, because of exercising their free will in choices and preferences. The journey in crisis leads them to ultimate peace.

One can divide the life of both the characters – their voyage from crisis of existence to absolute existence into five parts such as journey, memory, denial, quest and final stage of attainment of Absolute. These parts are so intermingled and interwoven with each other that one cannot understand them dividing into clichéd different points. The crucial difference between the journeys of both the protagonists is in the way of realising the truth, type of struggle and the role of 'shock' in attaining the absolute existence. And because of these reasons, the characters need to be analysed separately and then supposed to be put together for comparison.

### 4. Element of Journey in The Leagends of Khasak:

Physical journey of Ravi, in *The Leagends of Khasak*, shows his dissatisfaction: dissatisfaction with his present state. He is constantly in search of something, something that makes him struggle, wait and smoothens his path with the passing of time. Readers come to know that Ravi has travelled even before the starting of the novel to various places like dry jungles, indifferent villages, red light areas of towns or cities, all the places where normal or respected people don't go, including townships of lepers, and through various ways or means of transportation, irrespective of all the comforts and demands of the body. But he keeps shifting from one to another as he can't get what he is in search of. In the *Leagends of Khasak*, the passing reference is there to make readers aware that after passing how many hurdles he has reached to the village – Khasak.

"Strange indeed; untrodden paths called to Ravi with mesmeric power. The night before the examination, he slipped out of the hostel. The journey had begun.

The journey into the vast unquiet universe, watched by faces in railway compartments, tolerant and incurious. In the nights Ravi curled up on luggage racks and slept on the soft beats of rails. The names of railway stations changed, their scripts changed. Then on the road, up the high ranges, past hairpin bends in gasoline perfumed buses. The roadway dust changed colour, sunrise and sunset changed places, directions were lost in an assailing infinity. The journey took him to the cheerless shrubs, through streets of sordid trades, past cacti villages and lost townships and lepers, and ashrams were, in saffron beds, voluptuous swaminis lay in wait for nirvana. And at last, this respite, this *sarai* in Khasak..." (79)

Ravi leaves his study just before hours of final examination and started preparing for the great exam; the exam of his soul, of knowing his existence. He does not only leave the hostel, he also has also left his house before that. He and his Chittamma – his step mother – got physically attracted towards each other. Once, his step-mother tells him that she feels guilty for what they are doing and she showed his half paralyzed father, her husband in the answer of the question about remorse. She means to dedicate life to his father instead of committing the sin is their remorse. All of a sudden the matter strikes Ravi's conscience, he went to his room, prays to his father and left for the journey.

“Father who gave me these eyebrows and these eyes, I give up this nest of sewn leaves, I journey again. Bless my path.” (123)

In fact, almost all the places he dwells, he takes them as *sarai* not as his home. He always *stays* not *lives*. He is constantly aware of the ephemeral state of human life. And that is why he was in search of totality, to be one with Time, Earth and the Almighty, in other words, Amplitude. At the time when Padma asks him to promise her two things: to leave Khasak and second, to go to U.S.A. with her, he does promises, but only for the first one not for the later one. Padma gets irritated and asks whether he is escaping from something and here Ravi remains silent and replies within himself,

“I wish to escape nothing,...I want to be the sand of the desert each grain of sand; I want to be the lake, each minute of droplet. I want to be the *Laya*, the dissolution.”(164)

He talks about mixing and mingling with the totality, eternity which is far above the bonding of time and space. The biggest thing is that he knows very consciously what he has done and is doing. He was an astrophysicist and has left his profession after finding the worthlessness of the exploration in outer world, beyond the earth, in the space, rather he is intending to watch inward, towards his roots, his true existence. He says within himself,

“there is nothing to learn by looking at the galactic desert outside, turn the spectroscope inward, to where He has set his bow in the clouds within as a sign of the covenant between Him and the earth. Break the Galilean lances – the Florentine was wrong, he tempted men with a finite calculus. The confessor and the inquisitor were right, for the earth is not round but an experience of the fallible mind.”(163)

Though he is on the path of absolute existence he is aware of his journey, when he comes to know that his father is pining for him, he tells him, mentally,

“Father, do not pine for me,...I journey away to free us both from memory. I walk, an Avadhuta, a renunciate along the shores of Infinite Ocean. I let my slough of memory moult away. When I reach the last shore, when I wait for the last redeeming wave...”(151)

He talks of undoing all the memories, for both of them. By freeing themselves from memories, he wants to sort the Karmas out between both of them which is necessary for both of them to be free from the curse of rebirths. At the time of leaving the seedling house and finally his last *sarai*, Khassak, he stands for a while, looks at the building and prays,

“Father! Father of my eventides, my twilight journeys, allow me to go. I leave this nest of sewn leaves, nest of rebirth.” (172)

Both the times, when leaving the house and leaving the seedling house, he uses the word ‘nest of sewn leaves’ to

indicate the cosiness, safety, comfort and certainty from which he is going towards Infinite Ocean. While leaving every place, he knows he will not come back and he will not meet the same people again in his life. He ‘lives’ to the fullest where he lives before he leaves the place. He committed sin in the life, a mortal sin, but later on went far away from what George Gurdjieff considered the Original Sin – Identification. In the fourth *shloka* of the sixth *Adhyaya* of Bhagvad Gita Lord Krishna has said,

“*Yadaa hi nendriyaartheshu na karmaswanushajayate Sarvasankalpannyaasee yogaaruudhas todochyate*”

The *shloka* sings the importance of detachment – non-identification of Karma saying that when a human being is detached to his sense-objects and to his deeds and actions, leaving all the thoughts, then he is said to have attained Yoga. He never identifies himself with people and places which in spiritual sense, a great achievement. And the same must be the reason he has lived **reaction free life**. Instead of reacting, he does respond to all the matters and occasions, the same must be the reason **he lives in the state of non-imagination and in the present moment**. Throughout the novel he never regrets for the past and becomes anxious for the future. Even at the end, when the baby Cobra bites his foot, he uttered, “Teething, my little one?”. Even in death he remains what Bhagvad Gita calls – *Sthitpragya*.

##### 5. Element of Journey in The Infinity of Grace:

In **The Infinity of Grace** the journey is slightly different, as the protagonist Kunjunni has definitely an insight, a hunger for the Absolute but he usually goes to his ancestors for the same purpose. He, unlike Ravi, lives his role as a journalist in the society. Though his wife and daughter live at Calcutta, not with him in Delhi, he loves them a lot. He also wants to take them to Delhi but couldn't be materialized throughout the end of the novel. In the very beginning of the novel, Vijayan invokes the Absolute with a *shloka*.

The political atmosphere of the country was critically tensed as any moment the war may take place. After packing the luggage to go to Calcutta to cover the news of war between India and Bangladesh, Kunjunni seems restless to Shyamnandan, which follows a discussion regarding war. Here, one can read a journalist's mind in a couple of sentences. Shyamnandan Singh formerly was in army as a cook in Dogra Regiment and had seen war in while serving to the country. He says,

“The war will be like the hearts of those who fight it, babuji. If ours is a righteous war, a *dharma yuddha*, then all will turn out as we wish. The Colonel sahib was a man who kept dharma in war. And this humble Shyamnandan Singh as well. I have only fought in righteous wars. Wherever the Dogras went, Shyamnandan Singh always cooked the finest food for them” (367)

Here, Shyamnandan talks about the righteous things to be done, even in a war. Dharma is not seen as a religion but a righteous way to perform various actions during a person's lifetime. To state, talk and discuss about dos and don'ts are

one thing and the implementation of them is altogether a different thing. There remains a deep valley between ideal and real

I. Kunjunni knows and might have experience it and so says,

“What to do Shyamnandan! It is the opposite with us journalists. Always *adharmayuddha*.” (367)

Kunjunni knows very well what and why is he supposed to do but he is inevitably trapped by the bonding of Karma. The basic need of any search and here the path for absolute existence is curiosity and that was an essential trait of Kunjunni's nature. Kunjunni's father blessed him never ending curiosity when he asked the question about the pyre at 'the burning-ghats of the poor' on the riverbank of river Tootha. Death in general and death by war, make Kunjunni more and more prone to ask more questions about himself, about the meaning and nature of existence. He knows about the monotonous rotation of incidents related to war, its outcome and still he goes to cover the news to Calcutta. He presents his bitter real and anti-romantic idea of war saying,

“slogans end in war, and war in slogans” (418) and  
“no war of liberation ends in freedom.” (424)

He says war can give nothing worse than destruction and destruction, on each part and war gives one after another traps and nothing to be free. Political uncertainty offered him a different perspective to live the life which can be seen in a conversation with Allah Bux – the bar man.

“I was wrong, Allah Bux. After the Mahabharata, it was not only the memory of the stripping of Drupadi which survived. Something else remained.’

‘What was that?’ asked Allah Bux.

‘The Bhagvad Gita.’

‘The Barman smiled. May this war also leave us a Gita.’” (425)

Ravi, after drinking alcohol also, thinks about wars: the present one, of great mythology/epic (Mahabharata) and of eternal war on the narrow, long and linear passage of Time. He goes to his hotel room and while lying on the bed also he continues the thinking of the war.

“What would this war leave? What resulted from the Holy Song? *Nainam chindanti shastraani, nainam dahati pavaka*: weapons do not cleave the soul, fire does not burn it. The soul survived beyond the wounds of war, but bodies writhed in searing agony, screaming.”(425)

Kunjunni, though, is fully aware of the nature of soul that travels and performs various deeds while residing in the body; he doesn't realize the same by personal experience. He recalls the shloka of the Holy Song – Bhagvad Gita – where Lord Krishna has explained the truth of soul that 'the soul can never

be cut to pieces by any weapon, nor burned by fire, nor moistened by water, nor withered by the wind.’ The nature of existentialism, in Indian culture is; a person, if he interrogates about existence, all the answers have been given to him by one or the other spiritual or even religious books, his work is to realise them, not just to know them. At the end of the novel, Kunjunni reaches this point. He realises and experiences that eternal journey of soul. When Kunjunni was informed by Sivani that Kalyani is dying and she is not his but Pinaki's daughter (Pinaki is Sivani's colleague at hospital where she works.). Kunjunni was shocked and grieved like anything. All of a sudden, after her death and cremation, 'the bond between the two undone' (445) and in fact, all the knots of Karma among the three – Kunjunni, Kalyani and Sivani – untied. Kunjunni doesn't know what he is going to do but then he decided to leave his job and house and take refuge in Swami Balakrishnan's (his childhood friend) ashram. After taking Diksha from Balakrishnan, Kunjunni heard the voice of Kalyani,

“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)

At last, Kunjunni also, like Ravi finds peace, though in the present living life only and started journey towards another realm of Truth. Though he doesn't attained absolute existence, he realised the nature of existence by revisiting all the father-child relationship in the births from Vyasa and Suka to the present. Now the Holy Song, sung by Holy Singer remains not away from his conscience, he had become one with Timelessness.

## 6. Conclusion

Both the characters –Ravi and Kunjunni – are conscious like the anonymous writer of the Notes from Underground but their contemplative attitude and introspective interrogation lead their journey started from emptiness or existential crisis to amplitude or absolute existence. Ravi, though, apparently lives life like an ordinary or a failure man with lot many complications, has achieved three main achievements mandatory in the path of absolute existence: curiosity for totality, non-identification (detachment) and reaction free life. It seems Kunjunni's life from the end of The Infinity of Grace starts the way Ravi started his journey before the beginning of the The Legends of Khasak. Though existentialism is about projecting problems pertaining to existence, for Indian perspective, it is extended to the solution of the problem which can be realised in almost all the fictional as well as real lives.

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