



## Research article

# The Self-made Victim in the Crosshairs of East-West Confrontation: Ravi's Odyssey in O V Vijayan's *The Legends of Khasak*

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## Abstract

A pathbreaking novel in Malayalam literature, *Khasakkinte Ithihasam* (Legend of Khasak), was written by O V Vijayan and published in 1969. It is a novel that weaves together the existential journey of the protagonist, Ravi, with the religion, characters and culture of the fictional village Khasak. The paper is written to place in relief Ravi's inability to complete his education and analyse it in the background of the contrast Vijayan brings between Eastern and Western modes of thinking. The subsequent struggles he encounters in the single-teacher school in Khasak are read as being born of a more acute subliminal struggle. Drawing useful parallels for comparison from Jacques Derrida's essay "The Gift of Death," Ravi's character, particularly his indifference towards Western education and death drive, is studied, which interestingly provides insights also into his problematic sexual life which lies at the centre of his journey to Khasak.

**Keywords:** Deconstruction, Politics of Education, Coloniality, Sexual Politics, Translation.



[Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions, Gender Equality](#)

## Introduction

A master at his trade in subtly imitating the splintering of the fabric of society in his writings, particularly in the wake of the unease of British colonial rule and the import of English education, O V Vijayan's novel *Khasakkinte Ithihasam* (Khasak) has had a phenomenal impact on the literary imagination of the Malayali. It is often hailed as having defined Malayalam fiction "in terms of a 'before' and an 'after' in relation to it" (Panikkar, 2018). The debut novel of O V Vijayan, *Khasak*, was serialised in 1968. The novel is based on a fictional village named Khasak, loosely modelled after a village in Palakkad, Kerala, named Thasarak. The Malayalam original is used for the analysis done here, except where a comparison between the original and the translation provides insights which are relevant to the article.

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The novel is usually studied for its magic realism, exploring how the villagers' various interreligious beliefs and superstitions shape their communal life. The novel's lyrical quality—towards which the "freshness of its idiom" plays a major part—and the vivid and detailed description of nature have been particularly helpful in its lasting impact on the Malayali imagination.

This paper focuses its attention on an aspect of the novel that probably still needs to be dealt with in some detail. One of the major narrative concerns of the novel is its protagonist Ravi's sexual life. The women he has a fascination for physically or merely out of curiosity can be seen as falling into two categories based on where they come from, tied further to their educational background. His lover throughout the novel's timeframe is Padma, who was his classmate for the bachelor's course in astrophysics, which Ravi does not complete at Madras Christian College. All the others forming the second category are a few women of Khasak, his stepmother and a swamini at Bodhananda's ashrama. Wittingly or unwittingly, Vijayan differentiates Ravi's attitude in the two cases. The paper attempts to show that this difference in attitude is likely a result of the protagonist's uncritical bias against a formal manner of education.

Jan Patočka's *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History* is a book that provides his insights on particular undercurrents in European history, tracing Europe's decline from a quest for higher ethical living to a distinctive material orientation. Jacques Derrida, in his essay "The Gift of Death," on his part, problematises the question of responsibility in the background of Patočka's discussion of the 'incorporation of the orgiastic' and its 'repression' in the twin events of Plato's *anabasis* and the Christian mystery, respectively. The essay concludes with a discussion of how Abraham disregarded expressly ethical norms expected of him by his family and society in order to fulfil the command he received from an all-knowing God to become truly ethical in His sight. The deconstruction of Abraham's story provides one with the insight that the presence of ethical norms in one's actions need not justify it.

### **Vijayan's translation of Khasak into English**

Khasak was serialised in the weekly *Mathrubhumi*. The Malayalam poet and critic K Satchidanandan writes about his experience of reading it: "I still remember how we, the young, used to wait for the thrill of imagination that the novel gave week after week when it was serialised in the weekly Mathrubhumi" (Satchidanandan, 2005). It was published as a single edition in 1969. The English translation of the novel (*The Legends of Khasak*) came out around twenty-five years later, in 1994.

Several critics have raised questions about the degree to which Vijayan maintains the sensibility of *Khasakkinte Itihasam* in translation. In "Translation and Sensibility: The Khasak Landscape in Malayalam and English," P P Raveendran suggests that by the time Vijayan wrote the English translation of his widely acclaimed work, he had undergone a transformation of character and now was looking backwards critically at his earlier self with more certainty than when he conceived the story of Khasak and wrote it originally in Malayalam.

Though there is a pronouncedly spiritual dimension to *Khasakkinte Itihasam* too, the dialogically structured text of that novel does not allow a metaphysical reading to assert itself there. It is this possibility of a dialogic and compulsive misreading that has been

denied to the text in the process of translation. . . . It is an interesting case of the translator becoming an interpreter of the work being translated, in the process of which the translation itself turns into an interpretation of the original. It might also be treated as an instance of the later of the two Vijayans sitting in judgement on the early Vijayan. (Raveendran, 1999)

It also needs to be mentioned in passing what is seen as Vijayan westernising the novel in its translation. Raveendran argues in his article that when it comes to the translation, which happened roughly twenty-five years later, Vijayan replaces texts in the original with descriptions of topography or use of language which conforms more readily to the Western imagination than a stricter translation of the regional.

. . . though the general outlines of the original description have been retained, the author-translator has intervened skilfully in the core of the passage in order to bring the landscape closer to the terrain familiar to the European reader. This occurs again in the parts where certain indigenous expressions are glossed within the narrative, obviously for the benefit of the foreign reader. (Raveendran, 1999)

Despite these differences that have arisen in the translation, Ravi's decision to follow a more internal path away from committing strictly to the scientific study of astrophysics has remained consistent in both the original and the translation. It is that element which is central to the plot and forms the hinge on which all attendant plotlines and themes turn.

### **Ravi's Attitude towards Education**

Despite characterising Ravi as a promising candidate in the field of astrophysics, there are several pieces of evidence given in the novel, including Vijayan's own commentary in his Afterword to *Legends*, that suggest creating the trajectory of the novel in such a way as to favour his dropping the pursuit to follow something different, perhaps a more Indian way of thinking.

These excerpts from the novel are part of Ravi's conversations with Padma, whose father is a professor in the college where both of them study astrophysics.

An evening in their favourite clearing on campus. Padma, his classmate, told Ravi, 'The Princeton person came home, and he and papa talked most of the time about you. He feels you are a one-man revolt against all post-Galilean science.' (*Legends*, 1994; 78,79)

'What does the American want to do to me, Padma?' (*Legends*, 1994; 79)

Ravi laughed. 'What studies, Padma? What research?' (*Legends*, 1994; 164)

'Ravi—' 'Yes, Padma—' 'Tell me you'll leave Khasak.' With incredible lightness came the answer, 'I will!' 'Is that a promise?' 'It is.' 'And you'll come with me to Princeton ...' 'I don't know, Padma.' (*Legends*, 1994; 165)

Further, in the Afterword, Vijayan embraces even a scientific plausibility of the 'magic realism' of the novel unabashedly, as perhaps a fictionist might do extra-fictionally driven by a sense of the logic and unity of his work. This is not surprising considering how he was disillusioned with the

Marxist non-religiosity he had hitherto been following. Vijayan thanks Providence when he talks about how he “missed writing the ‘revolutionary’ novel by a hair’s breadth” (*Legends*, 1994; 175).

Truth is light splintered through a prism, and that gave me the idea of *the astrophysicist who turns away from the outer universe to the space within*. The Khazi’s sorcery was no less tenable than the Big Bang theory. (*Legends*, 1994; 176; my emphasis)

Added to this are the plot elements that Ravi does not complete his bachelor’s degree in astrophysics and that he does not stay long enough in Khasak to see the permanent establishment of the single-teacher school there. Ravi does not merely seem to be running away from the kind of education that has slowly been catching on everywhere in the country. As Vijayan comments on Ravi’s subsequent nomadic journey, which Padma trails seven years later, his story is that of an “astrophysicist who turns away from the outer universe to the space within.” Equally, his journey is interpreted as one seeking the expiation of sins, particularly of the sexual relationship with his stepmother, by the author himself and others.

He spoke within himself, what am I trying to accomplish scanning galactic distances and reading the bands of colour split out of stellar lights by lowly prisms? Doesn’t my sin lie within? (*Legends*, 1994; 79; my emphasis)

He calls the instruments for observing skies ‘lowly’ here, which, additionally, points to his perspective on the kind of outlook that western education has. Further, Vijayan, though a Malayalam novelist, can be seen to have had an acute sense of the eclectics of various intellectual movements in his own country and around the world and represents some of these in the context of the remote village in Palakkad. More importantly, he seems to have felt it his task to witness and serve the *reality* that was continuing to shape him and his work.

Once the spell was broken, the rest was easy. The Stalinist claustrophobia melted away as though it had never existed. Ravi, my protagonist, liberation’s germ carrier, now came to the village and re-entered his enchanted childhood. He was no longer the teacher; in atonement, he would learn. He would learn from the stupor of Khasak. (*Legends*, 1994; 175)

All these details, along with a discussion of his sexual character, interestingly make it possible to read the novel based on Derrida’s essay, “The Gift of Death.” Its first part analyses Patočka’s handling of the subjects of the orgiastic and the mysterious, Platonic responsibility, Christian conversion, technological modernism and sexuality, while the last part dwells on Abraham’s faith and his call to sacrifice Isaac. Concordant themes found in *Legends* are looked upon next in this article. Overtly Christian themes are first brought into focus.

## Legends from a Western Lens

### a. Ravi

Many perceive the death that Ravi faces, as Raveendran does in the article on Vijayan’s translation of Khasak, as an “absurd death from a snake bite” (*Legends*, 1994; 180). However, it summarises his character in many ways. Ravi is not someone to linger on in any one place because of what

external norms demand. His story throughout has been the opposite. In this sense, it might be seen as his wilful protest against materialist thinking, which is shown to be vehemently attacked in Khasak by Nizam Ali, who later dons the role of the Khazi, the sorcerer of the Sheikh.

The motif of death from a snake bite also invokes the story of the first parents from Genesis, where a conversation with a snake ultimately brings about their spiritual fall. Here again, however, Ravi's death does not seem to suggest anything spiritually absurd; on the contrary, his character is shown to harbour a sense of victory when the narrator says, "Ravi lay down. He smiled" (*Legends*, 1994; 173). He welcomes it with such poise, giving the reader the feeling that his spiritual quest is now free from any entanglements of earthly bearings.

Another passage where there is an overtone of a biblical theme is in the chapter on Appu Kili's conversion.

The knowing eyes grew heavy, the lids began to close. Leaving their skies the stars descended on the screw pines to become the fireflies of Khasak. Out of these infinities a drizzle of mercy fell on his sleep and baptised him. (*Legends*, 1994; 139-140)

The transformation of "stars" to "become the fireflies of Khasak" resembles Ravi leaving his goals in the field of astrophysics to settle upon the magic realism of Khasak. The word used in the original for 'skies' is the same word used to translate 'space science' into Malayalam. Although Vijayan seems to depict this "drizzle of mercy" that Ravi is baptised with as no less than an absolution for the prodigality of his journey, which includes wasting his intellectual prowess in astrophysics, there is much that runs counter to such a line of thought which is discussed in the following paragraphs where a comparison with Derrida's essays is made. The parallels between Ravi's story and Derrida's "The Gift of Death" are interesting, not least on account of the manner of Ravi's death or of some such detail in the narration or plot characterised by a similarity of themes and treatment.

As has been hinted at earlier, Vijayan does not take a mindless u-turn in this novel from his earlier socialist critique despite reneging on his Marxist ideas; his protagonist is not suddenly the sorcerer of the village. Ravi is not the Khazi. Also, Ravi's attempt to consult Kuttadan, the self-made oracle, which may be considered a low point in his spiritual journey, is an occasion of scathing satire for Vijayan. Vijayan is particular about giving Ravi a desirable end and finds no better than granting him "the gift of death."

According to Patočka, "religion exists once the secret of the sacred, orgiastic, or demonic mystery has been, if not destroyed, at least integrated, and finally subjected to the sphere of responsibility" (Derrida, 1995; 2). This responsibility, marked by the *anabasis* in Plato, rests on the relationship of the subject to itself. In this moment of discovery, the subject is liberated to find both the immortality of the self and its own mortality—immortality of the self because the subject identifies its journey towards the Good as its originary responsibility or call, and mortality because it is aware of its limitations in identifying with the Good except through a dying to self and turning a closed eye to whatever earthly discovery made the possibility of this life visible. This death and closing of eyes is the end that Vijayan gives Ravi in the novel.

Another interesting point of departure arises from the connection Patočka draws between responsibility and sexuality. "Since the concept of the *daimon* crosses the boundaries separating

the human, the animal, and the divine, one will not be surprised to see Patočka recognising in it a dimension that is essentially that of sexual desire" (Derrida, 1995; 3). The *daimon* characterises the stage of irresponsibility or non-responsibility.

To somebody looking at Ravi's life, it feels as though he is abdicating his responsibilities, as in Padma's reply to Ravi.

'And you'll come with me to Princeton ...' 'I don't know, Padma.' She began to sob. Ravi received her sorrow like a desert does the rain. 'What are you running away from, Ravi?' asked the despairing voice. (Vijayan, 1994; 165)

It is possible to analyse such a response on Ravi's part using Patočka's explanation of how a certain indifference or boredom can set in if discovering one mystery does not lead to finding an even bigger one.

The most refined discoveries are boring unless they lead to an increase in the Mystery that waits behind what is discovered, behind what is unveiled for us. (Patočka, 1996; 123)

It is compelling to argue that Ravi went through this experience of boredom before he decided not to continue the course in astrophysics. More than half of Ravi's ruminations in the novel are in regard to rebirth, death and the expiation of sins. No intellectual ideology or pursuit but a desire for the mystical could satisfy him. Derrida rephrases Patočka:

Contrary to what is normally thought, technological modernity doesn't neutralise anything; it causes a certain form of the demonic to re-emerge. Of course, it does neutralise also, by encouraging indifference and boredom, but because of that—and to the same extent in fact—it allows the return of the demonic. There is an affinity, or at least a synchrony, between a culture of boredom and an orgiastic one. The domination of technology encourages demonic irresponsibility, and the sexual import of the latter does not need to be emphasised. It occurs against the background of a boredom that acts in concert with a technological levelling effect. (Derrida, 1995; 35)

Vijayan himself regards his disillusionment with the intellectual ideas of the revolution as having led him back to something refreshingly mesmeric or mysterious.

Looking back, I thank Providence, because I missed writing the 'revolutionary' novel by a hair's breadth. Had I written it, I would have merely made one more boring entry in Marxism's futile, repetitive bibliography.

And then I was gasping for fresh air, a whole skyful of living breath. (Vijayan, 1994; 175)

It was mesmeric—maybe with my rejection of materialism, I was in the right state of internal enchantment to be mesmerised. (Vijayan, 1994; 176)

Another comparison which could enlighten the concepts found in both works is the faith system in Khasak and Patočka's characterisation of the supreme being. This is done here through an analysis of the character of the Khazi, in particular. In *Legends*, the differentiation between Muslims and Hindus, the two prominent religions, seems to be an extraneous imposition, at least to empirical observation. Both Muslims and Hindus follow an attitude of inter-appropriating belief

that Vijayan speaks about in the Afterword. There are also no indications of its tapering out despite whatever progressive thinking is caused in Khasak by English education.

Both the Muslims and the Hindus of Khasak look upon the Sheikh as their protecting deity. (Vijayan, 1994; 13)

'Shambho Mahatman,' Gopalu chanted in undertones, 'Sayed Mian Sheikh!' (Vijayan, 1994; 111)

This trans-religious attitude towards the supernatural is not simply true of Khasak; it has been Vijayan's real experience in Thasarak.

The Khazi's sorcery was no less tenable than the Big Bang theory. What obtained in Thasarak was a playful interface between being and beyond being. (Vijayan, 1994; 176)

This interaction between "being" and "beyond being" is reflected in Ravi's life in his journey from the objects of "the outer universe" of astrophysics to "the space within," where he is led in Khasak. Although the protagonist of *Khasak*, Ravi has to approach its mystery from the outside. His search and his past embody what is characteristic of the existence of "being," and Khasak becomes, for him, the window into the realm of the "beyond being."

Although Ravi's appointment to Khasak's new single-teacher school becomes the primary reason for Vijayan to unveil the story of The Legends of Khasak, the locus of the spiritual dynamism between "being" and "beyond being" is foregrounded with the help of the character of the Khazi in many ways.

## **b. Khazi**

Nizam Ali has been a part of Khasak from the time the mullah adopts him to follow in his footsteps. When he proclaims himself to be Syed Mian Sheikh's Khazi, the folk of Khasak are quick to accept him as such. He hears the voice of the *djinn* within him, and the people heed what the *djinn's* Khazi says. This evolution of the character of the Sheikh's Khazi is comparable to the "origin of responsibility" in Patočka. As for Nizam Ali's story, it oscillates like a pendulum in the sphere of responsibility when he rebels against the mullah, wraps beedi for Attar, starts his own company before disowning it, is reemployed by Attar, organises a strike against him, gets arrested and, later, becomes the Khazi of Khasak.

No more the orgiastic, which remains not only subordinated but, in certain extreme cases, completely repressed; instead, a *mysterium tremendum*. Tremendum, because responsibility resides henceforth not in an essence that is accessible to the human gaze, that of the Good and the One, but in the relation to a supreme, absolute and inaccessible being that holds us in check not by exterior but interior force. (Patočka, 1996; 116)

Syed Mian Sheikh is the deity around whom the realism or the magic realism of Khasak is woven. This is true despite the Hindu deities being equally feared and revered. The denizens of Khasak are believed to be the descendants of the entourage that accompanied the Sheikh. Although the later generations of Hindus want to discount the importance of the Sheikh and his Khazi, the novel does not show them as successful in this regard.

Twelve mosques in ruin, a desolate ring round the village; in them lay stagnant the infinite time of Khasak. Legend had it that pagan deities sought to rebuild the oldest of them. But the deities were sworn to build only in the dark, and complete their task before day broke. Demon spirits who turned themselves into roosters crowed when it was still night, which confounded the deities, who fled, abandoning the incomplete edifice. A curse lay on the mosques and after the deities were thwarted no one, and certainly no human, could finish building any of the houses of worship, least of all the most ancient of them. If you asked the villagers how old the mosque was, they would reply, 'Millennia.' (Vijayan, 1994; 19)

The voice of the Khazi is thus central to Khasak. The way the oracle of the Khazi functions is dissimilar in one important respect to the way Kuttadan, Nallamma's—the Goddess of Smallpox—oracle, does. Kuttadan works within the confines of his own property consecrated to Nallamma, whereas for the Khazi, the entire Khasak forms the perimeter of his site of action. However, the voice of inspiration for any oracle or prophet ever seen anywhere conforms to this description by Derrida:

On the other hand the silent voice that calls the Dasein is immune from all possible identification. It is absolutely indeterminate, even if "the peculiar indefiniteness of the caller and the impossibility of making more definite what this caller is, are not just nothing" ("Die eigentümliche Unbestimmtheit und Unbestimmbarkeit des Rufers ist nicht nichts") (§57, 275 [319]). The origin of responsibility does not in any way reduce, originarily, to a supreme being. But there is no mystery in that. Nor any secret. There is no mystery to this indetermination and indeterminacy. The fact that the voice remains silent and is not the voice of anyone in particular, of any determinable identity, is the condition of the Gewissen (that which is translated loosely as moral conscience—let us call it the responsible conscience), but that in no way implies that this voice is a secret or "mysterious voice" ("geheimnisvolle Stimme") (§56, 274 [318]) (Derrida, 1995; 32).

In spite of these overarching similarities that may be found in the larger picture obtained through a comparative reading of themes in the respective novel and essay, or precisely on account of it, it is impossible not to identify a discordant and incongruous behaviour on the part of Ravi in his behaviour towards women in the novel.

### **Ravi's Reception of Women**

Regardless of the presence of a spiritual *kenosis* factoring in Ravi's decisions and journey, adequate evidence may be gleaned from the portrayal of his character, which suggests a difference in the treatment he gives Padma and all the rest of the women he is fascinated with sexually or out of curiosity. Such a portrayal seems in all likelihood to have been a site of tension for Vijayan himself, as is amply evidenced by a comparison of this text in the Malayalam original and its corresponding in English. It is a conversation Ravi has with Padma when they meet after seven years.

Buy me something in flaring red and green. Something really loud and obscene.' 'Why?' 'Because the women back there will gasp in wonder.'



'Ooh, Ravi.' (Vijayan, 1994; 161,162)

This reference to the women of Khasak in Ravi's response is missing in the corresponding Malayalam original, where he says the reason he would like for Padma to buy him these clothes is simply 'Nothing, just a fascination' (Vijayan, 1990; 272; my translation). Nevertheless, this gives a clear clue to the difference in his attitude towards Padma and the women of Khasak. To Padma, he allows the possibility of some sort of a conversation, even if as an attempt to figure out what is in her mind, but not to the other women. In other words, Ravi denies an appreciatory room to hear their points of view and does not encourage the views of the women he does not consider equal to Padma. To such women, he simply seeks to give what is 'loud' and 'obscene.'

This seems largely because of Padma's refined manner of bearing in the presence of people, which seems to be positively correlated with her education. Although the fact that Padma is the only woman in the novel shown to be part of the educated lot reduces the textual evidence to be presented to support this argument, it is a possible conclusion. Supporting such a view are those instances where the novel explores the different opinions people in Khasak have of English education. It also shows how these voices unify in favour of the "King's angular alphabet" by gradually filtering out expressly opposing voices to English education and the portrayal of the increasingly warm reception Ravi receives among the village folk, how these different voices unify in favour of the "King's angular alphabet." At the novel's beginning, English education is contrasted with the "madrassa where the mullah taught the Koran, and the *ezhutthu palli*, literally the house of writing, run by a family of hereditary Hindu astrologers" (Vijayan, 1994; 14).

Not even towards his stepmother does Ravi fail to show his moral superiority even at the moment of the sin they commit together. His hypocritical attitude, thus, unravels where he least expects it. From what we analysed in the previous sections, Ravi is forgiven for his attitude towards education. Nevertheless, Ravi's double standards come out sharply in his attitude towards women, especially in translation.

What is deemed double standards here is the incongruity in Ravi's thinking, which translates into his preferential treatment of Padma on account of her educational background, while he himself considers a manner of life like Padma's (She is Princeton-educated and is now employed there) to be unsuitable for him. This is despite the novel maintaining Ravi's aptitude in the discipline to be a notch higher than Padma's. Ravi, nevertheless, opts for Khasak's magical realism. This becomes a compounded issue when his treatment of the women in Khasak does not match his overall behaviour.

Another detail that needs to be considered when talking about Vijayan's translation is the audience he had in mind. This assumes importance given the fact that one of the contributing factors to the success of the Malayalam novel was the flavourful knitting of local colour. This is entirely lost when Vijayan purportedly not only does not try to retain it but writes in a manner that caters to the stock and unimaginative idiom of an international audience. Raveendran writes,

Vijayan could have repeated the magic by creating his own pan-Indian audience that would have responded to the nuances of a decolonised English language from which would radiate the flavour of the original Malayalam dialect. But his sights were set elsewhere. His substitution of "Hindus" and "Muslims" for "Ezhavas" and "Rowthers" proves

that. It is clear that the potential audience that Vijayan has in mind for *Legends* are the English-speaking communities of the big international world whose global sensibility is a far cry from the locally rooted sensibility represented by *Khasak*. (Raveendran, 1999; 183)

Even in regard to Ravi's treatment of women, this aspect is not irrelevant. Several details giving a distinct local colour to these instances have been omitted by Vijayan in the translation. A few examples include narrations of Ravi's relationship with Chand Umma and Kunhamina. However, these not only do not make right the overriding concern of equivocation in Ravi's manner of dealing with women either in *Khasak* or *Legends* but rather place the issue in relief.

## Conclusion

O V Vijayan's *The Legends of Khasak* is leant against a deconstructive analysis to ascertain the ambivalence the protagonist Ravi shows towards a Western model of education. Prior studies of the novel have sought to determine Ravi's sexuality within the spectrum of morality. However, the underlying connection between Ravi's discriminatorily social or sexual behaviour towards women and his disposition towards Western education becomes evident when looked at through Derrida's deconstructive reading of Jan Patočka's *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*.

Ravi foregoes his education in astrophysics to follow an inward journey, as Vijayan claims in the Afterword, or as an expiation of his sins, as hinted at in some places in the novel. Both these justifications do not seem to hold well in the face of the contrast between the preferential treatment he gives Padma and the discriminatory treatment he gives the women of *Khasak*. Perhaps, if one follows the Derridean humour of deconstructing oversights, it could be said that Ravi deconstructs himself where he least expects it.

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