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Sahitya Akademi



India International Centre

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**meet the author**

**O.V. Vijayan**



“**N**ow the knowledge dawned on Siddhaartha: the love of one’s country demands the killing of children ... Siddhaartha sat in contemplation, with no pipal tree to stretch its merciful canopy overhead; and the Judge finished the last cantos of the judgement, and all around were the sounds of the people ... *God, God!* Siddhaartha reflected, *What voice is this, which is not of man nor animal, neither of the mate nor of the offspring? I know now!* He listened with the seeker’s alertness, and heard its echo down the centuries, through the dark valleys of memory. *It is, Siddhaartha realized, the eunuch voice of history.*”

(*The Saga of Dharmapuri*)



**O**V. Vijayan was born in Palghat in 1930. The son of an officer in the Malabar Special Police, he grew up in a camp of armed constabulary commanded by his father. He did not go to a school till he was twelve, but his education did not suffer in anyway whatsoever since he was given private tuitions at home, by a young man who had passed his intermediate exams, and was zealously intent on sharing with his ward everything he himself had recently learnt; and so, Vijayan, at eight and nine, was already familiar with Browning. This experience of learning has convinced Vijayan of the enormous assimilative capacity of children.

He took his B.A. from Palghat and a postgraduate degree in English Litera-

ture from Presidency College, Madras. He taught for a while, but his engagement with politics of the left put him in an intellectual minority, and he had to change his profession. He joined *Shankar's Weekly* as a writer and cartoonist when he was twenty-eight, and he has continued to draw political cartoons since then. His cartoons have appeared in the *Hindu*, the *Mathrubhoomi*, the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, and the *Statesman*.

The first drawing, Vijayan remembers to have done, is a sketch in charcoal, on the floor of his house, of an ele-



From the family album



phant; when later, as a five-year old child, puny, and afflicted with numerous ailments, a neighbour mockingly asked his parents who would ever give him a job, his grandmother came to his defence and asserted that he would make his living with his drawings. This prophecy came true.

Vijayan asserts however that he is primarily a writer. When his first novel, *Khasakkinte Itihasam* ("The Epic of Khasak") came out in 1969, after twelve years of drafting and re-drafting, it became an instant best-seller, catching as it did, the imagination of a new generation, weary of traditional platitudes about the meaning of life. The novel, which received the Otakkuzhal Award, is acknowledged widely as a powerful and artistic modernist novel of the new sensibility.

*Dharmapuram* was Vijayan's next work. A savage political satire, it recalls Swift in its fierce loathing of what politics has made of India, and Voltaire in its outrageously hilarious ridi-



Prof. Gadgil garlands him at Sahitya Akademi Awards presentation ceremony

cule of public postures and ideological pretensions.

The story of how it came to be published is of interest. Advertised to begin in July 1975 as a serial in the journal *Malayalanadu*, its publication was postponed on account of the proclamation of Emergency on 25 June 1975. It appeared only after the emergency was lifted, in 1977. Condemned by the Left for its allegedly "imper-



Vijayan at home



ialist stand", criticised by some readers for alleged obscenity, it found no major publisher in book-form till 1985. *The Saga of Dharmapuri*, the English translation, done by Vijayan himself, came out in 1987 and created the storm anew. "Not the kind of novel you forget in a hurry," Khushwant Singh said of it; and David Selbourne, writing in the *Times Literary Supplement*, refers to it as "... dangerous stuff, and cut close to the bone." Vijayan himself describes the act of writing *Dharmapuram* as a process of "cleansing", one he does not wish to repeat.

Vijayan's third novel, *Guru Sagaram*, explores the theme of the immanence of the guru in every human encounter, and is set against the backdrop of the Bangladesh war. It dramatizes the sorrow of a broken family and delves into the meaning of relationships, and human loneliness through memories, meditations and conversations. This work received the Sahitya Akademi Award for 1990.

*Mathuram Gayati* ("Sweet is the Music") is an extended allegorical fable of a post-holocaust world where the two hemispheres of the earth are apart and at war, and can only unite again through the harmonious, un-analysable power of love, which alone can bring together the divisive energies of the universe. *Pravachakante Vazhi* ("The Way of the Prophet"), Vijayan's recently completed novel, was serialized in the popular weekly *Kalakamudi*. This major work affirms, in fictional mode, the oneness of perennial revelation, which is



Sahitya Akademi Award-winner

marred only by illusory differences as it comes to man through historical and ethnic filters.

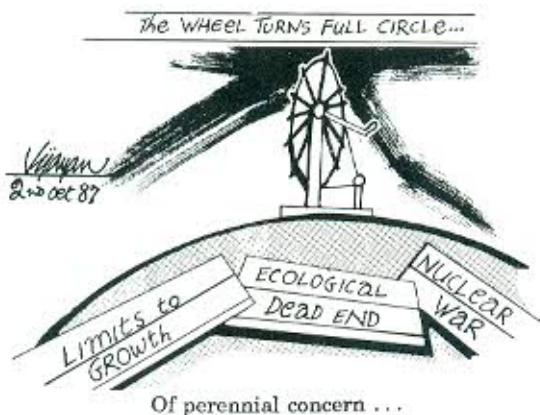
Vijayan is also a short-story writer of eminence. He has published five collections of short stories of which one, *Bala Bodhini* is a collection of mischievous little tales. The others are *Vijayante Kathakal* ("Vijayan's Stories") a varied collection covering a period of 20 years; *Ashanti* ("Turbulence") with stories notable for their exploration of sex and terror and the states of the stilled mind; *Oru Neenda Ratriyute Ormakayi* ("In Memory of a Long Night") which consists of three long stories on the theme of tyranny - the tyrant as simple allegory, tyranny as comic horror, and the horror in transformation unwittingly becoming the instrument of a bizarre liberation. The other two collections are *Kattu Paranha Katha* and *Kadaltheerathu*. The translation

of the latter into English, by Vijayan himself, as *After the Hanging and Other Stories*, has won for him the Sahitya Akademi's prize for translation.

Vijayan has also published five volumes of political essays, and a parody history in ten chapters, *Ente Charitranveshana Pareekshakal* ("My Experiments with History").

As fine a translator as he is a cartoonist and writer, Vijayan is at present translating *Khasakkinte Itihasam* into English. His adventures in shuttling between languages, have led him to introspect deeply on the process of translation, of transferring human experiences through social, historical and discursal "filters".

Vijayan's creative work is distinguished by intellectual originality, a fine sense of humour, a deeply moral and even spiritual engagement with the paradoxes of being, and the exploration of the dimensions of primordial energies of various kinds. In his writing as with his drawings, his strokes are both bold and subtle, both modern and complex in sensibility and yet sparse and simple as the ancient hills. Always more eager to listen than to talk, Vijayan's successes as writer, translator, cartoonist and journalist, has not in anyway shaken his openness and modesty. For him, as for Blake, the sage and the iconoclast find their reconciliation in the higher innocence.



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## A Chronology

- |      |                                                                                                |      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1930 | Born in Palghat,<br>Kerala                                                                     | 1985 | Publication of his<br>controversial novel<br><i>Dharma Puranam</i>                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| 1954 | M.A English<br>Literature, Madras<br>University.<br>Began his career as<br>Lecturer in English | 1987 | Publication of <i>Guru<br/>Sagaram</i> ; published<br>his first collection of<br>political essays<br><i>Ghosha-Yatrayil<br/>Thaniye</i>                                                                                                                 |
| 1958 | Joined <i>Shankar's<br/>Weekly</i> as a Cartoonist                                             | 1991 | Received Sahitya<br>Akademi Award and<br>Vayalar Award for<br><i>Guru Sagaram</i> . Got<br>Sahitya Akademi<br>Translation Prize for<br>1991 for his <i>After the<br/>Hanging and Other<br/>Stories</i> (translation<br>of his own<br>Malayalam stories) |
| 1965 | Married to Theresa                                                                             |      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| 1969 | Publication of<br><i>Khasakkinte<br/>Itihasam</i> , his first<br>novel                         |      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| 1970 | Received Otakkuzhal<br>Award                                                                   |      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| 1978 | Published his first<br>short story collection,<br><i>Vijayante Kathakal</i>                    |      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |



With literary friends, Dr. Sitakant Mahapatra and Prof. Nishikant Mirajkar