Murmuring Stories: Postmodern Storytelling and Ecological Perspectives in S. Hareesh's *Moustache*

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by

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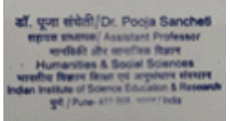Supervisor: Prof. M.T. Ansari

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Certificate

This is to certify that this dissertation entitled "Murmuring Stories: Postmodern Storytelling and Ecological Perspectives in S. Hareesh's *Moustache*" towards the partial fulfilment of the BS-MS dual degree programme at the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research, Pune represents study/work carried out by Akshay Kumar at Indian Institute of Science Education and Research under the supervision of Dr. M.T. Ansari, Professor, Centre for Comparative Literature, University of Hyderabad and Dr. Pooja Sancheti, Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IISER Pune during the academic year 2022-2023.

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To my sister who will likely find this boring and my parents.

Declaration

I hereby declare that the matter embodied in the report entitled "Murmuring Stories: Postmodern Storytelling and Ecological Perspectives in S. Hareesh's *Moustache*" are the results of the work carried out by me at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Science Education and Research, Pune, under the supervision of Prof. M.T. Ansari and Dr. Pooja Sancheti, and the same has not been submitted elsewhere for any other degree.

Akshay Kumar

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Abstract

In contemporary Malayalam literature, S. Hareesh, who won the JCB prize for literature in 2020, has become an important voice in questioning the ethical, moral, and rational assumptions of our society with his stories that combine myth, magic, and wilderness that promote a more posthuman, magical and ecocentric ways of thinking and being. His novels and short stories dissolve and bridge the boundaries of human/animal, unreal/real nature/artificial, etc. Being an emerging writer experimenting to express his ideas through various narrative techniques like magical realism, all of his works carry a sense of depth and freshness. The research I'm undertaking in this work is to critically situate and analyze Hareesh's most important work 'Meesha', through posthuman, ecocritical frameworks. My goal by conducting this research is to understand the ethical and philosophical consequences of his ideas and how they can be read along with the posthuman and ecocriticism movements that inevitably characterize the current larger phenomenon of postmodernism. With Hareesh's strong ecological sensibility and his use of magic to express the interconnectedness of all beings, analyzing his work will open doors to fresh ways of thinking about human and human-nature relationships. It will, in my opinion, offer alternate possibilities to our current dispositions and enable us to move toward human actions that are in harmony with nature and the world.

Contents

Bibiliography **87**

Stories are the secret reservoir of values: change the stories that individuals or nations live by and you change the individuals and nations themselves.

—Ben Okri, *Birds of Heaven*

Chapter 1

Introduction: Climate Change and Fiction

In the beginning of the documentary *Timelapse of the Future: A Journey to the End of Time* by John D. Boswell, the narrator declares with great emphasis over an incredibly enigmatic piece of music the following:

> "The Holocene has ended. What we do now and in the next few years will pro-
> foundly effect the next few thousand years. The only conditions that modern
> humans have known so far, are changing, and changing fast." (Boswell)

It is undoubtedly clear that our actions over the past few decades have drastically changed the composition and behavior of the planet. We have collectively ended a geological epoch that continued for about 12,000 years, one that not only remained 'unusually stable and warm' enough to sustain complex human civilizations but is the only period we know in which humanity can thrive with the 8 billion human beings supported by the planet today (Meyer et al. 35). We have become geological agents right on par with asteroid impacts or volcanic eruptions. The new era we are in is termed as Anthropocene,

which is marked by changes in global climate caused by human beings through the emission of greenhouse gases and the destruction of sensitive ecosystems. These global scale disruptions have caused repercussions that call for a multi-layered approach to solving the problem of climate change.

Craps et al. writes his introduction to *Memory studies and the Anthropocene*:

> "...humanity's geological agency and the nature and extent of the changes we have wrought on the Earth system raise problems of scale for the human imagination, necessitating new ways of thinking that are vastly more global and historical in scope than the narrow spatio-temporal confines of our ordinary daily lives tend to allow." (499)

It is increasingly understood that our human-centered thinking has led us down this path of environmental change that now reached up to planetary scales. To avoid the worst of these changes, we need to explore new ways of thinking and being that are "vastly more global and historical in scope" and at the same time, ecologically sustainable. Craps also observes that climate change poses "problems of scale for the human imagination", a sentiment that is also shared by Amitav Ghosh in his work *The Great Derangement*. Ghosh sees climate change as a crisis of culture and thus of the imagination. No writer or critic can escape the effects of climate change in our culture. Environmental thinking has become pervasive through media and cultural works so much that Lawrence Buell coined the term "environmental unconscious" to denote an unconscious or suppressed sense of the notion of the environment that a sufficiently perceptive individual carries into their conscious awareness, which manifests in his literary or artistic projects. (Buell 22).

Our current interventions into climate are mostly dominated by science, often not acknowledging valuable contributions from other fields. This is especially true for humanities and literature. Climate change is largely seen as a technical issue to be solved

through the further advancement of increasingly capable technology. This is complemented with humanities departments facing a crisis of low enrollment and neglect by academic institutions, which made Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht propose the end of humanities (Gumbrecht). In a capitalist society burdened by global issues like climate change, environmental degradation, the threat of pandemics, etc, it is not self-evident what the role of humanities is. In other words, it has not succeeded in convincing what it can offer in an increasingly technological world. Humanities can indeed play an important role in global issues despite its practical challenges. Contributions from contemporary literary frameworks and movements like Ecocriticism, Posthumanism, Queer theory, Animal studies, etc., are crucial in dealing with the issues of today to enable a more functional and sustainable society.

Discussions on human-induced climate change fail to focus enough on the human part of it. For a long time, arts and humanities were thought to have marginal or even negligible roles in the environmental movement. Descartes and his cartesian dualism had firmly established in our cultural imagination the absolute certainty of the superiority of science. As Tim Morton writes:

> "Despite the refreshing and necessary skepticism and ruthless doubt of science, scientific discoveries are necessarily based on a decision about what real things are" (26).

The perceived objectivity of science is based on certain assumptions about reality. Humanities, at the very least, acknowledge its own subjectivity and help us understand how our perception of the world influences to how we act in it. It is hardly a coincidence that most industries, whether it's fashion, transport, or food production, all of them contribute to ecological breakdown and climate change. There must be a deeper issue that is in some sense closer to the individual human being than molecules of carbon and methane. Our subjective understanding of the world has an influence on the actions we

take towards nature. We are a species that lives through meanings. We interpret patterns and events in relation to ourselves. Sometimes these interpretations are simply not useful or sustainable, and we need to seek alternative interpretations and new meanings.

Science undoubtedly has a role in tackling climate change—its predictive power can help to understand the dynamics of global warming that causes climate change and reduce its effects. But it conveniently forgets the historical and cultural reasons that caused it. Without changing our cultural attitude, science solves only the symptom of a much larger issue. Often, the scientific perspective of climate change looks at it as a meteorological event that happens somewhere "out there". But the reality of it is experienced although indirectly, by each of us, some more than others (Odeku et al. 104). Its frequent transgression into our lives necessitates a shift from our traditional ontologies. But what traditional ontologies must be reformed in our changed environment? These deal with our ideas of reality, ourselves, and the world around us. Every action that we, and collectively as a society, take is in some sense aligned with a particular worldview, built from a set of assumptions about the world and our place in it. Our current road to environmental destruction and the possibility of our own extinction makes it imperative to audit these assumptions and axioms that we as a society, take for granted for their functioning.

Our contemporary worldview was formed from a paradigm shift that took place in the 16th and 17th centuries when the scientific revolution was underway. Along with the ideas of the Enlightenment it formed the substratum upon which our modern world was established. It was only post-modernity that Nature as an ontologically different category came about (Possamai 836). This scientific rationalism that formed as the result of the European enlightenment which pervades our social discourses is what historically guided what is real and what is not, who we are and what is our relation to nature etc. Historically our belief systems also had a great leverage in affecting the course of science and technology (White Jr 1206). The changes in the production and capitalist

lifestyle that came with modernity authored assumptions and narratives that sustained themselves, and posited humans as separate from all other beings by virtue of possessing a characteristic 'human nature'. The rigid walls of capitalism perfectly hid nature from view. Trees were replaced by tall towers. Forests of concrete spread over miles, driving the economy. The rich, emotionally sensitive textures of nature were substituted by spaces that are characterized by clean, featureless minimalism. As capitalist economies thrived, pre-packaged foods became more common in supermarkets, which distanced the consumer from the sources–mostly plants and animals– from which they originate. Although these changes happened over centuries, they all contributed to the alienation of the modern individual from nature. They made nature non-essential in our daily lives. Nature became a representation, an object to look at, a work of art to be admired, and its destruction was quite an unfortunate thing to happen. This mechanistic understanding of nature as passive and inert is faulty and at the very least dangerous in determining future climate interventions. Only when we acknowledge the agency that is inherent in nature we can begin to take steps to reverse the effects of climate change. We need to at the same time reverse the scientific notion of objectivity and the perceived distance from which we can look at phenomenon. As Bruno Latour rightly mentions, "[t]here is no distant place anymore," from which we can look at things (2).

Climate change as a phenomenon poses unique problems in our cultural representation of it because of its massive scale. Even with scientific understanding it cannot be fully modeled and predicted with its millions of parameters. It is evasive and its effects cannot be directly attributed to particular causes. It is an example of what Tim Morton calls a "hyperobject" (Morton 1). Like all hyperobjects, its reality is hidden from our immediate perception. We never have complete access to it. Its scale and magnitude are such that it is difficult to fully comprehend by the human mind. Climate change is the single most important event in our current era and is too critical to leave it just to science and technology. Solving it requires a trans-disciplinary approach, and literature will have an

important role to play.

D. Worster in his book *The Wealth of Nature: Environmental History and the Eco-logical Imagination* writes about the ethical dimensions of climate change:

"Why are we in a State of crisis with the global environment? Scientists of many disciplines have described that crisis with impressive precision.... They can pinpoint with amazing detail the sources of that carbon in the tailpipes and smokestacks of the industrialized, automobilized societies. But having done all that, the scientists still cannot tell us why we have those societies, or where they come from, or what the moral forces are that made them... They cannot explain why we humans will push tens of millions of species toward extinction over the next twenty years, or why that prospect of ecological holocaust still seems urelevant to most of the world's leaders.... All those "why" questions are rooted in culture, which is to say, in ethical beliefs....

We are facing a global crisis today, not because of how ecosystems function but rather because of how our ethical systems function. Getting through the crisis requires understanding our impact on nature as precisely as possible, but even more, it requires understanding those ethical systems and using that understanding to reform them. Historians, along with literary scholars, anthropologists, and philosophers, cannot do the reforming, of course, but they can help with the understanding." (27)

Timothy Morton sympathizes with Worster and highlights that an important role of humanities scholars is to attune us to the ontological "upgrade" in human consciousness that is slowly taking place everywhere (Morton 101). Humanities help us move beyond science to human subjectivity into understanding how our ideas of real and unreal are constructed. At its root, the destructive attitude towards the environment arises from our flawed relationship with nature. And humanities, especially literature can help pro-

pose and imagine new sets of relations. This is where environmental humanities and movements like Ecocriticism and Posthumanism come into the picture. It is this cultural shift from our traditional ontologies that forms the center of discussion in these fields. They also facilitate these shifts in thinking. Reading a text through an ecocritical or posthuman lens is to bring to light the assumptions that underlie the construction of the text, highlight the ones that are beneficial in terms of how they make us relate to nature, and also to point out those assumptions that are no longer beneficial or sustainable.

But humanities as a field itself faces challenges in describing and understanding climate change. Amitav Ghosh argues that part of the challenges in understanding climate change, especially in the culture comes from the practices and assumptions that historically guided the arts and humanities itself. This includes, as Sten Pultz Moslund writes referring to Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, a dominance of the Cartesian worldview in the field (Moslund 29).

The importance of humanities is also clear when Neimanis et al. list four problems that define our relation to the environment and how solving them is not possible *without* (original emphasis) environmental humanities (Neimanis et al. 67). What these scholars point to is the fact that climate change is not just a geological crisis but also a crisis of imagination. In his book, Amitav Ghosh also details the challenges posed by climate change for the contemporary writer and traces some of it to the literary conventions and forms that had historically shaped our narrative imagination (Ghosh 7).

A related aspect is the influence of fiction and narrative in the modern culture. Fiction can have transformative effects on the readers, influencing their personality and allowing self-change (Djikic and Oatley 500). Narratives can be an important medium through which people understand themselves and their environment. It can have a huge influence on the development of one's worldview.

The changing environment and the anthropocentric destruction of ecosystems have

9

provoked responses from several artists and fictional writers. As Adam Trexler and Adeline Johns-Putra argue, "Climate change as a meteorological, ecological, and cultural phenomenon demands, in its turn, a new literary and critical climate" (197). This new literary and critical climate is already unfolding, with increasing critical studies on works that explore the notions of climate change (often termed as cli-fi) and a rethinking of the human/animal nature/culture binaries. There is also a non-human turn in the humanities that is taking place with influence from various fields, such as Animal studies and approaches from New materialism. Tim Morton writes:

> "All humans, I shall argue, are now aware that they have entered a new phase of history in which nonhumans are no longer excluded or merely decorative features of their social, psychic, and philosophical space."(33)

Contemporary writers are experimenting with stories and narratives to express the unique problem of climate change, often through postmodern modes of narration such as magical realism. Magical realism with its subversive attitude that rejects culturally constructed binaries and allows for the decentering of the notions of human, culture, and natural environment. Posthumanism, especially critical posthumanism, is yet another movement that challenges the traditional humanist ideas that underpin most of our belief systems and puts forward a more ecological concept of the human being as a node in the network through which matter, energy, and information are passed down. It challenges the uniqueness of human beings and is seen only as another entity in the ecosystem that has co-evolved with other living things and the environment.

Insofar as establishing a trans-disciplinary approach that forms the bridge between science and literature, Ecocriticism is such an attempt. It takes into consideration how human beliefs and attitudes, reflected in the culture through art, literature, films, and other mediums, influence our relationship with the natural world. Ecocriticism, primarily concerned with literary texts, looks at the representation of nature in these texts

and how these mold our conceptions of nature and our relations with it. The original definition of Ecocriticism was first put forward by Cheryll Glotfelty in her important work *The Ecocriticism Reader*, as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. This broad definition captures the wide range of possibilities and directions one can choose in the field but also brings criticism for the field's lack of a proper methodology. Nevertheless, its openness to adaptation of methodologies from other fields allows interdisciplinary approaches. Postmodern frameworks are uniquely positioned in terms of spirit and ideas in analyzing contemporary works of literature for representations of nature. Its denial of authority and dominant narratives parallels the deviation of writers from anthropocentric narratives to more ecological and post-human ones. Postmodernism brings new epistemologies. Its focus on subjectivity and plurality dismembers an objective notion of the "real."

Every fictional text establishes within itself a relationship between the characters and the setting. These relationships are especially important to look into if it is a natural setting since it reveals much about how human-nature relationships are encoded within such narratives. As Terry Gifford in *The Social Construction of Nature* writes, there can be no "innocent" reference to nature in a poem and that "[a]ny reference will implicitly or explicitly express a notion of nature that relates to culturally developed assumptions about metaphysics, aesthetics, politics, and status—that is, in many cases, ideologies. In other words, in literature, nature is culture" (33). This is true for novels and other fictional works. But in them, it is more implicit, through descriptions and metaphors, whereas in a poem, it is more explicit.

This work focuses on the works of S. Hareesh, primarily on his novel *Moustache* (tr. by Jayasree Kalathil, original *Meesha*), in understanding how the notions of human, animal, and nature are represented using magical and post-human elements. I might add here that for the analysis, I mostly used the English translation *Moustache* only referring to the Malayalam version to confirm certain aspects. In the third chapter, which deals with

the comparative analysis of *Moustache* by S. Hareesh and J. Kalathil and *The Legends of Khasak* O.V Vijayan, I have used his self-translated version of Vijayan's novel instead of the original Malayalam version, which is titled *Khasakinte Itihasam*.

I aim to understand how *Moustache* deviates from the traditional ideas of human-nature relationships and proposes alternate ontologies that redefine human-animal-nature relationships. It also looks into how the novel reveals the power of stories and story-telling and how it can be an important tool in getting us to more sustainable futures. This is also a theoretical discussion from time to time, using *Moustache* as an example, on how Magical Realism, Ecocriticism, and Posthumanism as independent theoretical frameworks intersect and interact, empowering each other, creating new narrative and theoretical possibilities. I consider *Moustache* by S. Hareesh the ultimate postmodern text in Malayalam. The story is told using a magical realist mode of narration in a layered and non-linear fashion. Magical realism as a mode of narration had been used by several writers in Malayalam after being influenced by Latin American authors like Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Alejo Carpentier.

One cannot mention *Meesha* (the original Malayalam version) without also mentioning the controversies that the novel went through after publication. A sexual remark on the upper-class women going to the temples put forward by a character in the story was attacked by religious right-wing groups, forcing him to withdraw the publication of the novel. This raises the question of the freedom of the author and of the characters to say certain things. If characters act according to their will, as with *Moustache*, what does it mean for the writer to force it otherwise? As Hareesh says in the author's notes of *Moustache*, "novels are free countries, and there is very little a writer can do about what the characters get up to" (Hareesh 9).

The first chapter deals with the theoretical foundations of Magical Realism, Ecocriticism, and Posthumanism, looking back to their origins and defining the concepts. The

second chapter contextualizes the novel *Moustache* in terms of the language, literature, and environmental context and also does a comparative study of *Moustache* against another novel, *The Legends of Khasak* by O.V Vijayan, who pioneered a discernable magical realist style in Malayalam literature. The chapter also situates the novel as a postmodern work, exploring its particular characteristics. The third chapter, in the beginning, situates *Moustache* as 'participating' in the mode of narration called Magical realism. The novel is then analyzed through Ecocritical, Posthuman frameworks and looks into the postmodern storytelling that distinguishes it from other novels in Malayalam. It also looks into stories and storytelling in a much broader aspect as essential tools in our actions toward a future in which we exist in a symbiotic relationship with nature.

Chapter 2

Magical Moustache, Kuttanad and the Legacy of Kattapulavan

Introduction

This work analyzes S. Hareesh's novel *Moustache* through three frameworks- Magical Realism, Ecocriticism, and Posthumanism. Although Magical realism is thought of more as a mode of narration or a genre, it is helpful to look at it as a theoretical framework. The title of the chapter lists symbols that embody these frameworks. The moustache of Vavachan is an irreducible magical element that is present in the novel, Kuttanad is the land upon which the drama unfolds, and Kattapulavan is the mythological character described in the novel, who is at once a man and a snake. Although these three frameworks seem separate, they deeply align with each other at their roots. Their values and ideas are synergistic and complement each other. *Moustache* deeply embeds these ideas within the narrative.

All three of these frameworks developed as reactionary movements against dominant and suppressive regimes and branches of knowledge. Magical realism in literature as a

distinct genre originated mainly in Latin America. Its origin was influenced by European colonization, the beliefs of indigenous communities, and the socio-political uncertainties of the period. It challenged the imposed European colonial notions, including the realist mode of narration in literature. Ecocriticism was established in the latter half of the twentieth century, inspired by environmental movements that began with Rachel Carson's most important work, *Silent Spring*. Ecocriticism also challenges anthropocentric ideals and is concerned with understanding the global ecological destruction that results from it. One aspect of ecocriticism is the decolonization of nature- to understand how colonial ideas have shaped our perceptions of nature and our relationship with it. Posthumanism is also a collective movement that arose in response to the increasing advancement of technology and traditional European humanism that argued for a stable, essential nature of human beings. It questions the fundamental assumptions about the idea of "man", which is fundamental to most of the progress and colonizing ideals of the West. All three frameworks uphold a strong postmodern spirit in rejecting universals and embracing plurality. They reject liberal humanism that occupied a central stage in humanities for a long time and, as an alternative, put forward a more inclusive humanism in which the traditional notions of man and nature are deconstructed and promote an ecocentric basis for life on the planet. Our current capitalist economy and the process of globalization are, in its nature, inherently exclusive. In its global 'progress,' it undermines various local and marginal cultures, languages, and narratives, resulting in a homogenous global culture. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's idea of planetarity is particularly relevant here. Shifting from globe to planet as our relational frame gives rise to a new set of moral and ethical concerns that are not solely centered on us human beings. She writes:

"If we imagine ourselves as planetary subjects rather than global agents, planetary creatures rather than global entities, alterity remains underived from us; it is not our dialectical negation, it contains us as much as it flings us away." (Spivak 73)

To arrive at such a notion of alterity is what movements like ecocriticism and posthu-

manism are after. This is only possible with a substantial shift in the foundations of the very structures that Western knowledge is built upon. These frameworks try to decolonize the knowledge from European influence and highlight inherent subjectivities in any knowledge system. Another aspect that unites them is that these frameworks are inherently political and normative. Challenging dominant ideas and notions makes them unavoidably normative and political. It is also evident in ecocriticism's close engagement with environmental activism. Although each proposes different sets of ideas, their objectives and ideals align toward a more sustainable, inclusive, and hopeful future. A recent key text that explored the theoretical intersection between Magical Realism and Ecocriticism is *Climate and Crises: Magical Realism as Environmental Discourse* by Ben Holgate. He explores the long-standing links between magical realism and environmental literature. An essential quality of magical realist literature is its ability to portray alternative paradigms– of knowledge, relations, reality, etc. As a narrative technique, it enables writers to break from traditional ontologies and epistemologies and seek out better ones. Being a narrative technique makes it more fundamental and open to ecocritical and posthuman thought.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the broader movements of modernism and Postmodernism, followed by an introduction to Magical Realist, Ecocritical, and Posthumanist frameworks for the reader, exploring their historical roots and highlighting key themes and ideas. It forms the theoretical basis for the analysis of the Moustache. My own understanding and perspectives on these are also mentioned so that the chapter is read more than just as a literature review.

2.1 Modernism and Postmodernism

Modernism and Postmodernism are cultural and aesthetic movements that profoundly influenced our culture and shaped the arts, literature, and architecture of the period.

Modernism is thought to have begun in the late 19th century until the middle of the 20th century. Both movements took roots from the cultural and political context of their successive periods, both in the aftermath of World Wars I and II. The rise of modernism paralleled industrialization and urbanization in the West, which created a shift in the material conditions of the people. It inspired a response from artists and writers who found it necessary to move away from forms that did not adequately represent the new situation that they were finding themselves in. The material changes have not only influenced the arts and culture but also changed how we fundamentally perceive and interact with the world around us. Modernism peaked in the first half of the twentieth century as the world progressed exponentially in economic growth and industrialized lifestyle. The early Victorian conventions and morality seemed incompatible with this new world order. Modernism broke away from the traditional norms that guided art and culture, promoting experimentation and celebrating innovation. The realistic modes of expression no longer made sense. Artists experimented with forms and styles, creating new forms of art. Cubism, surrealism, futurism in the arts, and literary techniques such as stream of consciousness in literature all resulted from modernism and flourished during the period (Kuiper).

An important aspect of modernism is its rejection of traditional forms and ideas and replacing them with abstractions. Non-representational ways of expression replaced representational, realistic, and mimetic forms (Lewis 1). This is visible in the paintings of Picasso and Kandinsky. In literature, you can see it in the works of James Joyce with his *Ulysses* and others, with its fragmented and non-linear narratives, stream-of-consciousness mode of writing, and other avant-garde techniques that challenge the established norms and conventions. It was also a response to the anxieties and disorientation caused by the modern industrial lifestyle. Modernism is better understood when set against Postmodernism, which is at the same time a reaction against modernism and an extension of it. Modernist principles began with the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure,

who started the movement of structuralism, not directly, but by proposing the concepts of "langue" and "parole," where langue is the larger shared understanding of language and parole is the individual utterance of it. Structuralism further developed in anthropology with Lévi-Strauss, who proposed that culture has a deeper structure similar to the linguistic system that can be arrived at through analyzing underlying patterns and relationships. This attempt to reach higher and more abstract structures is characteristic of modernism.

Postmodernism, on the other hand, slowly developed around the mid-twentieth century, building on the foundations of modernism. The disillusionment and skepticism pervasive after two world wars and the growth of global industrial capitalist society made writers and thinkers question the grand narratives and utopian ideals embraced by modernism. A characteristic feature of postmodernism is its rejection of objectivity and ultimate, objective truth. It freely embraces relativism. It also recognizes the role of language in the construction of reality. Lyotard, in his work *The Postmodern Condition*, describes Postmodernism as an "incredulity towards metanarratives" that includes the overarching explanations of culture, reality, history, etc (Lyotard 25). Postmodernism has helped in deconstructing the traditional notions of the environment but stands in the way of environmental activisim due to its complete disregard to broader narratives, especially when climate change becomes a global issue that requires global responses. But Sterling suggests that this could be overcome by moving towards a revisionary postmodernism (Sterling 148) and quotes Spretnik who proposes an alternative postmodernism which is a "grounded, deeply ecological, and spiritual postmodernism" (Spretnak 223).

Modernism borrowed some of the values of the enlightenment like an emphasis on rationality, individual creativity , a critique of tradition, and an interest in the idea of progress. It saw nature and culture as categorically distinct. On the other hand, Postmodernism has always been distrustful of constructed binaries like nature/culture, human/animal, character/setting etc. Modernism as a movement was intricately linked

to the modern period and the societal changes that came with it. In his book *We Have Never Been Modern*, B. Latour and C. Porter explains that these kinds of dualisms never represented the actual reality but, at the same time, significantly influenced our thought process in the modern world(53-55). These kind of dualisms carry onto the movement of modernism. Latour also introduces the idea of hybrids, which are entities that in a postmodern sense blur the distinction between nature and culture (51).

Postmodernism in literature began with writers like William S. Burroughs, Nabokov, Italo Calvino, etc., experimenting with language and structure, non-linear narratives, metafictional, and self-referential qualities. Theoretical works by Lyotard also had a massive influence on our understanding of postmodernism. Magical realism was a mode of narration that aligned with the ideals of postmodernism and is used in several postmodernist texts. These ideas have been used by writers worldwide to challenge dominant narratives and promote a sense of plurality and diversity of voices and empowerment of those at the margins, including animals and nature. These movements continue to influence our culture and are slowly changing our view of the world.

2.2   Magical Realism

Magical Realism— the term itself actively voices the contradictions inherent in itself before we learn anything about it. Composed of "magic" and "realism," the term is an oxymoron that forces one to imagine the contexts in which both the elements— those of magic and the real— coexist. To those unfamiliar with the works of magical realism, it is almost impossible to make sense of it just from the term itself. The term's ambiguity has to do partly with the cultural connotations of the terms " magic" and " real" itself, which I will try to examine in the coming pages. For this reason, several critics have come up with their own ideas on it, whether it is Homi Bhaba referring to it as a "literary language of the emergent postcolonial world," or Frederic Jameson as an "alternative to the narrative

logic of contemporary postmodernism." A basic definition of magical realism comes from Christopher Warnes, who explains it as "a mode in which real and fantastic, natural, and supernatural, are coherently represented in a state of equivalence. On the level of the text, neither has a greater claim to truth or referentiality" (Warnes 3). There is an ontological disruption of the real by the fantastic, but more as an intensification of reality rather than something separate from it.

It is interesting to look at what Magical Realism can contribute to contemporary literature. The moment we think that the period of magical realism is over, that it has played its part in the history of literature, we see another novel pop up that uses, at least in part, elements of magical realism. Decades after the invention of the genre, it is still being used by contemporary writers as a tool to accomplish their narrative goals. Several magical realist books have won international awards like Booker prizes, most recently being *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* by Shehan Karunatilaka in 2022, which, following the tradition of Garcia Marquez and Rushdie, uses a kind of "pervasive magic," as distinguished by Wendy B. Faris in her essay *Scheherazade's Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction*, extensively from the beginning. This reassures the relevance of magical realism in the contemporary period and proves its relevance. Here, the distinction between it being a genre and a mode of narration becomes important. In the early periods of magical realism when a style of narration quite distinct from others began to emerge, it was thought of as a genre more than a mode. Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* are good examples of magical realist writing. Later, as authors began experimenting, they used magical realism only sparingly and only as a tool to achieve particular effects. This is evident in Garcia Marquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera*, which uses magical realist elements but less prominently than his other works. Many authors who do not consider themselves magical realists use elements of magical realism in their works. This is not surprising since authors are in no way obliged to use the mode or identify themselves as writing within

a genre. More than a trend that comes and goes, magical realism has slowly assimilated into the larger paradigm of literature and continues to nourish it in different ways. Hence, One of my interests is to understand how magical realism is used innovatively in current social, political, and literary contexts.

Since its origins in Latin America, magical realism has spread throughout the world, influencing writers all over the world. Enough research on local cultures will make one realize that elements that resemble magical realism can be found all around the world, including in Japan, Asia, and West Asia. However, the beginning of the mode recognized as distinct from other previous writing styles is often credited to Latin American authors. The term "Magical Realism" originated before it was attributed to literary works. It was coined in the early twentieth century by an art critic Franz Roh in his 1925 book *Nach-Expressionismus: Magischer Realismus: Probleme der neuesten europäischen Malerei* (Post-expressionism: Magical Realism: Problems of the newest European painting). Roh had been pondering over a new style of painting that emerged out of the Post-expressionist period that showed elements of magic but also grounded in reality. The term came to literature through Latin American writers such as Arturo Ulsar Pietri, who mentioned it in his *The Literature and Men of Venezuela*, and Alejo Carpentier, who, in the prologue of his novel *The Kingdom of this World*, had used the term to signify an

> "unexpected alteration of reality (the miracle), from a privileged revelation of reality, an unusual insight that particularly favors the unexpected richness of reality or an amplification of the scale and categories of reality" (Carpentier)

The term was popular in the 1940s when it was associated with the idea of the "marvelous" coined by Carpentier, which sought to describe the kind of reality inherent in the region of Latin America. Later, in the "el boom" of the 1950s and 60s, when Latin American writers were widely read in the international milieu, it became recognized worldwide.

Although the term came from Roh, the origin of the concept of magical realism in literature has always been a disputed topic. In one of the first critical essays on magical realism, Angle Flores argues that it began with Borges's *A Universal History of Infamy*. According to him, the beginnings of the mode can be traced back to Kafka. The novelty that Borges brings, he notes, is the amalgamation of reality and fantasy. Unsurprisingly, Luis Leal disputes Flores' claims and re-examines the history and characteristics of the mode in his own essay. According to him, magical realism is "more than anything else, an attitude toward reality" (Zamora and W. Faris 121).

For a long time, the critical writings on magical realism failed to define it completely and to separate it from other theoretical categories like fantasy, metafiction, marvelous realism, etc. It still fails to define the term, not because of the inability of the theorist to undertake such a task, but the impossibility of it. Throughout history, the term had multiple meanings, and moreover, it is not clear what constitutes magical realism. Wendy B. Faris, in her essay, tried to painstakingly find a comprehensive list of primary and secondary features that can be attributed to magical realism. Although this is helpful in some aspects, it can never be a comprehensive list since an upcoming text on magical realism may expand the notion of the genre itself. Moreover, after it had become an international phenomenon, the works of writers worldwide began to be recognized as magical realist even when they did not resemble Latin American magical realism. Examples include Indian author Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, which creates a distinct genre of Indian magical realism, and the Nigerian author Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*.

Magical realism is, like other movements, not an isolated phenomenon. It can be seen as a reaction to earlier modes of writing of the modernist period, which focused mainly on realism. It is also to be noted that magical realism originated in a postcolonial context. As Stephen Slemon observes in his essay, magical realism seems "most operative in cultures situated at the fringes of mainstream literary traditions" (Slemon 408). This ob-

servation reinforces the idea that magical realism is an inherently radical and subversive genre. It is operative in postcolonial societies, and for good reason. One of the strengths of the genre is its ability to reinterpret reality and history and "to supplement the realistic text through a corrective gesture, a means to overcome insufficiencies of realism (and the language used to ground realism)" (Simpkins 164). Magical realism allows postcolonial societies to reclaim their traditional roots and correct the historical interpretations of the dominant authority. This inclination towards a magical realist mode of writing in post-colonial societies underscores the fact that "established systems of generic classification are complicit with a centralizing impulse in imperial culture" (Slemon 408).

Realism as a literary style developed differently in India compared to Europe. In Europe, realist literature prospered in parallel with industrialization and the rise of a capitalist society. It was different in the case of India, where the economic context of the time was different from the West (Mukherjee 4). In India, realism mainly dealt with socio-political context and their depiction using the form of the European novel. This difference in context also changes our understanding of the rise and development of magical realism in India.

One of the most important books that explore the intersection of magical realism and ecocriticism to come out in recent times, *Climate and Crises: Magical Realism as Environmental Discourse* by Holgate, addresses the issue of ambiguity in defining the term Magical realism. Holgate takes inspiration from Derrida's "law of the genre" to think about it. He does not give a definition but rather a common characteristic that allows a text to participate in the genre of magical realism. Any text cannot fully belong to a particular genre. It is often a mix of multiple genres, and one can only say that the text participates in multiple genres rather than belonging to them. This is most helpful in magical realism since it is almost impossible to define it fully. Magical realism does not seem to be dying out anytime soon. It is used in novel ways to challenge different dominant epistemologies and will be used in the future. It is important to examine how

magical realism is adopted and intermixed with contemporary genres and literary works across regions, especially the global south, and what such an amalgamation of style would result in. My focus in this work is to look at the magical realism in Malayalam literature, especially the novel *Moustache* by S. Hareesh.

2.3   Ecocriticism

Deriving from "eco" and "criticism," the field of ecocriticism aims to study the relationship between literature and the environment. It primarily looks at literary works to understand how nature or the environment is represented in those works. Ecocriticism's theoretical foundations lie in the field of ecology and the study of interrelationships between things. These relationships can be closely analysed once we establish that the works of literature have material impacts. As Glotfelty remarks in her essay, if we accept Barry Commoner's first law of ecology, which says that everything is connected to everything else, we need to conclude that literature is not separate but part of a world in which "energy, matter, and ideas interact (original emphasis)" (Glotfelty and Fromm 19). Such a study is crucial, especially during the ongoing global environmental crisis. Climate change has been studied and approached from multiple perspectives, but they all employ scientific methods to study the environment. Once we recognize that the climate crisis is also a human issue— created by humans and affecting humans— we realize the potential of the Humanities to support the mitigation of human-induced climate crisis. Literary theory had long ignored the climate crisis, even though writers were writing and thinking about the environment and their relationship with human beings. Even when there were critical works, it was scattered and was not brought under a single framework. This limited the ability of the scholars to build on already existing knowledge. This seemed to be the case even when other humanities-related fields were incorporating environment and sustainability into their field. Glotfelty's *The Ecocriticism Reader*, a collection of

early essays on literature and environment, is an important landmark in this movement.

Looking at the attitude of literature to environmental issues, Glotfelty observes that "If your knowledge of the outside world were limited to what you could infer from the major publications of the literary profession, you would quickly discern that race, class, and gender were the hot topics of the late twentieth century, but you would never suspect that the earth's life support systems were under stress. Indeed, you might never know that there was an earth at all. In contrast, if you were to scan the newspaper headlines of the same period, you would learn of oil spills, lead and asbestos poisoning, toxic waste contamination, extinction of species . . . " (Glotfelty and Fromm 16), and she goes on with the list of these issues related to the environment. She also notes that there had been no journals, jobs, discussion groups, professional societies, or conferences on literature and the environment. But since Glotfelty's remark, there have been several advances in literature and literary theory's relationship with the environment. Several authors began writing about environmental issues, critics developing theoretical frameworks, and creating conferences and journals, all related to critically looking at the role of the environment in literature.

In the few decades when ecocriticism was developed as a critical theory in literary studies, it asserted its relevance through varying discourses and by drawing from multiple fields of study, including anthropology, sociology, environment studies, etc. It had situated itself as a critical stance in its own right. Several key figures in the ecocritical movement had disputed the terms 'eco' vs 'environment' criticism. As a student of science, I prefer the term "eco" over the term environment as it deviates from an anthropocentric view to an ecological one. I'd like to include in the term ecocriticism all kinds of environments and spaces that are in constant engagement with human life. If that seems to center human beings as more important in an environment, I would argue that it does not because focusing on an environment without human beings offers no serious critical investigations to take place.

The field of environmental studies was created and established in the mid-eighties and nineties. A new association for studies in ecocriticism called the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) was formed in 1992. The next year, a new journal was established by Patrick Murphy called ISLE (Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment). These two initiatives established ecocriticism as a distinct critical school of study. Defining ecocriticism is not the most straightforward since it has grown in its conceptual depth and breadth. Glotfelty's definition is simple and useful for the time being, "ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and physical environment"(Glotfelty and Fromm 18). They go on to clarify the definition with some questions that the field is interested in such as, "How is nature represented in this sonnet, what role does physical setting play in the plot of this novel? How do our metaphors of land influence the way we treat it? ... In addition to race, class and gender, should place become a new critical category?"(19) I find that these questions are more helpful in understanding the field than the definition of the term itself.

Ecocriticism, while negotiating its definition, forces one to contemplate the relevance of literature itself. It lifts literature from being passive to having active influence in our lives and the material world around us. Instead of being just a cultural product, it engages in the material reality of the world more than we immediately notice. As Glotfelty observes, literary theory in general, examines the relationship between the writers, text, and the world. Ecocriticism expands the notion of the world from meaning the "social sphere" to encompass the entire ecosphere.

Place as a critical category

"Kuttanad is the only place in the world which is entirely made by human beings," Hareesh writes in Moustache (140). Of course by this he meant that the land, which was once merely swamp and water was transformed by the people there into vast fields

that characterize Kuttanad today. But I would like to take this as a starting point for a discussion about the idea of a *place.* Aren't all places made, or in other words constructed, sometimes imagined, by human beings? Of the several questions raised in the field of Ecocriticism (Glotfelty and Fromm 19), one of the most basic is regarding the role of the setting in the work of fiction. Every story is also the story of the place within which it unfolds. The characters in the story can only engage with their environment as is allowed by the qualities of the place or the setting: it would be different in a city as opposed to a remote village in the hills. The question of place is certainly fundamental to Ecocriticism. It is followed by the term Ecoliterature, which points to the texts that acknowledge the place not merely as a background but equally part of the narrative. They foreground multiple aspects of the setting that we, by default, push into the backdrop. These texts are also sensitive to ecologically destructive practices and defend against them. In her article "What is Ecocriticism," Allison Wallace defines eco-literature as "[w]riting that examines and invites the intimate human experience of place's myriad ingredients: weather, climate, flora, fauna, soil, air, water, rocks, minerals, fire and ice, as well as all the marks there of human history. Writing that sifts carefully among old metaphors regarding natural phenomena (again, including humans) and casts about for new ones, conscious that metaphors serve not only as our links to these things but also as our provisional truths about them" (Wallace). Moustache is an example of Ecoliterature. The surge of eco-literature in the contemporary period can be attributed to climate change and an increasing awareness of the presence of nature as a consequence (Ghosh). *Place* is a different concept from nature or environment. It is bounded not so much by any physical or geographical boundary but by our experience of it. In describing the land of Kuttanad in *Moustache*, Hareesh is imagining, *textualizing*, and *narrativizing* the place as experienced by the author. The events that are unfolding in the story take place in the first half of the twentieth century before the author was even born. In that sense, Kuttanad in *Moustache* is an imagined place like Khasak, and the wilderness he depicts is also an imagined wilderness. From the vantage point of our contemporary world, where

some propose the end of nature (McKibben 63) and some the end of the world (Morton 2), such an imagination of wilderness necessarily becomes a political act. This is because the idea of wilderness as we imagine it in our minds does not exist anymore. By changing the global climate, we made every place on the earth man-made and artificial (McKibben 54). Hareesh's portrayal of nature is not romantic- a distant object to be witnessed or enjoyed- in fact, it is in some sense the opposite. *Moustache* draws us almost too close to its mythical landscape and its thriving multi-species communities of fishes and fauna and flora, that we don't see nature anywhere in the text. We only experience it *as* the text. The novel shows nature with its real agency and vigor, be it the floods that take place in the novel that create an "unearthly, hellish, scene" (Hareesh 159) or smallpox that affects the people "as though in a fury to annihilate [humanity] only once every twelve or twenty-four years" (173) or even the rain that doesn't end for days. The rain, however, with its innate agency "[is] not averse to compromise" and left the place of Chemmayikkari free, the place where people with the pestilence were kept (173). Kuttanad is in fact below the sea level and prone to floods three times a year. Nature is not passive in Kuttanad, nor is it merciful. It is a place in which nature expresses materiality at its highest. It is interesting to see how such materiality encodes itself into the text, affecting the text in a fundamental way. Can another land, that is much less dynamic, say even barren, give rise to a text like Moustache? It is unlikely. The materiality of the place shapes the texts it generates, the assumptions and relationships that underlie the text, and the values it promotes. The land, in a sense, speaks. A similar sentiment is put forward by Amitav Ghosh in *The Great Derangement*. He wonders whether our greater recognition and awareness of nature these days as a result of unlikely events becoming commonplace, is an indication that "there are entities in the world, like forests, that are fully capable of inserting themselves into our processes of thought?" He concludes that it is indeed the case that "non-human forces have the ability to intervene directly in human thought" (36). Ghosh also notes that the form of the novel in its imposition of certain boundaries in time and space offers a unique experience of a "sense of place," boundaries

that "render places into texts, so that they can be read" (62). *Place* is also intimately tied to memory and identity, themes that are deeply explored in the novel Moustache. For instance, Chella before her death, arrives at a place that "seemed familiar, as though the memory of it had been passed on to her through ancestral blood" (Hareesh 150). A place or a landscape has also an imagined aspect to it. It is intangible in the same way our experiences of things are. In other words, a place is not entirely real or material section cut out from the universe. It is always a representation that contains parts that are real and fictional. In one of the essays, Yi-Fu Tuan writes that "Landscape is ... an image, a construct of the mind and of feeling"(Tuan 89). It is this constructed landscape in *Moustache* that is one of my interests in this study.

Kuttanad in Moustache or Khasak in The Legends are examples of this. Khasak, despite it being a fictional space evokes a similar sense of place as Kuttanad. Ashwathy, Ravindran and Das writes in their paper on *The Legends of Khasak* that the narrative strategy by Vijayan "not only establishes Khasak as a real space but also fuses the physical with metaphysical space in the postmodern sense" (Ashwathy and Das 187). This is indeed true for Kuttanad also. It is a postmodern space that undermines binary distinctions between the real and the unreal. In both the novels, this is established by the use of magic. The place is also created by the narratives generated by the people who live there. Local myths about the land, mainly oral narratives and songs about gods and characters from folklore like Muthan, Perumaadan, or Aanamarutha, inform how people perceive the place and how they respond to it. In *Moustache* the character Damodaran's younger sister scolds her child to stop spitting otherwise "the Makkan will come get you." In another instance, local goddesses who set out to faraway temples at night are thought to always "take the same route, so we just have to be careful to avoid them." Myths are often attributed to particular places which can be seen in the novel. The spirit of Chovan only played tricks on those "who passed by the spot" (Hareesh 23) and the islet of Pathiramanal abounds with the spirits of those who died collecting

clams. Ashwathy, Ravindran, and Das note that "[i]t is these oral narratives that inform the very epistemology of the place and serve as a site wherein the borders of physical, cognitive and spiritual realms merge" (191). And place as a concept, as an experience, as a feeling lies precisely in this intersection of the physical, cognitive, and spiritual. And to the question of whether place should be seen as a critical category like gender or caste, I would argue that it should. We must critically explore how the place is constructed, how it is viewed and empowered, and how these representations of the place influence our actions.

2.4   Posthumanism

Posthumanism is a set of ideas that aims to shift the traditional conception of 'man' as we have understood it from the period of enlightenment. It also aims to explore the changing relationship of the human being to his external world. The "post" in posthumanism refers to a deviation or something that succeeds the movement of humanism. It is also a reactionary position that challenges humanist ideas that were prevalent from the Renaissance to the end of the twentieth century. The trouble with the term is that it encompasses multiple perspectives and movements that call themselves posthumanist. But importantly they all reject the 20th-century humanist thinking. To understand the broader framework of Posthumanism, we need to explore the doctrine of Humanism– how it began, how it flourished, and how it is nearing its end. Humanism is a philosophical movement that was widely accepted during the Renaissance, in which the human being, rather than religion or God, is considered the center of the world. Human beings were considered as the center of the creation of knowledge and meaning, through the ability of the human rational mind as seen in the rapid artistic and technological advancement of the era.

The humanist conception of man as a separate and distinct entity with a superior

agency, and responsible for the well-being of other "lesser" organisms was widely accepted during that period. Part of the reason for such confidence in man was the explosion of human creativity and rational thought during the Enlightenment and the great cultural advances that succeeded it.

Humanist perspectives are grounded on certain assumptions about man as an epistemological category. These assumptions can collectively be termed "human nature". A related aspect of humanism, or a different kind of humanism that Paden (1987) in his paper calls "explanatory humanism" argues that most, or all social phenomena can be explained by reducing it to the fundamental characteristics of human beings (124). This essentialist idea points to a set of properties called "human nature" which distinguishes us from other species and objects. One of the primary goals of posthumanist thought is to re-evaluate human nature and to understand the roles of external things– plants, animals, resources, non-living things– in influencing us.

Another important doctrine of humanism came from Sartre who proposed it in his book 'Existentialism is Humanism'. Sartre was one of the main locus of humanist thinking in France during that period. He influenced later theorists such as Foucault who critiqued his ideas for focusing too much on the individual and overlooking the influences of power structures. Existentialists like Sartre believed that existence precedes essence. By this he means that human beings are not born with an essence already established within them but rather, it comes about after their existence. This means that one has a choice to what his behavior or purpose in the world is. As humanist thinking flourished in the West the belief that man was a superior being was unquestionable. Humanism is also not a coherent set of beliefs. Richard Norman in his book *On Humanism* argues by looking at different humanist thinkers that there is no definitive set of beliefs called humanism, and that "there are many humanisms" (Norman 8). Just as there are many Humanisms, there are also many Posthumanisms. All the movements that consider themselves posthuman reject the humanist philosophy.

Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, who is a Renaissance philosopher, who has been called a humanist writes in his oration *On the Dignity of Man*:

> "The nature of all other creatures is defined and restricted within laws which We have laid down; you, by contrast, impeded by no such restrictions, may, by your own free will, to whose custody We have assigned you, trace for yourself the lineaments of your own nature. I have placed you at the very center of the world, so that from that vantage point you may with greater ease glance round about you on all that the world contains. We have made you a creature neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, in order that you may, as the free and proud shaper of your own being, fashion yourself in the form you may prefer. It will be in your power to descend to the lower, brutish forms of life; you will be able, through your own decision, to rise again to the superior orders whose life is divine." (Mirandola, n.p.)

According to Giovanni, one of the main attributes of human beings that gives them a higher status compared to other beings is their ability to choose freely on matters of how to conduct their life. He also gives man the power of judgment, and the ability to mold one's life to his wishes. Postmodern thought questions this idea of free will and sees man as the product of his environment.

In the modern era, human beings are enhanced by technology. Our smartphones and devices have become extensions of ourselves. Moreover, our human functions are replaced or added to by the use of prosthetic devices to the point that the definition of human becomes impossible without acknowledging them. We are once again asking the same question raised around two hundred years ago "What is Man"? Posthumanism answers the question by deconstructing the traditional idea of an autonomous, coherent, sovereign human and reinterpreting it as a series of congeries. It breaks the traditional boundaries of man and extends him as part of a larger network of interconnected and interdependent

living and non-living entities. Posthumanism anticipates the ambiguity in the definitions of the terms human, animal and machine as they intermix in modern and fictional settings (especially in science fiction) to form new entities that are assemblages.

Pramod K. Nayar begins his book *Posthumanism* by looking at fiction that blurs the boundaries and creates hybrid races of human and non-human. One of his interests is the works of Octavia Butler who bridge human and non-human worlds by inventing beings that are neither human nor the Other. Throughout the book, Nayar looks at how the idea of a normal human being is a constructed and not objective reference point.

One important movement in Posthumanism is called critical Posthumanism, which according to Nayar is the "radical decentering of the traditional sovereign, coherent and autonomous human in order to demonstrate how the human is always already evolving with, constituted by and constitutive of multiple forms of life and machines" (Nayar 11). It is through critical posthumanism one can aim to deconstruct and redefine the idea of man for the twenty-first century. Amidst technological advances, we unknowingly become intertwined with technological devices that add functionality to human beings. When looking closely at the idea of human beings as a distinct category, one fails to regard where the human begins and where it ends. For example, a considerable part of our own genetic makeup is shared by other living things, and we as human beings evolved against other species that were present at that time including plants and animals and maybe even fungi.

Nayar distinguishes between two notions of Posthumanism. One is the hybrid nature of altered humans in which human beings are modified in terms of functionality through technology or some other means. It is an ontological condition. An entirely different notion of the posthuman involves the historical conception of the human that placed man as superior to other forms of life. This is a more critical form of posthumanism, which begins with the "assumption that the human incorporates difference in the form of other

DNA, species, and forms of life so that its uniqueness is a myth"(Nayar 13). Thus in terms of critical posthumanism, we are already posthuman, unlike in the first notion in which we need to be intermixed with technology to become the posthuman. Literary works that encompass magical realist techniques often blur the boundaries between humans and animals to highlight the already existing posthuman condition. Another important term that is related is transhumanism, which is defined as "an intensification of humanism" by Cary Wolfe (Nayar 16). Transhumanists believe that the current human condition can be improved and made better with the use of technology. This in turn can give us better intellect, health, or lifespan.

The ecocritical inclinations of posthumanism, especially critical posthumanism as posited by Nayar are pretty easily understood, especially when we look at the emerging field of material ecocriticism. Clark in his book *The Value of Ecocriticism* observes that "Environmental issues are always inherently 'posthuman' in that they stress the degree to which human life and thought are determined by multiple material conditions and relationships" (14).

He quotes Alaimo in his other work *Ecocriticism on the Edge*:

> "In sum, to see 'matter as "interactive becoming"' is to 'infuse a posthumanist environmentalist ethic that refuses to see the delineated shape of the human as distinct from the background of nature, and instead focuses on interfaces, interchanges, and transformative material/discursive practices'" (58)

Such a posthuman turn in Ecocriticism is explored by Serpil Oppermann in his paper *From Posthumanism to Posthuman Ecocriticism* (Oppermann 29). As we see, Posthumanism as a movement does not exist in isolation. Its concepts align very much with environmental criticism of the twenty-first century and will have a substantial influence on the future of the Humanities. It would be impossible for any forthcoming field of

humanities to not acknowledge these ideas. Every branch of human knowledge relied upon the basic idea of man as its ideological basis. And when this notion itself changes, everything would need to be redefined in terms of the new definition of the human, which is what Posthumanism proposes.

The next chapter will discuss the socio-political and environmental context of Kerala that forms the historical and literary background for *Moustache*, and to read it as a postmodern magical realist novel in Malayalam.

Chapter 3

From Khasak to Kuttanad: A Comparative Reading

The Legends of Khasak is a text that had a profound impact on Malayalam literature. It is widely known for its unique use of language and the fusion of physical and metaphysical realms. Published in 1969, it portrays the journey of the protagonist Ravi into the fictional village of Khasak. The story takes place in the middle of the twentieth century, during a time when Kerala was changing through social and political reforms. Khasak is a place isolated from the influences of the outside world. Modernity has not found its way into the region yet. Life in this village is still governed by mythologies, traditions, and beliefs in spiritual and metaphysical realms. The Gods protect the village and ancient spirits roam around the countryside. The fictional nature of the place comes not only from its non-existence but the very construction of it through its legends, stories, and myths. *The Legends of Khasak* is read through the perspective of Ravi, whose journey to seek the ultimate truth and spiritual redemption leads him to the village of Khasak. Ravi is a young man with prospects of studying at Princeton. Instead, fate directs him to Khasak which becomes a temporary *sarai* in his search of spiritual escape from the rigid ethical and moral life in the city.

Moustache by S. Hareesh is a novel of epic dimensions that loosely follows the charac-
ter Vavachan, the son of Paviyan who belongs to a lower Pulaya caste, and his wanderings
across the land of Kuttanad. His life turns around when he accidentally finds himself
playing the role of a moustached policeman in a drama, a character that never fully comes
out of. In his wanderings and the search for a woman he encountered named Seetha, he
tangles himself into the landscape of Kuttanad, and into the stories and songs that people
tell. The stories and songs raise him into a legendary and mythical figure in the region
capable of extraordinary and magical abilities. These echo in the entire region affecting
everyone who inhabits the landscape, human and non-human.

Both novels take place in Kerala. Khasak is based on an village called Thasarak
near Palakkad. Kuttanad is a region that is spread across the districts of Alappuzha,
Kottayam and Pathanamthitta. Both settings in which the novel unfolds are isolated from
the influences of modernity. Although considered as a postmodern work, the elements
of modernism is still clearly visible in *The Legends of Khasak*. J.F. Lyotard in his work
The Postmodern Condition observes that "[a] work can become modern only if it is first
postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the
nascent state, and this state is constant" (79). The struggle of transition is visible in
the novel as the modern lifestyle of Ravi clashes with the mythical lives of the people
of Khasak. Moustache on the other hand is in my opinion the peak of postmodern
literature in Malayalam. In the next chapter, I will try to situate the text as postmodern
by examining its particular features.

Both novels have an inclination toward "nature". They both portray nature in abun-
dance. At the same time, they don't acknowledge nature as a separate category. One
drawback of literary analysis of texts looking for representations of nature, especially
texts from non-western regions that inherently see the world through a different ontolog-
ical lens from the West, is that they have to draw an imaginary line to separate "nature"
from the world to try to understand it. It tries to create an illusory distance when trying

to understand the representations of what must be categorized as *nature*. But what nature entails is arbitrary. We must acknowledge this inherent limitation before engaging in texts that don't see an ontological separation between man and nature. In *Moustache*, spaces are not distinguished as inside or outside. It all takes place in nature. They all merge together as a single space of the text. Foreground and background exchange their places. Every other sentence mentions nature in some or the other manner. The novel not only deals with human drama but is inclusive of all species of plants, animals and fishes that come across in the text. Each species of plants and other living beings are equally given consideration and their own narrative space. In *The Legends of Khasak*, the relationship between human beings and nature is exemplified through an allegorical short story that Ravi tells his children. It is about two spores who parted ways for one wanted to stay and the other who was overcome by a desire to discover. Later the spore who stayed became the Chetali tree and the one who travelled became a girl with surma eyes, who despite being her sister does not recognize the tree. This story mirrors the parting of human beings from nature, failing to acknowledge the roots of their existence. This is an allegorical destruction of the human/nature binary. Moustache also blurs the boundary between human beings and nature but is more direct and textual, often using metaphors and similies. For instance, Hareesh compares Vavachan to a plant at one point in the novel- "[l]ike an unmoving coconut tree or a cormorant, he was part of the landscape, and invisible at first glance" (Hareesh 98).

Anand in her comparative study of *The Legends of Khasak* writes that, "The characters of Khasak emerge more as functions of the landscape than entities controlling and regulating nature"(9). This is also true with *Moustache*, where people always seem to be responding to the landscape, be it floods endless rains, or epidemics. There are also people who are clearly portrayed as separate from nature. Notably in the novel the cast hierarchy determines the extent of alienation from nature. Those in the lower caste are described as closer to nature, almost merging into their environment, than those of the

upper caste. The presence of Paviyan who belonged to the Pulaya caste is seen as "natural and expected, like the shadow of a coconut tree in the slanting evening light" (17). They were also thought to possess magic tricks just by virtue of belonging to a particular caste. The character Matha Mappila in the novel warns others about Vavachan, that "[h]e's been seen in different places at the same time. Bet he knows some magic and tricks. He's a Pulayan after all" (87). Just like people, the gods too arise as the functions of the land. They are also an integral part of the experience of the landscape for the people. For instance, in *The Legends of Khasak*, the tamarind tree is considered the goddess who is believed to have cursed Chand Umma's father, the wandering Fakir.

In both the novels, there is a sense of agency given to the non-human. In *The Legends of Khasak*, the agency of the non-human is an illusory agency granted by the beliefs of the people. For instance, the Chetali hill upon which the ghost of the Sheikh sleeps is thought to possess powers that can have destructive effects on the people. In *Moustache* the agency of the things lie within themselves. It is not bound by the human actor. These entities act in their own ways, independent of an external governing body. The boat in which Paviyan traveled changed its course by itself to avoid hitting the snakehead murrel Paappu. "In the olden days," writes Hareesh, "coconut trees used to bend their heads to the Chovans, and the paddy would hold dried and ready-to-pound grains for the Pulayans" (241)

In both novels, it is the people who construct the land through stories and myths. The landscape enables the telling of these narratives. These stories serve a social function. They guide the fears and desires of the people living there. Just as *The Legends of Khasak*, it is the various legends of Kuttanad that give meaning to the existence of its people. In the case of *The Legends of Khasak*, the Chetali hill is considered sacred and believed to look upon the people of the village. In *Moustache* the entire Kuttanad is deemed magical, a place where local goddesses and other mythical beings wander about. The fantastical stories and songs about Vavachan instill fear in all of Kuttanad. They

change their ways of living and behaviour in response to these stories. It is interesting to note however that those who belong in the lower caste experiences the land differently from the rest. Magic is inclusive in their experience of the land. For them there is no distinction between real and magical events. Both are equally part of their day-to-day existence. In the novel, Hareesh writes,

> "Paviyan had seen a boat moving across the water without an oarsman. It was not simply floating in the water, but cutting across the currents as though it was in a rush to reach somewhere or to escape from someone. Still, he had not felt the need to share that story with anyone – not even with Chella. He would recall the incident if he had occasion to go that way, that was all. Chella, meanwhile, was the type of person who witnessed extraordinary sights within the small area of the two or three fields she traversed in the course of her daily work. A Paravan coconut picker slithering down a coconut tree upside down, paddy stalks fallen over in the rain raising their heads to see if someone was coming – she witnessed such wonders on a daily basis"(73).

Moustache can be seen as the peak of postmodern thought in Malayalam literature. Its use of myths and local stories to compose a pluralist narrative is unmistakably postmodern. Myths have been part of the literary tradition in Malayalam for a very long time, especially in local regions that predominantly used songs and oral storytelling to express these narratives. The arrival of modernism and changes in the socio-political landscape give rise to the form of the modern novel that was mostly used to realistically depict the social condition of the time. With the postmodern turn in our culture, texts like *Moustache* and *The Legends of Khasak* once again rediscovers these mythical stories once buried by the realistic narratives of modernist texts.

In *The Legends of Khasak*, we see the world through the perspective of Ravi. His emotional and psychological states in trying to make sense of Khasak and his place in

there are explored (8, 11). In the case of *Moustache*, the psychological aspect is largely absent. Vavachan, the main character, is always kept at a distance from the reader. We never fully understand Vavachan and the reasons for his actions. Even the narrator cannot explain "why did he run away with a policeman's moustache? Where did he hope to get to, navigating this boundless trap?" (Hareesh 90)

In both novels, the main characters embark on a journey with different goals and reaching different destinations. In *The Legends of Khasak*, the journey is allegorical and has multiple levels of meaning. Ravi's journey to Khasak mirrors his inner spiritual journey. Even during his stay in Khasak, sitting on his bed, he is drawn into the fantasy of the journey, his room metaphorically moving through the veils of time:

> "The seedling house became a compartment in a train, and he the lone and imprisoned traveller. Dark wastes lay on either side; from them fleeting signs spoke to Ravi—a solitary firefly, a plodding lantern. The wheels moved along the track with soft, deceptive thuds" (Vijayan 45).

In the case of *Moustache*, the journey is a literal traversal of Vavachan through Kuttanad, complimented by his transformation into Moustache. Vavachan, as he goes through this journey he slowly merges with the narrative and immortalizes himself in the stories and songs of Kuttanad.

Ravi, an honors student with prospects of studying astrophysics at Princeton, symbolizes everything Eurocentric—civilized, scientific, and modern. He faces the irrational world of Khasak, which is based on stories and beliefs in the supernatural. He is an outsider whose ideas and worldviews are challenged by the village. At the same time, Ravi finds the irrationality of Khasak as a place of mental refuge from the rigid moral and ethical make-up of urban life, where he can escape his past and forge a new identity for himself.

In Vijayan's novel, one is able to read Khasak against the Western-educated background of Ravi. The two incompatible systems of thought are contrasted against each other. Ravi becomes the objective reference to the paralogical ways of Khasak. It is presented as an *encounter*, a word that invokes colonial history. This makes it easier to see Khasak as a separate ontological space, distant yet strangely enchanting.

In the case of *Moustache*, there is no objective standpoint. Even the reader stands on an unstable ground of reality that can change, expand, and even deceive the reader at any moment. It presents multiple subjective points of view, some non-human, that paint a picture of life in Kuttanad. In the novel, there is no passive, unchanging background that can be identified as entirely separate from the story, and hence, there can be no foreground. As Morton writes in another context, the "background ceases to be a background, because we have started to observe it" (113). Objects in the narrative "thrust themselves towards us" (76). This merging of the background with the foreground, in some sense, parallels our contemporary experience. In *Hyperobjects*, Morton writes that "[i]n an age of global warming, there is no background, and thus there is no foreground. It is the end of the world since worlds depend on backgrounds and foregrounds" (99). The setting acts like a character in itself, and the characters act like a setting, constantly changing and responding. What differentiates between a character and a setting? This is a binary that is questioned in the novel. The idea of a character is based on dynamism and agentic action and setting based on an unchanging passivity. What happens when there is no passive entity? In one instance in the novel, after Vavachan enters another world through the mushroom, he thinks what if he "stood at one place" like a plant or a tree and spent the rest of his life contemplating? (128). It is this sense of passivity that undermines Vavachan as a "character" as opposed to a "setting". He is certain that "all he would have to do is to watch the skies by night and the expanse of fields and water around him by day, without losing the sense of wonderment" (129). Just like Vavachan, we too are carried away by the constantly evolving, acting landscape of Kuttanad. In a

more radical sense, what we experience through the reading of the novel is the evolution of the landscape and the people merely contained, tangled, and run through as it changes. In an instance from the novel, the boat with Paviyan darted away from the snakehead murrel named Paappu, and it set in motion the entire events that give rise to the whole narrative (Hareesh 17). Also, there is no consolation for Vavachan as there is for Ravi. There is no escape from the landscape. He is trapped by the vast expanse of fields, an expanse "that only had a beginning, and no end" (80).

Both *The Legends of Khasak* and *Moustache* actively try to revise existing norms and ethical frameworks by starting tabula rasa. Hareesh's Kuttanad "is a place with no history, or with a history that no one remembers" (89). Both Khasak and the Kuttanad lie outside of time and history. Both Hareesh and Vijayan explore what it would be like to live in a society unaltered and uncolonized by European ideals. In *Moustache*, more than in *The Legends of Khasak*, the novel limits the acknowledgment of the existence of the West to the margins- a reversal of Eurocentric thinking. In that sense, Moustache can also be read as a postcolonial novel, marginalizing the West and reclaiming the land's indigenous knowledge and ways of living.

Both novels are considered magical realist works. They exhibit the presence of an undercurrent of magic in an otherwise realistic narrative. But the way they use magic is different. In *The Legends of Khasak*, the magic is restricted to the mythical stories told by the people. In *Moustache*, the magic transcends these stories and becomes part of the reality itself. The boundary sustained between physical and metaphysical reality in *The Legends of Khasak* is completely blurred in Moustache. Hareesh's novel takes the postmodern aspects of Vijayan's novel and explores them in a much larger scope. In Vijayan's novel, the magic is primarily epistemological, while in *Moustache*, the magic is ontological. This mirrors Brian McHale's idea of modernism being epistemological and postmodernism ontological (McHale 9). There is also a strong posthuman aspect to *Moustache*, which is not present in *The Legends of Khasak*.

I have done most of the comparison by taking Vijayan's self-translated version of the novel and not the original *Khasakinte Itihasam* in Malayalam. There are a few differences in the attitude of the novel in both versions, which have been explored by several scholars, but the plot and story remain the same. In the case of Hareesh's novel, I have mainly referred to its English translation by Jayasree Kalathil. Although it doesn't portray the musicality of the language used by Hareesh, the themes and story remain essentially the same. It is almost fifty years after O.V. Vijayan's magical realist work *The Legends of Khasak*, which made a profound impact in Malayalam literature that Hareesh writes his magical realist novel *Moustache*. One can see that there are elements that Hareesh inherits from Vijayan in terms of the magical mode of narration but differs in many other ways to create a highly original piece of work.

Chapter 4

Context: From Literary to the Landscape

4.1 Malayalam: From Language to Literature

Malayalam literature occupies a special place in Indian literary heritage. The cultural history of Kerala had been shaped by its relative isolation from the rest of India and its exposure to the West through trade relations. This has resulted in a multiculture reflected in the literary tradition in Malayalam (Ramakrishnan 29). From its beginnings as a language derived from an old Tamil and influenced by Sanskrit, Malayalam over the centuries became an independent language with its distinct style and literary ambitions. The early forms of Malayalam can be traced back to the works in Manipravalam, a literary language that emerged in the medieval period. Later Malayalam gradually developed into an independent language and saw the emergence of works such as *Ramacharitam* and Cherusseri's *Krishnagatha*. Tunchath Ezhuthachan created modern form of Malayalam with his work Adhyatma Ramayanam, which helped raise Malayalam as a robust literary language. Ramanujan Ezhuthachan, who is considered the father of modern Malayalam,

is also a figure who makes his appearance in Hareesh's novel *Moustache*. Literary works in Malayalam had always been deeply attuned to the vast changes that took place in the social and political landscape of Kerala, throughout its history. Malayalam authors responded to Western literary influences in style, form, and content and were also receptive to the modernist and postmodernist movements, which are reflected in their works. Most of the development of Malayalam had been through now largely extinct traditional genres such as Kavyas, Sandeshkavyas (messenger poems), Ithihasas (sagas), Attakatha (poetic narratives), Khanda Kavyas (miniature epics), etc. These were gradually replaced by Western forms of the novel and the short story during the last quarter of the nineteenth century (Palakeel 189). One of the key works in Malayalam that adopted the Western style of the novel was *Indulekha* (1889) by Chandu Menon. *Indulekha* is considered a point of departure for Malayalam literature and marked the beginning of the realist novel in Malayalam. It raised the aesthetic and literary standard of the Malayalam novel and quickly became the standard for evaluating later novels. It also marked the beginning of a new medium for expressing social concerns of the period.(Vinayan and Raj 2). The early 20th century saw a radical departure from traditional literary forms and the emergence of Modernism. This was the result of the influence of global literary trends and also the various social movements that were happening in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in Kerala. The writers experimented with new forms and themes, exploring new techniques and seeking new perspectives. This period saw the modernist works by writers such as Vaikom Muhammad Basheer, Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, Kesavadev, etc., who broke from conventional themes and explored social realities in their works. Pillai's masterpiece *Chemmeen* had a significant cultural and social influence on the literary landscape of Malayalam. Kesavadev's *Odayil Ninnu* also provided fierce critiques of social injustices and hierarchies of the time. The postmodern turn in Malayalam literature marked the latter half of the 20th century. It was a departure from objective, unified, realistic novels to fragmented narratives, multiple perspectives, and the use of intertextuality. One of the key texts that started the postmodernist movement

48

was *Khasakinte Itihasam* by O.V. Vijayan, which was also the text that arguably began the magical realist tradition in Malayalam. There existed stories with myth and magic like Panchatantra, because they did not exhibit the unique characteristics of magical realism, they were not considered as part of the genre. However, *Khasakinte Itihasam* was one of the first novels to be characterized as a magical realist work owing to its novel narrative features. Postmodern writers like O.V. Vijayan reintroduced myths and explored the intersections of fictionality and reality. S. Hareesh is part of this long list of postmodern authors in Malayalam, experimenting with language in depicting a reality that is inherently diverse, intermingled, and unknowable.

4.2   The Role of Translation in Malayalam Literature

Malayalam literature saw a proliferation of translations of literary works from around the world, especially from the West, during the late nineteenth and also late twentieth century, especially in the 1970s and 80s. This influx of translations can be attributed to the dynamic social landscape of Kerala during that period. It was when major reformations took place in Kerala, also sometimes known as 'Kerala's renaissance'. Most translations were from English, but there were considerable works from French and Russian authors. Some of the translated authors were Tolstoy, Maupassant, Maxim Gorky, Dostoevsky, Gogol, Chekhov from Russian literature and Jules Verne, Voltaire, Hugo, and Dumas from French literature. This period if also related to the rise of social realism in Malayalam literature (Sherrif 163). Translation also played a huge cultural role. Ramakrishnan in his essay on the role of translation in Malayalam literature observes:

"During the various stages of its development as the language of a large community inhabiting the province of Kerala, Malayalam had to negotiate the ideologies of power inherent in these separate traditions at different points in history. Translation became the mode of negotiation in resisting the hegemonic tendencies in these separate traditions.

Translation was built into Kerala's literary culture almost from its inception. Kerala used translation to define its identity and move away from the dominant Sanskrit and Tamil traditions. Translation allowed the native sensibility to resist cultural influences that appeared overwhelming to the indigenous culture" (30).

These translations paved the way for new prose-centered genres like novels, short stories, etc. In the late 1980s, when Latin American works gained an international reputation, those works were widely translated into Malayalam. In fact, Malayalam was one of the first Indian languages to publish translations of Latin American authors. Among the translated are works by authors like Marquez, Mario Vargas Llosa, Borges, etc. These authors were received well and extensively read in the public libraries in various local regions in Kerala. They influenced a huge number of writers and readers in Kerala, and their influences can be widely seen in Malayalam literature. Hareesh, in his novel *Moustache* refers to Borges and also puts as his epigraph a quote by Brazillian writer Jorge Amado. There are also thematic and narrative elements inspired by Latin American authors that can be traced in the works of Malayalam writers. Hareesh adopts the 'marvelous realism' of Alejo Carpentier, who used the term in his prologue to his novel *The Kingdom of This World* to describe the inherent magical nature of Latin America (Carpentier), in describing his homeland of Kuttanad. He also uses the Latin American idea of the labyrinth in constructing his story.

4.3 Situating *Moustache* as a Postmodern Text

Hareesh's *Moustache* can be identified as a postmodern text by looking at its thematic choices and narrative style. The narrative structure of the novel is non-linear, often changing from the narrator's life to the story of Vavachan who tells to his son. The distinction between both worlds is also blurred in many instances. The story of Moustache can be seen as a story within a story. But it is also not a single story but composed

of multiple local stories and myths in the region. Again, the boundaries are blurred when Vavachan becomes part of the myths that are told in the story and becomes a fictional figure himself. These multiple levels of story within a story are characteristic of postmodern texts. Hareesh uses magic and reintroduces the myths told by the people of Kuttanad over several generations. *Moustache* challenges dominant ideas about reality and provides a non-western lens to look at the world. According to Brian McHale, postmodern fiction is more interested in the problems of modes of being or ontology than problems of knowing or epistemology (McHale 9). The reality that unfolds around Vavachan as he is forced to go on the journey is not epistemological. What we observe is not the psychological reality of Vavachan. It is independent of how the characters perceive it. In other words, it is ontological. Even when the focalization shifts from Vavachan, the landscape continues to exhibit its magical properties. The author creates a sense of merging of realms, making it hard to separate fiction and imagination from reality. There is an inherent sense of mystery attributed to the reality and the environment, achieved through a magical realist mode of narration. His representation of the landscape is not something that can be expressed fully but construed as limitless and unfathomable, at one point describing it as a "boundless trap"(Hareesh 90). The story told by the narrator is at multiple points in the narrative broken by Ponnu asking questions about the story and the character, constantly reminding the reader that they are reading a constructed text (204). There is also no single ending to the text. Vavachan lives in multiple stories. He is always alive through the stories and songs that the people of Kuttanad tell. Vavachan also does not fulfill his goals. In some stories, he is with Seetha, and in some stories, he is still searching for her. In other stories, his search does not end even after finding Seetha. Like many other postmodern texts, Moustache also deals with shifting identities. Identities change throughout the narrative. Vavachan does not assume the role of the characters he is forced to act. He *is* the policeman. He *is* Muthan for the people he dragged out of the water (169). He *is* the Matapathi who takes care of those who are diseased. Hareesh writes, "In some songs Moustache was Edanadan," and "[i]n the song

in the kayal fields, Moustache was a man from Kaipuzha, and there were other songs in which he was a man from Pulinkunnu, a boatman from the coast, or a different man from Mundar". And then there were "songs in which he was a Vaalan from Thanneermukkam, and a Parayan living on the embankment of the Chalakkappalli field". He writes that "the moustached man who had appeared onstage was not the same man who had escaped into the paddy fields, or the one who was described in the stories and songs"(284). Who is Moustache really? He is all of these characters. Moustache is all of them. This is true not only for the human characters, as Hareesh writes, "[t]he cattle egrets of one land became kalimundi in another, yellow bitterns became manjakocha"(247). Hareesh rejects the idea of one true identity and celebrates the multiplicity of characters that are within us, all of them equally true and make up who we are.

Intertextuality in Moustache

According to theorists like Julia Kristeva, intertextuality is one of the important characteristics of a postmodern text. Hareesh uses intertextuality extensively in his works, especially in his novel *Moustache*. He mainly uses it in the form of allusions. One of the chapters of the novel, chapter 7, is titled after the work of Vaikom Muhammed Basheer, an important writer of the modernist period. Hareesh also references epics like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, stories from Panchatantra, etc. HariHarasudan and Thavabalan mention in their analysis of Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things* that "[...] no good Indian text can escape from the influence of classic epics like Mahabharath and Ramayan"(Hariharasudan and Thavabalan 13825). Vavachan, with his fear-inducing moustache, is frequently compared to the ten-headed demon Ravana from Ramayana. The third chapter is titled "Ravanan" in which Vavachan's drama is carried on where he acts as a policeman. At one point, horror washes over the audience, who felt that "[Vavachan] had truly turned into the fearsome king, Ravanan"(Hareesh 48). While talking about the land of Kuttanad, the narrator explains that the place is "like the magical palace built by

Mayasuran for the Pandavas in Indraprastha. A place that beguiles one with trapdoors and labyrinths like the fortress of Ravanan, the king of Lanka"(89). Then there are also parts of *Moustache* that, in isolation, feel like a reading of a story from Panchatantra. For instance, the narrator writes:

> "Paviyan saw a jungle fig tree, almost all of its branches leaning into the water, creating a tricky spot for the boats passing by. Its trunk was covered in tasteless fruits with bitter, red seeds. He wondered who had started the rumor that these fruits were sweet. A monkey sat on one of its branches. Paviyan had never seen a monkey in these parts. Its body was covered in white and gray hair, and it opened its mouth at a passing fly.'Hey there, friend,' the crocodile called out. The monkey ignored him" (110).

Here, the monkey ignores the crocodile instead of offering him the fruit, as it is in the original Panchatantra story of the monkey and the crocodile.

Latin American literature has been quite popular in Kerala for a long time due to the widely available translations. The narrator recalls Borges at one point in the novel and says that "[e]ven Borges has said that writing is not a faithful copy of life, and that if a Bengal tiger in a story has three legs and speaks Sanskrit, so be it" (33). At one point, the narrator also refers to a character in Crime and Punishment by Dostoevsky, another by the French writer Henri Charrière, and Gulliver from *Gulliver Travels*, etc. He writes about the local man who was his inspiration for his story of Moustache, that "[h]is life enticed me, much more than the lives of Papillon or Raskolnikov or Chanthrakkaran, and held my attention like the stories of the blue fox or of Gulliver" (33). He also refers to Hindu mythology when Vavachan opens his eyes and realizes that "the world had turned over an entire circle of life. Everything that had happened before – Ezhuthachan, the drama, Paviyan, the moustache, Seetha – had repeated itself" (159). He also refers to a tale about the snakes and eagles(160) and another about a Namboothiri who persuaded the goddess

Meenakshi(198). Further, he includes local mythologies from Kuttanad throughout the book. At one point in the novel, the narrator describes one of his characters, Ezhuthachan, as greatly interested in birds that "he spent several years watching the bird [Kalmannathi robin]. He had spent five years observing the red spot under its tail and the white mark that became visible only in flight. Its movements and feeding habits had taken several more years of dedicated observation" (128). This sounds very similar to how J. A. Baker, in his book *Preregrin*, writes about his obsession with the bird, "For ten years I spent all my winters searching for that restless brilliance, for the sudden passion and violence that peregrines flush from the sky. For ten years, I have been looking upward for that cloud-biting anchor shape, that crossbow flinging through the air" (Baker 31).

4.4 Ecological context of Kuttanad

Kuttanad is a deltaic region in Kerala spread across the districts Alappuzha, Kottayam, and Pathanamthitta, characterized by intricate waterways and vast stretches of paddy cultivation. It hosts the largest lake in Kerala, the Vembanad Kayal, and is a region of ecological importance. Most people in the area depend on agriculture and fishing for their sustenance. Those who live in Kuttanad know all too well about the power of the forces of nature—the land floods at least three times a year during the southwestern monsoons. The Vembanad Kayal is flooded with saltwater in the summer, and salinating the fields makes it unusable. Over the years, Kuttanad had been facing increasing human intervention and anthropogenic pressure that had increasingly adverse consequences for the region, including the ecology and even the people's livelihood. Climate change also had devastating effects in the area, including the shrinking of the carrying capacity of Vembanad Kayal and the increased intensity of rains that led to floods. This has resulted in a loss of fauna and flora, especially the fish population. Using nitrate and phosphate fertilizers from the fields has resulted in the eutrophication of large water bodies. Toxic

54

organic and inorganic matter is deposited through the rivers, resulting in health hazards. The increased flooding also contributed to waterborne parasites that cause diseases. Hareesh shares this ecological concern and nostalgia for a past wilderness in his novel. He understands and expresses the diversity of Kuttanad with its numerous birds, animals, and other species. He is also deeply observant of the geographical and ecological features of the land. He writes in detail about the "[f]orty-seven rivulets, one hundred and fourteen streams, and countless creeks originated in Kudamurutti Hill, and merged to form the rivers Meenachilar and Kavanaar. They flowed, twisting and turning, converging and diverging, to feed the fields in the lowlands" (154). He is knowledgable as we will see of the countless diverse fauna and flora of the region. Hareesh details about the Vembanad Kayal at one point: "[w]hen the water was clear, one could see huge rays with fan-like wings prowling the bottom, tiger prawns that could bite off a man's balls, giant barramundi with spines that could pierce and kill a person" (203). Hareesh uses extensively the particular ecological and geographic qualities of Kuttanad, to its maximum narrative capability, that makes it an amorphous space in which land and water, reality and unreality co-exist with each other.

Chapter 5

A Postmodern Analysis of *Moustache*

5.1 Locating the Real and the Unreal in S. Hareesh's *Moustache*

"But who is to say what [is] real?" asks Hareesh in the later pages of his most celebrated novel, *Moustache*(270). Indeed, that is precisely the task I had taken up in the following pages. My goal is to understand how the novel expresses the real and the unreal, how they interact within the text and challenge traditional ontologies, and examine them for the cultural functions they undertake in the text. Magical realist narratives exist in the liminal space between the real and the unreal. *Moustache*, in Ben Holgate's terms, "participates" in the genre of magical realism (Holgate 16). Magical realism is a Eurocentric term that separates magic and real as two ontologically separate categories. For most people outside the West for most of the period before the Enlightenment, it wasn't so. Their sense of reality encompassed the magic and the real. Although it is hard to pin down the genre because of its wide range and global scope, defining the

contours of the mode helps to understand it better. A few of these, as listed by Wendy B. Faris in her book *Ordinary Enchantments*, are helpful in understanding how magical realism is used in Hareesh's novel as a mode of narration (Faris 167). In the book, Hareesh uses narrative techniques such as the presence of an "irreducible element" of magic, a near merging of the planes of real and imaginary without each overpowering the other, detailed descriptions of the phenomenal world, distortion of the concepts of space, time and identity and dissolution of socially and linguistically constructed binaries to name a few. These characteristics are traditionally associated with the genre. By its subversive and political mode of narration, magical realism offers a deconstruction of our reality by questioning fundamental assumptions we have taken for granted. Given that in magical realist texts, the codes of real and unreal coexist, often blending into each other inseparably, one might question the usefulness or even the credibility of the task. But this will prove to be a fully worthwhile, meaningful, and relevant task because of the following reasons:

1. The magical elements or events that are present in the novel are not benign but have cultural and political implications. They are not devoid of meaning but make strong statements because of their selective distancing from rationality. They serve to deconstruct our supposed notions and provide useful insights. They allow fluid thinking in otherwise rigid, realistic thinking.

2. By understanding how magic is used in these texts, we can understand the author's ethical, philosophical, and moral standpoints, the impact they create on contemporary readers, and how they can be useful in adding to the current discourses on environment, ethics, and morality.

The task in front is not in any way trivial. Hareesh has constructed a world suspended in a liminal space between the magic and the real, often crossing between them without prior notice. There lies a certain sensibility behind the person taking up the task of

58

delineating an inherently magical world into real and unreal. A sensibility that makes him consider something as real and another as magical. It is easy sometimes in the novel to get pulled into confusion about whether Vavachan was really there at that particular time and place or if it was the "combined effect of the flickering lamp and the shadows it cast."(Hareesh 85). This ambiguity can never be fully resolved. Both these options must be true at the same time. This is often why magical realism has been resistant to traditional modes of literary criticism, which have upheld an ideal of objective study and rational analysis of texts. The only way to derive value from the analysis offered in the following pages without restricting the novel's scope is to relate and add such an analysis to the existing conversations about society and the environment. An analysis of the novel from an objective, rational perspective, thereby disregarding the magical component as something brought about by the author's ignorance, is not a useful approach. For instance, saying that it is not scientifically or rationally possible to make oneself smaller and fit under a mushroom, as one of the characters of Hareesh does, misses the point (127). When Ursula is horrified when José Arcadio Buendía hypotheses that Earth is round in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (Marquez 9), that "fact" evokes laughter among the turtles who speak in *Moustache* (Hareesh 113). In an article about Garcia Marquez, commenting on his book *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Rushdie writes, "These are stories about real people, not fairy tales. Macondo exists; that is its magic."(Rushdie). The characters and magical events Hareesh describes in *Moustache* are about real people and events. We see that the character Vavachan is a person that the narrator sees every day when he goes for a walk.

Any analysis of texts, particularly magical realist texts must add to the current discourses on the environment and climate change. My goal is to have a conversation with Hareesh's novel and explore how, through the use of narrative techniques like magical realism, the author challenges dominant notions, provides useful criticism, insights, and possible solutions to contemporary issues, particularly those related to the environment

and our changing relationship with it. Moreover, I want to explore how the novel reconstructs our flawed relationship with nature, bringing back the sense of mystery and respect towards nature that we have lost.

Before even attempting to analyze the novel I'm forced to confront, at least provisionally, the philosophical question of the real. This was expected because the terms 'magic' and 'real' are defined against each other. Their meaning lies, as Saussure would argue, in the *difference* and not in the terms themselves. In other words, what is magical is what is not real and if the concept of 'magic' were somehow to go away, what it had previously implied would be compensated by the term 'real'. The pre-Enlightenment and indigenous societies did not have a sharp separation between the concepts of magic and reality. But most of us would jump into answers in full confidence when invited to distinguish something into good/bad, true/false, and of course real/unreal. It comes quite naturally for people, from considerable years of living, to point to something as inherently good or bad, or as it is here the case, inherently real. The question didn't bother us when we were children. We were new to this world and saw everything as magical. As Hareesh says, "Flying Tigers, talking monkeys ... ethereal beings that stood guard over the ponds ... [The young child] *know* all of these exist."(Hareesh 276) They do not merely believe in them. As we grew up, we *learned* to believe what is real and what is not. We understood the science behind radios and saw the hidden sleight of hand the magician uses to convince us about the magical undercurrent of reality. In magical realist narratives, the boundary that separates these two codes of real and imaginary is thin and blurry. From a Western scientific perspective, the real is defined as that which obeys the laws of nature and the magical as those that break these laws. Trapped within our own subjectivities, the objective world that science describes is quite simply, not accessible to us. Everything then becomes a matter of perception. What is real then, is what is perceived to be real. This allows any number of possibilities to happen and is something Hareesh and other writers of magical realism are aware of. Therefore it is quite possible

to witness events that Hareesh describes such as "every five or six years, a large fireball [that] passed overhead and disappeared into the horizon, followed by sounds of wind and flapping wings." (Hareesh 129) Just as Hareesh says, who's to say?

Trouble in moving forward with the term is that to even talk about magical realism is to position oneself as an outsider looking in and to admit that one is part of the Western Empirical tradition that is based on the ideas derived from European enlightenment. A tradition that separates magic and real as two ontologically separate categories when in most indigenous knowledge systems it isn't. It is only us, who break reality into binaries and separate the world into categories such as real and magical. Magic for them is not a separate category of existence but one that is already included within their reality. Although Magical Realism as a genre was first attributed to Latin American novels that showed particular qualities, similar modes of writing were already used by regional writers all around the world before even the official coin of the term. My goal in trying to study an extremely regional novel like *Moustache* against these arbitrary definitions is also to contrast the scientific/rational/binary thinking that was derived from the European enlightenment to the ontologies of a community of people who were isolated from the forces of history and modernity. It is with this acknowledgment that we will begin to look into the novel.

"Many people believe", Hareesh begins his novel *Moustache*, "that eenampechi ... is a divine creature like the stork or the owl, and that spirits of dead children appear in its form". From the very first sentence, Hareesh lays the groundwork of what the reader can expect in the pages that follow. He does not ease the reader into the mythical world of Kuttanad but pulls them straight into it. In the first sentence, the Eenampechi is compared to "the stork or the owl" both of which are already assumed to be divine creatures. He introduces ghosts, "spirits of dead children" appearing in the form of an animal, the eenampechi. This hints at Hareesh's posthuman inclinations that dissolve the boundaries between the human and the animal, several instances of which come

61

later in the novel. By now Hareesh makes it quite clear what the reader is getting into-animals, spirits, mythical beliefs about dead children- a quick peek into the magical land of Kuttanad. It is in this land that borders the real and the unreal that the story of Vavachan, the son of a Christian Pulayan named Paviyan, unfolds. It is not just the story of Vavachan himself, but the story of the place the people, and the gods with which his journey is intertwined. It is also not a single story, but a collection of several related stories and myths that revolve around multitudes of characters similar to other magical realist works such as *Legends of Khasak* or *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and the protagonist Vavachan being the central thread that weaves them all together. This creates a sense of diversity or multiplicity of voices that is characteristic of postmodern and Magical realist texts. The place of Kuttanad is not a passive landscape in the novel but acts as an active character that has agency and influence on the life of Vavachan. The characters are intertwined with themselves and the land, so much so that without them, their stories, and their mythical beliefs there would've been no Kuttanad and no Moustache. At one point the character Avarachan asks Vavachan, seeing that he does not have a home to go back to, whether "the whole of Kuttanad is your land now?"(Hareesh 232) In his wanderings Vavachan becomes deeply connected to the land that sustains him, so much so that he becomes part of the landscape. We quickly realize that the Eenampechi is "aware of who he was" and could speak (1). It is only the first among many animals in the novel that can speak human language and is given an agency comparable to human beings. Later we will see the bullfrog warning Paviyan "Be careful, mind the paddy "(103), turtles commenting on humans, "I don't understand these human beings ...They're mad, the lot of them. Never at peace "(113), crocodiles having a conversation with Paviyan about his species being hunted by white people(109) etc. This shifting of perspectives to other beings/animals is an example of a 'defocalized' narrative, in which we experience the story through multiple subjective perspectives. According to Faris, this "multivocal and defocalized narrative of magical realism [that] bridges the diverse worlds of realism and fantasy" is one of the fundamental features of the mode (Faris

17). Although not exhaustive, Faris provides an essentialist way to understand how magical realism functions and the techniques it employs to generate certain effects in the readers. The magic in the novel, unlike many other magical realist texts, is pervasive, and not limited to particular events or situations. The magic seems to linger everywhere Vavachan goes, and we can feel its presence. I will now refer to concepts from Faris's *Ordinary Enchantments* to analyze the magical realism in *Moustache*.

The first of the characteristics described by Faris in her book is the presence of an irreducible magic, the most obvious of which in *Moustache* seems to be Vavachan's moustache which grows and assumes mythical properties that even defy Vavachan. This paragraph shows the independent agency of Vavachan's moustache. "It had grown bigger and bushier ... He would not need to trim it or shape it anymore as it had taken on its own grooming, sometimes remaining tidily shaped, and at other times lazily defying the order, standing unruly with a straight back. The hair on his chin had stopped growing, and sucking up the surplus energy, the moustache grew, taking on life like a human being – sentient, irate, decorous. Vavachan considered shaving it off with the penknife sharpened on a stone, but the thought filled him with fear"(Hareesh 117). The moustache behaves like a living thing with its own magic and life.

Because of the constant disruption of the real by the magic, and because the narrative style seems to suggest that magic is inherent to nature, it is conveyed to the reader that experiencing a world as described in the text is only a matter of being sensitive to it. This makes the reader wonder if it was possible to be receptive enough or possess a heightened state of senses, so one could see more clearly the world in its real nature, one which is teeming with magic. This peculiar quality of magical realism, as Erik Camayd-Freixas says, to make the "natural appear strange, and the supernatural pedestrian" will have an interesting and relevant consequence in terms of our relationship with our own reality, and by extension the environment (qtd. in Faris 11). This makes the readers see nature in a different light, enabling in a sense, a "re-mystification" of nature. It would make us

more attentive to our surroundings and place the once-lost mystery back into nature.

In *Moustache*, beings that are closely associated with nature like animals, ghosts, and mythical figures, often go beyond our epistemic limits and are able to know deep into the past, and future, and even read the minds of others. "You'll see her," says the ghost of an old man when Vavachan asks about Seetha (122). The Perumadan also says the same thing to him(167). The buffalo that Vavachan sees foresee the flood (131) and one of the two turtles who meet is able to figure out that Vavachan's mind "has been obsessed with the thoughts of a woman"(114). When Avarachan began to survey the land and measure the dams and canals to take up the "best bits of land", only "the otters understood" when "people were confounded by the sight"(215). These animals are given extra-sensory-perception more advanced than capable by human beings, and by doing so question our assumed superiority over them.

It is difficult for us human beings to question the fundamental assumptions or even absurdities that underlie our behavior that we almost take for granted that the way we do things is the way it is done or the right way to do it. We look at other animals and mock their behaviors that seem pointless to us. It never occurs to us that we might be, even if by a conservative estimate, equally outrageous in our behaviors. We need at times, an objective point of view to look back at ourselves. This is what defocalization does in a narrative. It replaces a human point of view with that of an animal to be able to look at ourselves more objectively. For instance, in the novel, pigeons and parakeets are "baffled by the way humans treated paddy, boiling it twice in water, drying it in the sun, and then boiling it again to eat"(95). In chapter nine the turtles comment extensively on human absurdities with contempt. One of them says "They're mad, the lot of them. Never at peace. I don't understand why they can't eat and drink and be happy with these canals and fields like the rest of us. Instead they rush about all over the place" and they laugh at the thought of us thinking the earth is round(113). Otters knew that human beings were intelligent and they "had to measure everything before making

decisions" (215). They also comment on our flawed sense of priorities, "They're busy remembering things, but nothing important sticks in their memory"(114). Unlike his new novel *August 17*, *Moustache* does not involve in portraying alternate history, but his imagination of wilderness and nature takes us to an earlier period before industrialization when the land was rich with vegetation and natural diversity. His extensive use of names of diverse species of fauna and flora adds to the realism of the novel. Sometimes dream-like events are portrayed realistically or real events are portrayed in a highly imaginative manner that it makes the readers doubt if what happened was real or a dream or trick of perception. In these cases the dream reality is merged with the actual reality but not entirely. They both lie suspended in the literary world of Kuttanad with neither of them fully assimilating into the other. When Paviyan and Vavachan steer away from the encounter with Seetha, Vavachan decides that "he had dreamt the whole thing up"(21). As readers, we don't have access to the textual reality except told to us by the narrator. If the character feels it was a dream and the narrator does not comment on it, we are left thinking whether the event had actually happened or not, until we settle down to the conclusion that it had taken place, regardless of it being in the imagination or reality. Where it took place ceases to become the issue and what only matters is that it did and that it had actual influence in the characters as well as the story. When Vavachan's sister asks Vavachan if he ate something, he replies that he only dreamt about it. But then miraculously she is able to identify what he dreamed about through her smell, "No, no. I can smell it on you ... it's the smell of coconut oil."(21) One can only speculate whether the event was dreamt by the character himself or something that happened in reality. For instance, during the heavy rain that lasted days after the death of Chella, the people had seen Vavachan using his moustache as a shelter from the rain or carrying a sack of rice on his head when even a grain of rice wasn't available to eat. This time aligning with logic, even the narrator feels that it could be the "hungry illusions of those stuck at home with nothing to eat"(158). What is interesting about the magical descriptions of Vavachan and his moustache that are spread throughout the narrative is that in each

of them, Vavachan is described based on the fears and desires of the people with whom Vavchan comes into contact– either literally or through apparitions. The people searching for Vavachan see his form everywhere they look. When Kesava Pillah looks into the hut of Vaniyathi he sees the form of Moustache rushing at him even though it could have been an illusion caused by the shadows of the lamp (Hareesh 85). Fear engenders illusions in the minds of people. The six Nayar men who set out to find Vavachan saw "quite clearly" the form they were looking for with a moustache that was "dark as a vetiver bush" and "snaking sideways like sturdy bean vines" spanning the "width of a man's outstretched arms"(58). This time too the narrator is soon to dismiss it. "Surely it was an illusion," says the narrator since it was not compatible with the traditional logic that the readers are familiar with; Vavachan at that time was "asleep ... on a bund at least an hour's walk" from there. This logical argumentation of the narrator makes him more relatable to the readers. Pachupillah, who had grown the Etha bananas on top of the Vedagiri hill had worked hard to raise the banana plants and cared for them so much that even while coming back home, instead of trees and crops "all he saw, everywhere, were Etha bananas". With these examples, the author makes an important case that it is our perception that decides our reality. Our desires and fears color our perception and consequently, also our experience of reality. This is a radical change from our existing ideas that objectively separate what is real and what is imagined or perceived to be real. There are few instances in the novel where there is no confusion– the dreams experienced by the characters extend into the waking reality. Chella wakes up on the day of her death "she realised that her dream had actually come true"(143).

Magical Realism, as Faris notes, disrupts our perceived ideas about time, space, and identity(Faris 36). All these three features can be observed in *Moustache*. Like many texts in magical realism, it also at times reverses the logic of cause and effect. Even before it happened, Vavachan could predict " the precise moment at which [the flock] would metamorphose into a thousand flamingos, and the fields in which they would land"(Hareesh

129). On certain occasions Time (denoted by capital T) intentionally changes, slows down, and stretches to confuse the characters. When Paviyan and Vavachan set out to cut grass "Time played tricks on them". Time was addressed as the "cunning trickster" who changes the experience from one minute to five minutes "just because he could do so"(22). Both Paviyan and Vavachan do not doubt the ability of Time to change as it pleases. It is interesting to note that all they can experience is their subjective sense of time. They could not have measured the time using a measuring device and are at the mercy of Time behaving as "he" pleases. By denoting it as a person they take it as a being not unlike themselves. The concept of space is also subverted when Vavachan enters an entirely new world through the mushroom (127).

Hareesh's use of magic re-establishes a long-lost connection with nature. It empowers, mystifies, revitalizes, and rebuilds our conceptions of nature. Doing so allows the readers to examine their own reality and form healthy relationships with their environments without exploiting or abusing them for personal needs. Although this seems to be an idealistic burden put on Magical Realism, merely getting the readers to rethink what they had thought to be true would, in my opinion, exemplify its success.

5.2 The Notion of the Story in *Moustache*

"A good story is like an arrow from the Pandava prince Arjunan's quiver: a single arrow that becomes ten when released from the bow, and hundreds of thousands when striking the target."(Hareesh 27). Whether Hareesh here compares the arrows to the literal number of stories or in terms of its effects on the reader, or both, his novel *Moustache* exemplifies this spirit of plurality. *Moustache* is a collection of multiple myths and stories that are woven together into a single narrative thread traversed, almost literally, by the protagonist Vavachan. Hareesh raises questions about the role and function of a story, what they are for, and why we read them. In the novel, the narrator during a book launch

event speaks to an audience and asks them the question, "Why do we read stories?". It is also, less explicitly, posed by Hareesh to us readers. Without allowing us or the audience time to think up an answer he answers his own question by saying that it is "to enjoy a good story" and that "There was nothing else beyond that". He clears up his position in the next few sentences:

"Why did we read Poombatta or Ambiliyammavan as children, or listen to our grand-mothers' stories? Just for the enjoyment of a good story. Children's stories usually ended with a moral, but that was only to deceive parents into thinking that stories were edify-ing. It is the same yearning that leads one to Panchatantram or to a novel by Pottekkad – the yearning for a good story. The idea that reading provides us with a compass for politics, philosophy, spirituality, or insight into life and all that was pure nonsense."(31)

According to the narrator, reading fiction is an activity that we do merely for the enjoyment of a good story. We are misguided to think that the stories, in his words, provide a compass for politics, philosophy, spirituality or insight into life. It would be naive here, in my opinion, to equate the narrator's argument to the author's since in the novel stories play a more important role than mere enjoyment of the reader or listener. In the novel, stories are more than just stories and have real impact in the lives of the people of Kuttanad and Vavachan. They are not merely for one's enjoyment but perform several cultural and social functions. In Kuttanad, the stories are passed down orally in the form of songs and myths about Vavachan and influence the reality and truth of the people in the region. Kuttathi, one of the characters in the novel at one point says that even she had "begun to feel that the songs told the actual truth"(271). These stories affect not only the people but other beings as well, as the magical world of Kuttanad makes no distinction between human and non-human. When sitting beside Ouseph, the baby frog says to Vavachan, "Everyone talks about you, tells your stories when they are sad or in danger. It's the songs about you that keep us going, give us hope that tomorrow will be a better day"(265). For us as well as the characters, stories become a

way of transcending our discontent selves and offer us consolation during difficult times. Gods and mythological characters come into existence through stories and they make the children obey their parents. When his son was spitting in the yard Damodaran's sister scolded him to "Stop spitting or the Makkan will come get you"(54). Not only the children but the fears and desires of the people of Kuttanad are also guided sometimes by the mythical stories they tell themselves. Stories about Moustache create fear and panic among the people of all the villages except Kainadi since "It's only in the stories that the people of Kainadi tell that Moustache has died. He's still alive in the stories that others tell"(204). Here the stories themselves determine the reality of the existence of Moustache. Hareesh ponders what it means to kill a character in the story and asks himself, "What is there to do when such a person – Moustache, for example – is killed off in stories? The rest of humanity, however, was still scared of Moustache because, in their stories, he did not go to Kainadi. In their stories, he was not dead"(205). Here the identity of Moustache is passed down entirely onto the stories. He is immortalized in them since he cannot die in the story even if he must eventually die in real life.

Stories told in the form of drama also have similar effects, inducing a real sense of fear in the audience that extends into their daily lives. In Ezhuthachan's drama Vavachan, dressed up as a policeman enters the stage, and those who sat in the front rows "felt that their age-old fear of mythical, discarnate beings of darkness, such as the Rakshas and the Makkan, had finally taken physical form and appeared before them" (48). In Kuttanad, stories and songs often spill into the real world. The character of the policeman still brings fear even though the drama is over. More interesting is the case of Krishnan Thattan, who played the role of the goldsmith and is portrayed as a thief who stole bits of gold from his customers. Ever since the play, no one approached Krishnan Thattan with gold, thinking that he would steal it just like he had done in the play as the character (51). This was so widely thought to be true to the point that even Krishnan Thattan himself believed the story. It is evident from these instances how stories influence people more

69

than they think and do not merely perform the function of being entertaining. Just as characters from the stories spill into reality, characters in the reality are brought into the realm of stories. Vavachan and Seetha are written into the songs and stories of Kuttanad. Pachupillah, a man from Neendoor appears in the songs as Moustache's companion (258) who was added to the songs at his request to someone named Panakkan. It is interesting to note that for Hareesh our life itself is a story that we live out. Richard Kearney in his book *On Stories* notes that when someone asks who we are, we tell our story, and give ourselves a "narrative identity"(Kearney 4). Similarly, Hareesh says, "Each of us is made of the stories that are told of us. If we look carefully, we can see a train of murmuring stories following each person like the royal mantle follows an advancing king. Some people are not flesh and blood, but fully made up of stories"(Hareesh 205). Hareesh blurs the distinction between characters and stories. Moustache begins as a character with flesh and blood and later in the novel is turned into a story that people tell. As Hareesh writes, "Stories were made up about Moustache, and so he must now change to become the stories"(284).

The form of the novel also limits the nature of telling stories. Amitav Ghosh writes: "It is thus that the novel takes its modern form, through 'the relocation of the unheard-of toward the background . . . while the everyday moves into the foreground'" (Ghosh 17). In magical realist narratives like *Moustache*, this is reversed. The background comes into the front and the foreground recedes into the background.

In the pre-novel narratives, the structure of the narrative was often circular- for example, *Panchatantra*, *Arabian Nights*, etc. They either had a larger story which contains another smaller one which again contains a smaller one or it would have a collection of short tales that are sewn together with a central narrative. *Moustache* also follows a similar structure. In its structure, it deviates from the Western notion of the novel. These deviations and experiments with the structure are important, especially in the contemporary period when novels become inadequate in representing phenomena that are much

70

larger in scale like climate change.

Being the only species that tells stories, it could be argued that storytelling remains at the core of what makes us human. For as long as there were humans there had been stories of differing kinds. Mythical stories throughout the past allowed us to explain the world to ourselves and others. They allowed us, even with some help of imagination, a way to understand and pass down our experiences and encounters with worldly phenomena. Hareesh uses the power of stories to its full extent. By demonstrating how the myths and stories have real effects on the characters he also points at how it would affect us readers too.

5.3   Nature and Posthuman Ecological Awareness in *Moustache*

Human-nature relationships have changed a lot over the course of time and history. We can find traces of the evolution of these relationships in our culture. To better understand these relations we must take a critical stance towards cultural products, be it art or literature, and contextualize them against the period and wider environmental phenomena that shape them. This is precisely the goal of ecocritical inquiry. Such criticism not only acknowledges the underlying assumptions that make up human/nature relations but also promotes those that enable a sustainable way of living. By understanding the hidden meanings and consequences of such assumptions, we can avoid those that are and continue to be detrimental to the environment. For this to be the case ecocriticism must admit that it is inherently normative. It is, as G. Garrard argues "a political mode of analysis"(3). R. Kerridge and N. Sammells in their book *Writing the Environment* defines the goals of the ecocritic as the following:

"The ecocritic wants to track environmental ideas and representations wherever they

appear, to see more clearly a debate which seems to be taking place, often part-concealed, in a great many cultural spaces. Most of all, Ecocriticism seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis." (5)

The idea is to look for them "wherever they appear." Since its beginning Ecocriticism had been looking at representations of nature in works that are specifically concerned with nature, including nature writings, travel writings, fictional works that specifically speak for the environment, climate fiction, etc. The field had been long concerned with accurate, mimetic, and scientific representations of nature. It is slowly changing its course and looking beyond the mimetic and non-realistic modes of narration, specifically subversive modes like magical realism. Hareesh's novel uses magic, myth, and stories to represent nature the way the people of Kuttanad experience it.

Indigenous communities have always conceived of nature differently from us, the inhabitants of modern capitalist societies. There are certain fundamental ethical and moral assumptions implicit in every society that drives its functioning. These are often hidden and guide our actions without us thinking about them. There is a social agreement to act in ways that are in adherence to these assumptions. More important is that these assumptions are arbitrary. They are either based on a flawed interpretation of who we are and our relation with the world or are the result of historical processes. Our current relationship with nature is, contrary to what many people think has not been the same but is fairly recent compared to those of the indigenous and native cultures around the world.

Hareesh's *Moustache*, in telling the story of Kuttanad and its people, can also be read as an anthropological account, albeit very limited, of the lives of the people of Kuttanad. And their notion of nature is quite different from the European idea of nature. Not being influenced by the process of industrialization and the ideological changes that resulted from it, the people of Kuttanad who are in constant engagement with their immediate

environments, have a more ecologically aligned and mysterious relationship with nature. In his essay "Perceptions of Nature by Indigenous Communities," Paul Maiteny talks about "how different types of meaning underpin different orientations to nature and how, in turn, these take the form of human choices and actions that may be adaptive or maladaptive in relation to the ecological processes on which humans depend" (Maiteny 463). Our current state of environmental affairs begs for rethinking our relationship with nature. Large-scale ecological destruction, global warming, and pollution are all caused by a misinterpretation of our place in the ecosystem. Looking for alternatives, we are forced to look into culture and literature, especially those that are subversive to dominant narratives and provide more sustainable ways to understand human-nature relationships. Writers like Hareesh, through their stories, put forward such alternatives, and it is the role of critics to understand and highlight them. We as a culture need to engage in actions that are "adaptive" and support ecological processes, and for that, we need to gather meanings and orientations that are conducive.

Hareesh's use of magical realism is significant. Magical realism as a mode of narration had been formally and historically subversive and open to alternative forms of narratives and knowledge systems, often that are in the margins. Kuttanad, Hareesh writes, is "a place that overwhelms one with illusions of land and water, like the magical palace built by Mayasuran for the Pandavas in Indraprastham" (89).

From its postcolonial roots, magical realism has come a long way into contemporary literature, empowering and foregrounding the voices of the subaltern and marginalized. But in the contemporary scenario, it has been used by several authors to empower yet another of the oppressed in the long history of humankind- the natural world. Magical realism, with its rediscovery of myth, empowers nature and helps rediscover its mystical aspects that we have long lost. Ben Holgate also describes the similarities that underlie the goals of both magical realism and ecocriticism. Hareesh also uses strong elements of Posthumanism in his novel. He breaks the binary separation between human beings

73

and animals, albeit in a magical manner. *Moustache* ontologically and politically orients itself toward a posthuman worldview. The setting of the novel is foundational to the story. It sets up the ambiance, atmosphere, and context in which the story unfolds. In *Moustache*, the setting comes alive and becomes the magical background against which the narrative unfolds.

Just as in *The Legends of Khasak* by O.V. Vijayan the setting of *Moustache* becomes inseparable from the narrative. Kuttanad is a region that covers three districts in Kerala. It is a wetland that stretches across countless waterways, canals, fields, and swamps. It is a deltaic region below sea level. The water sometimes overpowers the land and sometimes recedes into the distance. The land is composed of a dynamic labyrinth of canals and waterways. This in-betweenness quality of the land creates a state of openness in which the region is not strictly composed of land or water, real or unreal, but exists in a middle plane of reality- a liminal space- that has properties of both land and water and both reality and unreality. Hareesh uses these amphibious qualities of the landscape as a way to question the boundaries of reality, where the events sometimes disobey the human-proposed laws of nature. In the novel, as in the case of other magical realist texts, the magic is not external but internal. It is ontological and does not arise from the psychological or spiritual states of the characters. The land itself becomes magical, a space through which the magic enters the world. Hareesh extensively uses nature imagery and creates a rich and diverse setting that is inhabited equally by human beings, animals, and living plants. In fact, it is difficult to find parts of the novel without any reference to nature or metaphors of nature. In a few instances, the narrative is framed by nature, sometimes literally, when Paviyan rows his boat towards "a house that was visible through a cluster of banana trees"(Hareesh 19). Just like Khasak in Vijayan's novel, the land of Kuttanad spreads across the text giving the narrative form and purpose. It forms the background stage and starting point for the unfolding of the life and story of Vavachan. "There, at the very spot where Paviyan's hut had been, where Vavachaan had started

his journey, is where northern Kuttanad begins."(89) It also at times foregrounds the narrative, pushing the characters into the margins. Sometimes nature occupies the stage of the narrative, without any characters. For instance, the narrator at one point gives a long description of the Vembanad Kayal– "Vembanad Kayal [was] turbulent with big waves, and fish that swam in with the surging seawater and defied ordinary nets. When the water was clear, one could see huge rays with fan-like wings prowling the bottom, tiger prawns that could bite off a man's balls, giant barramundi with spines that could pierce and kill a person, and, amidst them, shadowy, indecipherable shapes that could be fossilized tree trunks or crocodiles "(203).

Sometimes the characters are forced to be at the mercy of the forces of nature. As Vavachan ran away from the rain, it soon caught up with him and "fell with the cruelty of stones . . . The sky seemed determined to pelt him to death". This is only one instance in which nature forces the characters to take action and drives the story. The story is rich with instances where the land comes alive and acts out with intention.

This intentionality makes the land a character on its own. It can even be thought of as a primary character of the story. Primary here does not mean the most important, but rather the one who leads the narrative. Although it might seem that the protagonist, Vavachan, is the one steering the narrative forward, a closer look would reveal otherwise. For instance, early in the novel, a snakehead murrel rocks Paviyan's boat and sets in motion a chain of events that would lead Vavachan "astray in the world of the water for the first time in their lives"(17). It is the pervasive, omnipresent land of Kuttanad that orchestrates the narrative, influencing the events and character's perceptions.

Hareesh's posthuman inclinations are clear from the beginning. It is often impossible to separate the ecocritical and posthuman elements from the novel. For Hareesh, the posthuman condition is the only way we can approach the relationship between human beings and nature. He freely uses metaphors of nature to describe the human characters

and metaphors of the human to describe nature. These are present throughout the novel. A curious case is Pothan Mappila, whose first name is an adjective that means buffalo-like. His maddened passion for buffalo meat, in the end, slowly transforms himself into behaving like a buffalo. To escape from the burning sensation after eating the buffalo meat, he gets into a canal and stands neck-deep, like a buffalo (76). Another case is the Kattapulavan, a character who never comes out of the water. He is at the same time a man and a snake. The narrator's son Ponnu interrupts the story to ask whether he is a man or a snake, and he replies, "Sometimes a snake and at other times a person" (285). In the last moments of her death, Chella is visited by a snakehead murrel and she sees in its fins the "ear studs that adorned them"(150). Paviyan at one point sees "a kollikkoravan owl" that was "shouting like a person" (77). In other instances, Vavachan magically transforms into behaving like an animal. "He was like the tortoise; he could breathe on land and in water" (88). The Nair ghost that approaches Vavachan who had died of hunger, before his death had a noticeably different lifestyle. When the food was scarce, he would "curl up on his mat for days like a tortoise that buried itself in the mud, but could rise . . . and eat a whole para measure of rice", a behavior that resembles that of certain animals, like snakes or tortoises (77). Hareesh also substitutes humans for animals, from metaphors to the ontology itself. There's an instance when Vavachan mistakes a human being in a parachute for a "strange bird," who went through the field "gobbling up fish," made "loud animal cries" etc. Only later when he kills it he realised it was a human being. Hareesh draws similarities between humans and animals. The narrator asks, "If there were escaped animals in these surroundings, wouldn't there be escaped human beings too? Human beings who would have run back, like domesticated animals, into the fields, into the wild?" (131). The people of Kuttanad, he writes, were "used to an amphibious life" (248). Hareesh uses magic to break the boundaries between humans and animals. When Ponnu asks whether Vavachan knows magic tricks, the narrator replies, "Sometimes [Moustache] would become a falcon or a kingfisher and fly away. Or he would shapeshift into a frog or a tadpole or a minnow or a tortoise" (88).

What Hareesh points to is the fact that there are these hidden worlds of life forms whose lives are just as complex as ours that need recognition.

Throughout the narrative, characters are placed outside, allowing them to interact with their surroundings and at times merging with the environment. There are several instances in which the characters 'become' the surroundings they inhabit, making it difficult to separate between the character and the environment. The presence of Paviyan, the father of Vavachan was at times "natural and expected"(17), like the shadow of a coconut tree in the slanting evening light. He blended into the background in a way that it was not possible to point out the exact direction he went or his position, "was he still here?" Vavachan often felt that Paviyan was close enough to nature that he became inseparable from it- "It felt as though he was always around whether he was physically there or not"(17). In another instance, the policeman remarks that "[c]atching a Pulayan in the fields is like looking for a needle in a haystack"(80). Sometimes, Vavachan too was indistinguishable from his surroundings- "Like an unmoving coconut tree or a cormorant, he was part of the landscape, and invisible at first glance"(98). He is seen as being able to melt into the surroundings— "[Vavachan] closed in on the birds, melting into the surroundings like an ordinary plant"(126). In another instance, "Common pierrot butterflies flitted around [Vavachan's] moustache thinking it was a plant"(241). These instances in the novel blur the boundary between the individual and their environment and argue for the ecological unity of human beings with nature.

Although human-nature binaries are questioned in the novel, Hareesh does not describe all human beings as being inseparable from nature. The people who are at the lower end of the caste hierarchy, those who are directly engaged in nature are seen as closer to nature than those of the higher caste feudal lords who own the land. Paviyan, who belongs to the lower caste called Pulayan, is given capabilities that allow him to fit in more with his own environment. For instance, he is able to communicate with the crocodile who was trapped in the bushes (109). Chella, as she is dying, also talks to

a snakehead murrel of the certainty of her death. Chella is also cared for by nature in the last few moments of her death. Clouds bring her shade and a cool breeze comforts her (150). This points to the deep symbiotic relationship these people who live on the land have with their environment and reveals that this relationship is not one-sided but mutually beneficial. Paviyan is also thought of by those who are of the higher castes as possessing magical tricks merely by virtue of his caste: "He's been seen in different places at the same time. Bet he knows some magic and tricks. He's a Pulayan after all."(87) Magic is something that those in the lower caste communities share with nature. In one sense, magic can be seen as an act of resistance possessed by those who are subjugated. It empowers them. It also brings out a certain mystery inherent in nature and in people. In one instance in the novel when the crocodile who carried Paviyan was killed, someone comments, "[t]old you didn't I? Even iron breaks down in a crocodile's stomach" (112).

In another sense, they inherit the magic of the land. This points to a continuity of human beings with nature. All these instances point to Hareesh's argument that human beings, before they were landlords and before the caste system, were primarily part of nature itself. He says that we *are* nature. Vavachan, by deviating from his own life and acting in the drama as a policeman strips him of all the magical qualities that Paviyan possesses. It makes him a castaway. "Unlike other Pulayans, he would no longer be able to live without food or draw energy from the wind or the sun"(58). By being part of the more "cultured" people, he lost his ability to endure hunger. "[Vavachan] had, unlike Paviyan, Chella or their other children, lost the ability to endure hunger, his metabolism changed by the availability of regular meals while he was with Ezhuthachan and his drama troupe"(58).

Hareesh also understands that Kuttanad, as a landscape is not inert. It is a living, breathing being. He writes, "[a]s night fell, the fields came alive. In the crevasses of silence, things scuttled across water and land. Man-high swarms of tiny insects rose into the air. Decaying stubs of hay exhaled their last breaths in the water. The frogs were

mostly quiet, dejected in the stagnant water pumped up from canals starved of rain and life" (103).

In his book *Ecocriticism*, Greg Gerrard observes that Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* initially begins by portraying the manmade ecological catastrophe as something supernatural and emphasizes it by adding the epigram from one of Keats's poem, in which the magical power of a beautiful woman blights the environment (2). This comparison of the catastrophe to a magical event accomplishes two things: (i) It emphasizes the strangeness and implausibility of the event itself. (ii) Comparing the event that happened in reality to the magic emphasizes it and keeps it from being seen as an everyday occurrence.

Hareesh uses magic to achieve a similar but opposite effect. Whereas Carson makes an actual event seem magical, Hareesh normalizes fantastic events, and de-emphasizes the magic, making it an unquestionable element in the experience and construction of reality. As we go through the novel, we can see that Hareesh elevates nature from a passive state-being the background in which the story unfolds- to an active and agential character in the story. Hareesh blurs the distinction between nature, narrative, and persons to the point that they all blend into each other. Magic lay hidden in each of its nooks and corners. Hareesh writes, "[t]he boat pulled into Pathiramanal, an islet that reinvented itself every night" (284).

Wylie, in his essay, writes that "landscapes, whether printed or visual, urban or rural, can be thought of as texts which may be read" (Wylie 5). The description of Kuttanad in *Moustache* forms such a reading of the landscape by which we can understand how the land is perceived by the people of the region. Its manifestation in the novel is especially beneficial since he offers alternative readings against dominant rationalist approaches. Instead of conflating everything as 'nature,' his landscape can be characterized by a sense of multiplicity that includes life in all its forms. Kuttanad is rich and diverse in its fauna and flora, often hosting multiple ecosystems. In the novel, each species plays its unique

part, supporting the existence of its people, ecosystems, and narrative. The diversity that Hareesh includes in his novel and keeps in his narrative space is much larger than his human counterpart. The kinds of snakes portrayed range from "banded kraits, beak-nosed blind snakes, double-headed sand boas, puffer snakes, bronzebacks, rock pythons, tree snakes, wolf snakes"(Hareesh 159). Birds of various kinds are too described, "whiskered terns, black-headed ibises and white egrets"(129), "night herons, openbill storks, great tits, wagtails and black-headed cuckooshrikes"(247) to the "moorhens with quietly dragging steps, and the cormorants with supple necks"(124). Hareesh's Kuttanad is full of life with "Cormorant butterflies flitting around "mysterious neelakoduveli plants"(158), "wild mulberry and sneezewort"(226), etc. His work is inclusive of both the natural world and the human world. It is filled with characters that are non-human and engage with the narrative. No species is irrelevant in the story. Hareesh also carefully maps out the topography of the region. For instance, the narrator talks about the "forty-seven rivulets, one hundred and fourteen streams, and countless creeks originated in Kudamurutti Hill, and merged to form the rivers Meenachilar and Kavanaar. They flowed, twisting and turning, converging and diverging to feed the fields in the lowlands."(154). Hareesh takes the geography of the region seriously. As the people search for Vavachan, they go "past Chozhiyappara, Kattukari, Kanyakon, Chekka, and Kochu Chekka, presently reaching an islet surrounded by water. This was Pandarachira. Like the people of Thiruvarppu had Chemmayikkari and Chekuthanparambu, Pandarachira was the place where the people of Perunthuruthu and Kallara discarded their diseased and the dying"(190). It is interesting to note that these two sentences list eleven different places, in some sense trying to cover the region of Kuttanad. Hareesh understands that Kuttanad is not one single land but comprised of different places that make it up. He indeed writes out the landscape in extreme detail, bringing attention to the geographical features of the land.

In exploring our relationship with nature, there is one less obvious topic to consider—what we eat. Food is becoming an increasingly relevant topic for ecocriticism (Estok

681). In *Moustache*, Hareesh foregrounds our relationship with the food we eat. He describes the kinds of foods that the people of Kuttanad ate during the period he writes about. We often distinguish ourselves from animals by our food patterns. Hareesh forces us to question the basis of food as a way to see us as separate from other animals. He draws parallels between us and animals. In the novel humans act like animals in extreme situations. For instance, the floods that resulted from rain that started after Chella's death forced some people to eat "the palm shoots that were meant to feed the ducks" and others to eat "yams and banana stems" before they "turned their attention to cattle feed."(Hareesh 158). The image of humans eating banana stems or cattle feed invokes our animal nature and breaks apart human/animal binaries. Those of us who buy groceries from supermarkets don't see the food we eat as coming from nature. They are neatly packaged, preserved, and contained so that they seem to not resemble the source from which it was taken. Hareesh brings our attention to the fact that we get what we eat from nature and that as recently as in the early 20th century, one had to search for food if they were ever to find something to eat. "[Chella] searched far and wide for stray spreads of wild rice. She dug up banana corms, cleaned and cooked them with salt, made stir-fries out of pigweed and other wild greens"(146). Vavachan, in one instance, "plucked water lilies and, discarding their petals, ate their hearts." It was a time of hunger during which there was not enough to eat that even "the cockspur seeds growing wild on the bunds and in the dykes would be harvested to be eaten – steamed in a cloth bundle over a pot of water, or boiled with coconut pumice."(125) In Kuttanad, they made dishes from ingredients that come directly from nature. Chella would go early mornings and the nights after thunder and lightning to gather mushrooms and cook them. The narrator also details the way in which they are cooked— "The straw-like bundles of enoki and the milky button mushrooms could be cooked with salt and a sprinkle of water. Sometimes she would slice the larger ones and roast them folded in banana leaves with hot chillies."(126) These instances make explicit the simple fact that human beings have been and are primarily dependent on plants for their food. There are also lessons

in sustainability that we can learn from Vavachan's mother, Chella. Whenever there is a surplus of prawns that she catches, "[Chella] split them in half, salted and dried them in the sun, and stored them in containers made of areca spathe"(146).

Hareesh witnesses the changes that take place in his surroundings. He sees how Kuttanad changed over the years due to changes in climate and destructive interventions into nature by human beings. But when expressed in the novel, it is difficult to distinguish whether it is the experience of the character, the narrator, or the author himself. For instance, he writes that "[t]he evenings had become hotter, he realised" (103). He remembers or imagines a time when things were different. He writes, "From the bow of the boat, one could see the faint greenness of Kottayam to the east. Earlier, there would have been nothing but the volatile lake between the boat and the land. . . The lake had surrendered completely. Man-eating crocodiles and saw-toothed sharks had disappeared" (272). A greater awareness of our modern era and the unmistakable proof of our ecological disruption codifies into the narrative when the narrator observes a middle-aged man who dove for clams comes up "shaking away the plastic entangled in his fingers" (297). Near the end of the novel, the narrator is forced to confront his Kuttanad changed by the human forces. He notes that he, "had read recently in the newspaper that the bottom of the lake was now covered in a two-meter-thick layer of plastic instead of seed clams, rays, and aquatic grass. Instead of fossilized pieces of wood and coal, it was empty bottles of alcohol that swept down the five rivers in the rain. People would laugh if they were told that, until seventy years ago, there were crocodiles and sharks in these waters; that, before the Thanneermukkam Bund was built, Kumarakam fishermen used to catch mackerel and sardine that swam into the lake with the surging seawater. According to the figures, the lake has shrunk by one-third of its size in the last one hundred years" (297). The narrator replies to his son Ponnu at one point in the novel that "[i]n those days, there were so many trees and bushes and vines" (71). Hareesh remembers that earlier time when he set the story of Vavachan as a nostalgia for a richer landscape that is now gone. He says that

"[t]he fields themselves have changed, their endless expanse tamed into small patches of land with boundaries of coconut trees and bunds wide enough for four-wheeled vehicles". He points out that we have changed the landscape to suit the needs of modernity and not the ecosystem itself. He writes with nostalgia about a "timeless place" which had been filled "with echoes of the footfalls of field workers, the hollers of ploughmen, and the chatter of womenfolk". But "[t]oday, most of the fields lay fallow, weed-grown; the land raised centuries ago from swamp and water was returning to its innate nature. Now, only a few enterprising people, with an eye on government subsidies, ventured to cultivate these fields. Paddy is not a highly valued commodity any more. . .Machines do the harvesting now" (293). Hareesh also remembers the Vembanad Kayal, the largest freshwater lake in Kerala, with its changed topography because of global warming. He writes that "[i]n those days, the Vembanad Kayal was four times bigger than it was now, turbulent with big waves, and fish that swam in with the surging sea water and defied ordinary nets. When the water was clear, one could see huge rays with fan-like wings prowling the bottom, tiger prawns that could bite off a man's balls, giant barramundi with spines that could pierce and kill a person, and, amidst them, shadowy, indecipherable shapes that could be fossilised tree trunks or crocodiles" (203) In another instance in the novel he writes, "Twenty years ago, standing at this same spot, it would have felt as though the houses and the trees would topple over in the wind. Now, the fields have been pushed back, the land filled with soil, and embankments planted with coconut trees" (89). The Kuttanad that Hareesh imagines no longer exists. It has changed. Only the memory of that wilderness and clear waters remains. This is a clear indication of modernization and human impact on the environment. Kuttanad is a sensitive region that responds and reacts to climate change and is not remotely passive in its characteristics. *Moustache* is Hareesh's answer to Ghosh's question of what the place of the non-human is in the modern novel. The novel is inclusive to all life that makes up the land of Kuttanad and acknowledges the presence of forces and entities that are not human but have a significant influence on human beings in how they live out their lives.

5.4   Conclusion

There is one instance in the novel when Vavachan one evening finds that all the birds and dragonflies and butterflies are gone, he can see no fishes or waterfowls or herons, and it seemed "as though no living thing was left in this world" (125). Instead what he sees the next moment is a large flock of birds "that had lost their lives to the stones from his slingshot". This is indeed a terrifying moment. What if, like Vavachan, we too find that all the birds and animals that we had seen around us slowly disappear, and go extinct, as a result of global warming? This could be read as a warning sign, reminding us of when we will be the only living beings left in the world. In the context of such a comparison, the following sentence the narrator poses seems deeply ironical. He asks, "[w]here could they hide in these waters as clear as the child's mind?" (125) We realize that there are no clear waters anymore, and the reason that we don't see these living things is because they have gone extinct. Hareesh poses this as a warning sign for us as we move faster and faster into a future of extreme climate events and species extinction. *Moustache* is an important novel that challenges contemporary Western and neoliberal thinking with the mythical and unreal world of Kuttanad. It tries to use magical and posthuman elements to dismantle existing binaries of human/animal, nature/culture, etc. Hareesh's use of magic, myth, and metaphor enables us to relate to the land in a way that is not tied down to the empiricist and rational notions that came to us from the West. It reconstructs a once-forgotten ontology that is inclusive of myths and magic. The novel is also about the power of stories and narratives to change our perceptions of the world and what is real. By reclaiming myths, legends and ghosts that once guided the lives of the people of Kuttanad, it invites us to take a step outside our current ways of thinking and being. The novel also invokes a deep appreciation for the landscape and acknowledges its agentic, autonomous nature. It illuminates that we are deeply connected to the environment and constantly molded by it. In expressing its alternate ontologies, it also performs a political function that enables a larger change to take place, one that

is more in alignment with the ecological principles of nature.

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