

MAMOUS

TACHE

A NOVEL

S. HAREESH

TRANSLATED FROM THE MALAYALAM BY
JAYASREE KALATHIL



Moustache

by S. Hareesh



THE JCB PRIZE *FOR*
LITERATURE
— 2020 —

An exclusive extract from
the JCB Prize for Literature

CELEBRATING DISTINGUISHED FICTION BY INDIAN WRITERS

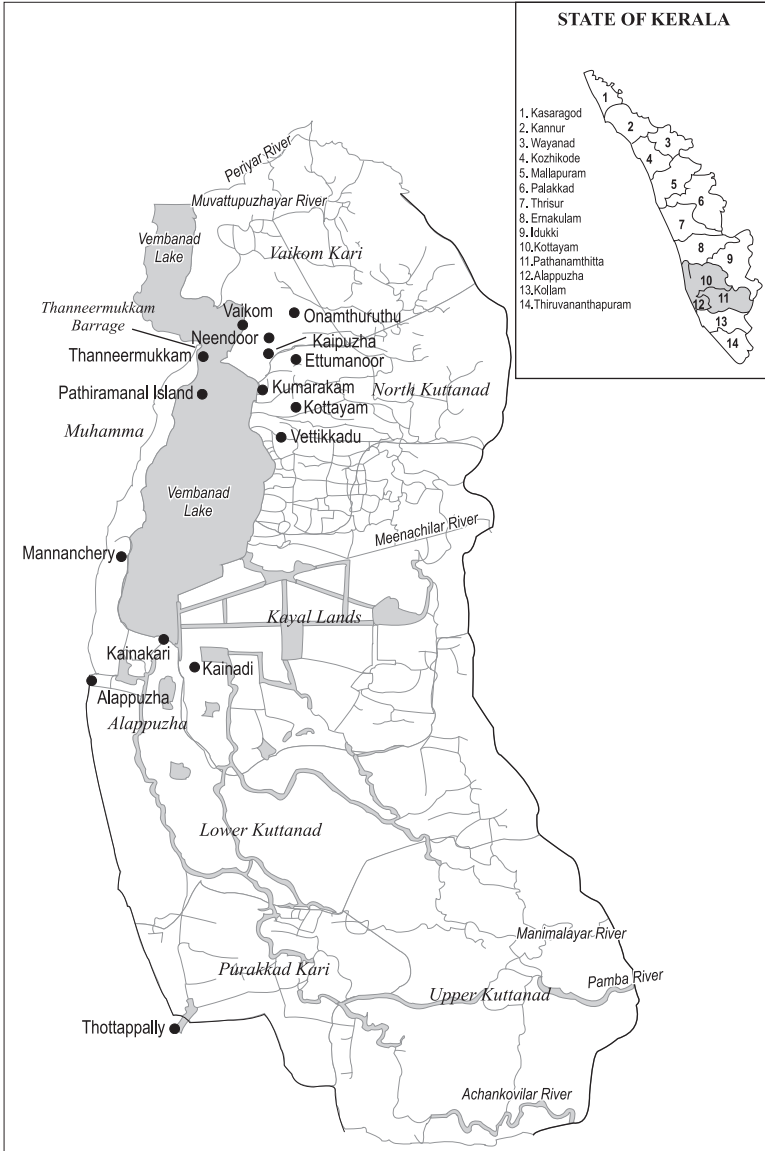
MOUSTACHE

S. Hareesh's *Moustache* (*Meesha* in the original) is a novel of epic dimensions, deeply rooted in the regional history of Kuttanad. It narrates the history of the social transition of this fertile region in Kerala during colonial times; but it also transcends that history to enter the realm of myth by creating a superhuman being whose elusive and overwhelming presence turns the narrative into a rare fable told in the unique dialect of the region that approaches poetry with its striking images. This novel creates a language within language, and can be placed easily among the most accomplished fictional works in Malayalam. Jayasree Kalathil, the translator, who obviously had a daunting task before her, has captured the nuanced native beauty of the original narrative.

– K. Satchidanandan

For Achchan

MAP OF THE KUTTANAD REGION



1

TRICKSTERS

Most people believe that eenampechi – the animal also known as alunku or pangolin – is a divine creature like the stork or the owl, and that the spirits of dead children appear in its form. But Paviyan, who lived on the embankment of the Chozhiyappara fields, knew for a fact that they were also somewhat stupid. In the months of Makaram and Kumbham, very early in the mornings, Paviyan would walk east to the mango tree near the dwellings of the Vaniyaan folk to collect the mangoes, small enough to be held in one hand and be squeezed over a bowl of kanji, that would have fallen to the ground overnight. This task was made stupidly easy by an industrious eenampechi who would have done the work of gathering them up through the night. Greedy for mangoes, the eenampechi would arrive as soon as the sun set, but instead of eating his fill, he would set about collecting the windfall to carry home with him, rolling each mango into a pile: one at a time ... two at a time ... three at a time ... But it was a never-ending job as the mangoes would keep falling throughout the night, and at daybreak, having run out of time, the eenampechi would leave without having eaten a single mango. All Paviyan had to do, arriving just as the creature left, was transfer the pile of mangoes into his basket.

One night, in the month of Karkitakam, Paviyan had gone to the homes of those with overfilled grain chests and stores of paddy to ask

for a handful of rice, and was walking back home, empty-handed. In the scattered light, he saw something shaped like a ball in his path. It was the eenampechi. He picked it up thinking it might amuse his children, make them forget their hunger for a while, and put it in his basket. He walked fast, hurdling over fences and water ditches, and he heard a voice: 'Slow down, Paviya, slow down.'

He realised that the eenampechi was aware of who he was, and yet bore no grudge against him.

The formidable snakehead murrel – the anglers called him Paappu, but he had another name among the fish – was an entirely different type of creature. Just as His Golden Majesty was the ruler of all this land, Paappu was the king of the numerous canals and waterways around Neendoor and Kaipuzha. Gorging on frogs and grasshoppers, he had grown as big as two mudfish, and produced thousands of offspring. Now, at his full size, disdaining fishing traps and bamboo baskets, he ruled over all fish. In the afternoons, he came up to the surface of the water to sunbathe in all his glory. On one such afternoon, Paviyan came along the canal in his narrow boat. His attention was elsewhere, and he did not see the fish. His boat, with years of experience navigating these waters, darted out of the way of the fish. Paviyan did not understand why his boat rocked suddenly. And he did not realise that, at that precise moment, something had been set in motion, and that he and his son – Vavachan – would soon be tricked and sent astray in the world of the water for the first time in their lives.

To the north of where their house stood like an untidy heap of paddy, partly sliding into the canal and partly covering the embankment, Vavachan leaned over a sluice, and gazed into the water. He spat into the canal hoping to attract spit-eating rasboras and glittering danios. He picked up the pieces of coal that surfaced when the dirt used to reinforce the field edges dried, put them into the water, and watched them float away. His mother Chella collected them and sold them to a Christian Mappila from Athirampuzha. The Mappila sold them on to blacksmiths who, in turn, lit the fires in their forges with them to make hoes, spades and plough bits that ended up back in the fields.

Vavachan did not look up when Paviyan's boat drew close, his long-oar leading it through carpets of waterweeds that kept the water cool. Paviyan's presence was natural and expected, like the shadow of a coconut tree in the slanting evening light or a stand of scutch grass nibbled by a calf. It felt as though he was always around whether he was physically there or not. Vavachan and his mother Chella found it hard to answer when people asked where Paviyan was, even though they would have watched his boat disappear down the canal. Did he go east or west? Or was he still here? It was only when, in the full morning light, he went to the open ground to defecate that Paviyan did anything that was even a little out of the ordinary. He would sit among the weeds and create an imaginary screen of coconut fronds around him, and have a long conversation with himself. Anyone else in the vicinity doing their business would feel that he was having a serious discussion with someone.

Paviyan looked at Vavachan, silently asking him to get into the boat, but Vavachan did not realise that it was an invitation until his father gestured with his hand. He scrambled up, disbelievingly, and jumped into the boat, almost toppling over into the water and frantically wheeling his arms to keep his balance. The boat, empty except for two sickles with worn blades and a small bundle of sackcloth, rocked, and Paviyan cursed. It was not aimed at Vavachan; Paviyan cursed whenever something went wrong or threatened to go wrong. Last time, when the paddy seeds sowed in the Kuttankari field did not germinate even after twenty days, Paviyan had walked along the dykes swearing loudly at the seeds rotting in the mud. It is said that if a person falls inside a boat and survives, it is better to beat them to death as they would not be of any use to anyone afterwards.

Vavachan sat on the plank, proud that he had been allowed into his father's boat, suppressing the urge to lean sideways and run his fingers in the water. Except for giving them a good thrashing with a length of coconut leafstalk a couple of times a year, Paviyan paid very little attention to his six children – he would be hard pressed to recognise his own daughters – and it was the first time one of them had set foot in his

grass boat with a leaky bottom through which water seeped in and had to be bailed out every now and then.

It was noon. Pied paddy skimmers and black-tipped ground skimmers flitted in the still heat. Paviyan, a Pulayan born to work the land, moved his boat forward pushing aside the densely floating water hyacinths with his long-oar. All around him, vast fields, drained and freshly sowed, lay like upturned dirty dishes, the seedlings yet to show their green tips. Womenfolk working the fields were nowhere to be seen. Stout snakeheads lay alert, barely moving a fin in the clear water, and up in the sky an eagle soared, equally alert, barely moving its wings. Younglings of orange-and-black-marked pallathi fish went about their business, mouth-down in the mud, while mottled leaf fish hid in the darkness of the weeds by the side of the canal. Vavachan looked at an old wound on Paviyan's shin. He had slapped mud over it. It dried hard, sucking the moisture out of even the ooziest of sores and curing them.

They rowed south to the point where four canals met, and then turned west. Paviyan had, so far, only travelled up to Paivattomkarukappadam in that direction. Further ahead were Maniyanthuruthu, and the fields of Chekka and Kanyakon. The people of Kaipuzha and Neendoor cultivated the fields on both sides of the canal along these parts, and beyond that were the fields cultivated by the people of Vechoor and Perunthuruthu. When he was a child, standing at the back of his house and looking west, watching the rippling expanse of water, Vavachan used to think that all that lay beyond Chozhiyappara fields was either the lake or the sea.

Vavachan expected Paviyan to pull in at the luxuriant stands of grass along the canal, and cut them at their base, his sickle slicing through the water. But Paviyan's boat surged forward without stopping, meandering through the network of canals and waterways. He regularly delivered grass to a couple of houses that had oxen, and a Nair household with a few cows. Vavachan surmised that the last delivery may have been infested with beetles, causing diarrhoea in the cattle, and Paviyan may have been reprimanded. So now, he was on a mission to find juicy green scutch grass with fat stems and needle-sharp leaves, Vavachan guessed,

and Paviyan would not be satisfied until he could throw a bundle of it in the front yard of whoever it was that had scolded him.

To the west of Makkothara, Paviyan turned the boat ashore towards a house that was visible through a cluster of banana trees. Strands cut from the outer skin of a Njalipoovan banana tree were the best to tie the grass into bundles. Dried naturally on the tree itself, they were strong enough to tether cattle.

Unaware of the role this house, newly thatched with sturdy palmyra fronds, would play in his eventful life to come, Vavachan sat in the boat, uninterested. Plaited coconut fronds supported between thick posts of flowering mallow formed the walls of the house. The door was also a plaited coconut frond. The debris of last night's wind lay scattered in the yard, and an uprooted banana tree leaned on the house. An overgrown vine climbed over the wall.

Paviyan put the banana strands in the boat, along with a small, immature bunch of Palayankodan banana. He scraped his mud-caked feet at the base of a coconut tree. Suddenly, the coconut-leaf door snatched open and, as Vavachan watched in astonishment, a woman came charging at Paviyan. It was not her but her two generous breasts that were rushing towards him in anger, Vavachan thought, breasts like none he had seen before – white, round, disdainfully looking the man straight in the eye. He imagined they had moustaches. Their nipples were small and retracted, but they looked piercingly at Paviyan in their rage, shaking their faces like sabre-toothed stone statues.

Chella, Vavachan's mother, had breasts that hung down to her belly, sucked dry by her six merciless children. They dangled on each side of her body like baya weaver nests, getting in the way as she walked or bent over her chores. Once, Vavachan had seen her toss one of those appendages with no more use over her shoulder as she went about her work. Meanwhile, his sister, bilious by nature, had a chest that protruded. Nothing sprouted on them. And the breasts of the women who jumped across the dyke behind his hut and went to work in the fields were as dark and sun-burned as their arms and legs. No one looked at them fondly. They tied them back with old rags to protect them from the

razor-sharp blades of the paddy as they bent over them, and released them from their imprisonment as soon as they climbed out of the fields in the evening.

Vavachan did not see the woman's face or her features, only her breasts that changed expressions along with her words. He imagined they would burst as her anger increased, or turn into fists and beat the hell out of Paviyan.

'My bananas are not for Pulayans to come and cut down as they please,' she said.

The woman rushed towards the boat, and called Paviyan an obscene word that never should have come out of the mouth of someone her age. Sitting on the plank in the boat, Vavachan looked reverentially at the breasts looming high over him, and his heart paid obeisance as it did when he watched the light that came on in the evenings on the stone crucifix in the faraway Kaipuzha church.

'Here, take your bananas,' Paviyan said.

He threw the bunch, still oozing sap from its cut end, in front of her. 'Stuff them down your throat!'

He responded to her cursing with a string of abuse about her father, Kuttanasari, and her mother, Kavalakkathu. The daughter was even coarser than her mother, he decided, as he rowed the boat away from the embankment.

'Don't you forget that you're living on the Tharayil folk's embankment,' he said, as though he had some legitimate say in the matter.

The canal curved away to hide the house from their vision. The sun spread a cloak of silence. Vavachan decided that he had dreamt the whole thing up, sitting in the cool breeze in the boat. Paviyan continued muttering in anger.

The shortest dreams can seem as long as a whole year, or even a lifetime. One hungry evening, Vavachan had fallen asleep in the dampness under a coconut tree, and he still remembered in great detail the dream he had then. In it, he was eating something he had never eaten before, served up on an enormous banana leaf. He had recognised the pieces by touch, but when he woke up, he realised he had forgotten

what they were. Still, the taste of it had lingered in his mouth and on his tongue, and he could smell the heady fragrance of curry leaves as though a bull had frolicked through a curry leaf thicket.

‘You had something to eat,’ his bilious sister had flared her nostrils.

‘I only dreamt about it.’

‘No, no. I can smell it on you,’ she had insisted. ‘I know – it’s the smell of coconut oil.’

She could recognise the smell from the oil pots of a Vaniyaan oil-seller from Manjur who took his wares to market in a boat along the canal.

‘What does coconut oil look like?’ Vavachan had asked.

‘I saw it once when the boat overturned. It’s light green, like the weeds under water.’

Vavachan had raised his hand to his nose and inhaled deeply.

The sun was beginning to set, but Paviyan kept rowing. The altercation with the woman seemed to have made him forget his mission. Vavachan wished the boat was in the shaded part of the canal. He scooped up some water, drank it, and wiped his face with his wet hand. So far, he had not dwelled on his hunger because it was unusual for him to eat during the day. But he yearned for the tiny bunch of unripe bananas they almost had – he would have eaten them raw.

The sun sheds light but it also creates a kind of brilliance that fills one’s eyes with darkness. Vavachan’s eyes darkened, and through them he saw, for the first time, the endless expanse of fields around him, sown and fallow, with not a single human being in them. Where did they all disappear after turning these swamps into fields, and calling them by different names? Like a hay worker’s rope, canals crossed and crossed over again, creating a snarled knot.

Paviyan would not be able to get across these fields even if he rowed until the end of his life. They had no end, like the earth itself. When the heat began to abate, he stopped the boat near a spread of grass. God alone knew why he had not stopped before, where there had been better-quality grass. He was the type of person who went after the average even when he had a chance to go for the best.

Vavachan gathered the grass Paviyan cut, tied them into bundles, and stacked them in the boat. They worked quickly, but Time played tricks on them. The cunning trickster changed what they thought, correctly, to be one minute into five or six minutes, changed each of their nazhika – twenty-four minutes – to two or three nazhika, just because he could do so, armed with the accoutrements to decide the passage of time. So when they finished their work and raised their heads, the sun had already gone off to fulfil its responsibility of bringing light to other fields in faraway lands.

Paviyan turned the boat and rowed fast, and as he came around the corner of a field, a dark shadow rushed towards them, roaring. Paviyan was confident of his ability to row in the dark, and he stood at the bow of the boat, his black body indistinguishable from the darkened sky, working hard to keep the loaded boat steady in the blowing wind. Vavachan was convinced that they were lost. 'I don't think this is the way we came,' he said.

Paviyan was angry. If they were on land, he would have slapped his son across the face. This was the first time Vavachan had been to these parts while Paviyan, his father, and his father's father knew these fields as intimately as the fields they stood watch over.

The dark shadow turned into rain, and as raindrops as big as young coconuts fell and two brilliant blades of lightning illuminated the earth, Paviyan began to think that Vavachan might be right. He could not recognise any landmarks as the darkness had rendered his surroundings monotonous. Suddenly, he remembered that he had been cutting grass where a clever chemballi fish had killed a Chovan toddy tapper.

It had happened before the time of his father's father. Early one morning, the Chovan, from Villunni, was getting ready to go to work. But his Chovathi stopped him.

'Don't go today,' she said.

They had been living together for only a week.

'Move out of my way,' he said. 'If I don't retrieve the sap-filled pot from the top of the tree, it will overflow and rot the crown. The tree will be infested with beetles.'

‘Then promise me you’ll come back quickly. Don’t loiter. And be careful of your surroundings.’

She was aware that her Chovan had a peculiar habit. If he saw any good fish in the canal, he would stand there and watch until he worked out a plan to catch the fish.

The Chovan tried to heed his Chovathi’s warning, but as soon as he had climbed down the second coconut tree of the day, he forgot all about it. There in the canal below, in a spot where the water was low, was a group of chemballi quivering in the mud. Chemballi – people also called these dark-skinned perch kallada – was a tasty fish, skinned and cooked in a curry with chillies. Even the aroma of it being fried with chilli paste in a shallow pot was a great accompaniment to a potful of kanji. The Chovan set his toddy pot down, stepped in and picked up a handful, and tucked them in the waist-fold of his towel. And then he saw another one, much bigger than the ones he had already picked up. Without thinking what he was doing, he put the one in his hand between his teeth, and bent forward to pick up the other. The fish in his mouth remembered the history of its kind and of humankind, and deciding to die valiantly, it wriggled, making the Chovan inadvertently open his mouth. It slid down his throat into his stomach. Chemballi had razor-sharp bones, far more numerous than other fish, on both sides of their bodies. Back home, the Chovathi waited in vain.

From that day on, the spirit of the unfortunate Chovan played tricks on the boats and the people who passed by the spot, making them lose all sense of time and direction.

Paviyan and his son had strayed into his trap. They rowed from canal to canal. Imagining that he recognised a collection of fields from its outer bund, Paviyan would row towards it, only to row back, realising that he had been misled. Several times he imagined that they were almost at their house. Vavachan huddled in the boat with his head bowed, his body about to collapse from hunger and cold, and bailed out the water that leaked into the boat with a piece of areca spathe. He glanced at Paviyan at the bow of the boat with amazement. He was the type of person on whom hunger seemed to have very little effect. Sometimes,

he did not eat for days at a time, but if the opportunity for a meal came along, he would eat enough for two people as though preparing for the lean days ahead.

As his legs went numb in the cold water, Vavachan thought about the warm, unsalted kanji water he sometimes had. Whenever she got some paddy, Chella used it not to make kanji, but kanji water, and the children, enticed by the most pleasant aroma in the world, would drink it dry.

The boat reached a grassless spot along the canal. Vavachan shifted on the plank trying to keep his balance. The movement rocked the boat and enraged Paviyan. He raised his oar to strike his son with it, but changed his mind. The boat sat low in the water. Further ahead, Paviyan pulled up to a wheelhouse that housed a waterwheel. Pinning the boat to the shore with the long-oar, they climbed up, holding on to the thickly growing grass. It was pitch dark inside the wheelhouse, and the mud on the floor was churned as though someone had been in there during the day. There was nowhere to sit. In the flash of lightning, the waterwheel, an eighteen-leafed monster, loomed. It would have moved untold litres of water, persuaded countless fish to swim from the fields into the canals.

'No more today,' Paviyan said to himself. He turned to Vavachan: 'Why don't we stay here for the night? We can find our way in the morning.'

This was the first time Paviyan had ever asked one of his children for their opinion.

'I think we should keep going,' Vavachan said, trying to control his teeth jittering in the cold. 'Let's get home.'

Obediently, Paviyan got back into the boat.

'Water is flowing in from the east,' he said.

In the little time they had rested in the wheelhouse, the water level in the canal had risen. Further ahead, houses with pinpricks of light came into vision.

'Christian Mappila houses,' Paviyan said. 'I think we have gone all the way around, and come back to Kuttomburam.'

But he had to swallow his words immediately. A river was in front of him, larger than any canal and flowing swiftly. They inched forward sticking to the side, trying to avoid the strong currents in the middle of the river. Vavachan pushed back the branches and vines that slapped his face. They heard people calling out from the other side of the river, and Paviyan decided to cross it after all.

‘Take us across,’ one of the two people who had hollered to get their attention said.

The men were dressed in mundus and loose-fitting upper garments. They were thin, but seemed healthy. Vavachan had not seen a man in an upper garment until then. As they got into the boat, he noticed that their clothes were dry. It did not seem that it had rained properly in this area. The boat did not rock when they got into it, and when one of them spoke, his voice sounded as though it was coming from a hollow reed. The boat was loyal, and it never let one down regardless of the weight of the cargo in it, even when it looked like it was about to sink.

‘We went out cutting grass and got late. Where would I get to if I went this way?’ Paviyan asked.

‘Thiruvappu, and then into the lake. This is Kallumada. If you go west, you’ll get to Olassa and Parippu. You should go back the way you came.’

The boat reached the other bank. Hearing that there was a Pulayan dwelling nearby, Paviyan set out on foot to ask for some food. Vavachan sat on a stone, keeping an eye on the boat.

The young men began to walk away, but one of them turned back.

‘My name is Narayanapillah,’ he said. ‘And this here is Shivaramapillah.’

‘Where are my masters off to?’ Vavachan asked. The cold and the reverence made him huddle.

‘We’re going to Malaya.’

‘Is this the way to Malaya?’

‘This way, we’ll get to Kottayam. From there, we have to travel for a few days, and then get on a ship and travel further for a couple of months.’

‘Have you got people there?’

‘We’ll find jobs. After that, there’ll be no more troubles. They pay you in British money you know, not in paddy like here.’

‘So you won’t come back again?’

‘We’ll be back. But soon there’s going to be terrible hunger here, and famine. There won’t be even a single grain of paddy. There’s a war coming, you know, a big war.’

Vavachan understood that they were talking to him as a reward for taking them across the river.

‘We might consider joining the army.’

The moon made a sudden appearance, and in its light, Vavachan watched, with a sense of disquiet, the whiteness of the men’s upper garments retreating into the distance. Deciding to follow them, he had taken a couple of steps, when the boat swayed in the current, threatening to drift away. He turned back, and held on to it. He waited for Paviyan to return; he knew he would return empty-handed.

Discover the Greatest Novels of the Year

If you enjoyed this extract and wish to read on, [click here](#).

S. Hareensh's *Moustache* is one of ten books on the 2020 JCB Prize for Literature
longlist.

Follow @TheJCBprize.

The winner of the 2020 JCB Prize for Literature will be announced on 7th November.



THE JCB PRIZE FOR
LITERATURE
— 2020 —

www.thejcbprize.org

CELEBRATING DISTINGUISHED FICTION BY INDIAN WRITERS