



Grotesque Realism in O.V. Vijayan's *The Saga of Dharmapuri*

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Abstract

The Saga of Dharmapuri by O.V. Vijayan is a dystopian fantasy set in the imaginary country of Dharmapuri, which could be a depiction of India or any other newly independent country in the post-colonial era. Mikhail Bakhtin in his treatise *Rabelais and his World* (1965) justifies the use of Grotesque Realism, a literary trope that allows the author to move away from the conventions of propriety and decency to convey messages that are real and powerful nevertheless. Usually exaggeration and hyperbole are key elements of this style.

Through the centuries, literature has often been a medium through which contemporary concerns have been transmitted. This paper argues that O.V. Vijayan uses Grotesque Realism in his novel to depict the political, social and economic condition of India of the 1970s—specifically a country that was under emergency. Like all dystopian fables, *The Saga of Dharmapuri* has been prophetic in anticipating some of the social issues that we face even today. The paper aims at examining how Vijayan uses explicit language and scatological and sexual imagery so as to achieve this sense of realism within his novel.

Keywords: Dystopia, Grotesque Realism, Scatology, Sexual imagery, Explicit Language

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Introduction

The Saga of Dharmapuri appeared in its serialised version in 1977, just after emergency (1975-77) was withdrawn in India under Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi. The English translation of the originally Malayalam book was published much later in 1987. The novel is a dystopian fantasy set in the imaginary country of Dharmapuri, which could be a depiction of India or any other newly independent country in the post-colonial era.

Dharmapuri ('Country of Righteousness') with its capital, Shantigrama ('Village of Peace'), both ironically named, is ruled over by a power hungry, greedy President, who is portrayed throughout the novel as eating, defecating or fornicating. It is evident that the President is only interested in appeasing the needs of his own body and cares very little for the welfare of the people. The novel opens with the description of the crisis declared in Dharmapuri for the welfare of the people and to protect them from imperialist invasion. This could be taken as suggestive of the Emergency that was declared in India from 1975-1977. In order to retain its power, the ruling government takes the help of the White Confederacy and the Red Tarter Republic, possible refererring to America and Russia respectively. While maintaining the veneer of anti-imperialism and quasi-Communism, Dharmapuri's leaders kill its citizens, not just figuratively, to make profits for themselves and for their foreign patrons.

Mikhail Bakhtin in his treatise *Rabelais and His World* (1965) explains how the use of grotesque bodily images can be used to explicate the realities of the cosmos at large. He does this by invoking the imagery used by the French Renaissance author Francois Rabelais in his work *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. This paper aims to link certain key concepts used by Bakhtin to elaborate on Vijayan's use of language and imagery in *The Saga of Dharmapuri*. It also examines how he uses explicit language and scatological and sexual imagery to portray the reality of India, or any other newly independent country, plagued by several social, economic and political problems.

I borrow two key concepts of Bakhtin. The first is related to the use of 'the Carnavalesque' and the second and more importantly,

Grotesque Realism. Bakhtin describes what he means by the Carnavalesque:

It is, first of all, a festive laughter. Therefore it is not an individual reaction to some isolated "comic" event. Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people. Second, it is universal in scope: it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival's participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity. Third, this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. Such is the laughter of carnival (Bakhtin, 1984, pp. 11-12).

In other words, the purpose of Carnavalesque humour is to provide entertainment by laughing at everyone- right from the mighty and powerful down to the powerless. But more importantly, it has an ambivalent aspect of providing entertainment and also of mocking the larger issues that prevail in society.

Secondly, there is the question of 'Grotesque Realism'. Bakhtin refers to the work of German scholar G. Schneegans' "The History of Grotesque Satire" (1894) to arrive at what he means by the term. Schneegans makes a rigid distinction between three types of comic art- the Clownish, Burlesque and Grotesque. Clownish humour is of a kind that invokes laughter for the sake of laughter, and has no other purpose but to make the audience laugh. Burlesque intends to mock at high art and thus, mainly uses the method of parody in order to achieve this. Lastly, the grotesque uses exaggerated imagery and satirises people or episodes (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 305). Bakhtin disagrees with this watertight compartmentalisation of grotesque humour that disassociates its aesthetic element from its satiric element. Bakhtin claims that grotesque imagery is ambivalent. In other words, its intent is to combine within it the "negative" as well as "positive" poles. Bakhtin goes on to explain that apart from exaggeration, grotesque humour combines a mixing of the "lower" and "upper" strata of objects (often bodies). (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 309). He explains that in grotesque bodily images- "The object transgresses its own confines, ceases to be itself. The limits between the body and the world are erased,

leading to the fusion of the one with the other and with surrounding objects." (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 310). Thus, the body often stands as a symbol for something larger than itself, something that it is a part of.

It is with these working definitions of the Carnavalesque and of Grotesque Realism that I would like to explicate *The Saga of Dharmapuri*. I will go from explaining instances of satire employed by the author to specific instances of grotesque bodily imagery and their significance within this work. In the concluding section of the paper I will also briefly touch upon how Vijayan has offered spirituality as a panacea for problems that the novel sets forth.

The Carnavalesque: Satire Used within the Novel

Interestingly, *The Saga of Dharmapuri* opens with the elaborate defecation ceremony of the President wherein he excretes before the watching citizens and press. The product of the ceremony is distributed among the choice citizens and the press for devouring, who compliment the President on the "stability" and "hardness" of his turd (Vijayan, 1989, pp. 11-12). Evidently, this imagery is indicative of the mass sycophancy of the press that reinforces tyranny through its (mis)representations of power. It also speaks volumes about the attitude of the public, who are willing to accept anything and everything fed to it in the name of "patriotism" and "nationalism". In other words, Vijayan is perhaps trying to point at the mountains of "crap" fed to the public by way of "national propaganda", "information" and "news". Noted historian, Ramachandra Guha in *India After Gandhi* says of the condition of the press during emergency: "Within its first week the government had instituted a system of 'pre-censorship', whereby editors had to submit, for scrutiny and approval, material deemed to be critical of the government or its functionaries. Guidelines were issued on what did and did not constitute 'news'." (Guha, 2008, p. 501). Clearly the parallels between reality and the novel need no further explication.

There are several instances of such satire throughout the novel. The media within and outside Dharmapuri plays an important role in keeping people in a perpetual state of ignorance. The state

broadcasting agencies cover items like the President's daily defecation and the "stability" of his turd. This demonstrates how the press, supposedly the backbone of every democratic country, has dwindled into an instrument of propagating sycophancy among the masses. The foreign news agencies merely make a mention of "the stability of the Presidency" in their newspaper so as to keep the people of Dharmapuri happy. The Tartar Republic keeps up the façade of Communism and rails against imperialism while secretly being in league with the White Confederacy. Prava (which is also evocative of "Pravda", the official newspaper of the erstwhile Communist Soviet Union), the news agency of the Tartar Republic, plays a similar role as that of the native press, which is to reinforce the rule of the Presidency and to express their support for Dharmapuri.

The futility of the press and media is depicted in the novel when a white man tries to film a dead boy on the street. He is immediately arrested as an "Imperialist Spy". The Tartars are allowed to film the same scene as they claim to be filming "Dharmapuri's peace and progress...And of course, the happy children..." (Vijayan, 1989, p. 88). Exposing the hypocrisy of the media houses, which are in league with the corrupt political houses, is thus Vijayan's larger aim. Guha mentions how a reporter of *Time* describes the emergency in India: "The Prime Minister has won widespread support for seizing a rare opportunity to ram through a score of social reforms. These days India is engrossed in a frenzied campaign to encourage discipline, punctuality, cleanliness, courtesy" (Guha, 2008, p. 507). Thus, Vijayan's depiction of foreign media houses echoes his horror of the complacency of the press.

Another instance of this is when a foreigner notices a worm in the President's turd and points it out to everyone. He is shouted down as an "imperialist" and the Minister for Media proclaims the worm to be a "serpent signifying peace and progress" (Vijayan, 1989, p. 14). The man is not arrested however, because he is a white man. It is mentioned that had he been a native he would not have gotten away with it. Apart from the untruths propagated, this also demonstrates the hypocritical stance that developing countries take towards the powerful nations. On the one hand, there is the need to show an "anti-imperialist" stance and on the other, countries like

Dharmapuri kowtow to the whims and wishes of the former imperialists like the White Confederacy and the Tartar Republic. This bootlicking attitude of Dharmapuri is portrayed through several instances within the novel.

One of the greatest ironies within the novel is the presence of the Confederate trading houses within Dharmapuri. As they exploit local resources and drive local industries out of business, these houses provide ceremonial Vice-Presidential positions to the President's sons and sons-in-law. The President's unlettered broods of descendants are kept happy with candy, aphrodisiacs and white concubines. This is interpreted by the masses of Dharmapuri as signs of their country's "dominion over Imperialism". Once again, as it often has happened and is happening in world history, the governments of the developing nations are playing stooges to the rich and mighty nations. The novel also, perhaps indirectly, hints at the nepotism that is widely prevalent within Indian politics, wherein scions of powerful political clans are reared to become the next-in-line to the helm of affairs. As has been said of Indira Gandhi's son: "Just as an heir apparent is given a title at an early age...Sanjay [Gandhi] was given charge of the Congress' youth wing...And just as Mughal emperors were once given a *suba* (province) to run before taking over the kingdom itself, Sanjay was asked to look after affairs in India's capital city." (Guha, 2008, p. 511). The Presidents greatest fear is leaving behind no heirs to the throne of Dharmapuri.

Another example of biting satire is that which mocks the tendency to measure a country's "progress" by its technological advancement. Vijayan mocks this notion of material progress through his presentation of Dharmapuri's claims to military, scientific and industrial might. He writes:

In Dharmapuri there was a parade every month. Weapons were taken out of silos and towed along...The weapons were antique, but so were Dharmapuri's wars, antique wars waged on antique neighbours. Much of the weaponry bore White Confederate patents and were obsolete by a century: ironclads, and flying machines so primitive that one fancied they nested, and explosive devices that

raised palls of stench and dust. But Dharmapuri had no military budget, only a budget for Sorrowing and Persuading, and so became the most pacific nation on earth (Vijayan, 1989, p. 18).

Whenever there is a threat of insurrection within Dharmapuri, the President wages mock-wars with the neighbouring country of Samarkhand and so tries to camouflage his inefficiency as a ruler. The archaic weaponry used in such wars is provided by the White Confederacy- possibly weaponry that they themselves have stopped using. Drawing parallels to contemporary society, it is no secret that most of the weapons of third world countries are directly or indirectly supplied by countries like the USA.

Ironically, Dharmapuri and Samarkhand have done away with the use of words like 'Wars' and 'Soldiers' and have replaced them with the words 'Sorrows' and 'Persuaders' respectively. Reminding us forcibly of Orwellian Double-Speak, this is a bitter take on current discursive practices in politics that use euphemisms to cover up the dirty reality. The relationship between Dharmapuri and Samarkhand is evocative of the relationship between India and Pakistan, wherein military aggression has always been a tactic employed by ruling governments when the political situation within their countries becomes tenuous. This win-win situation is explained by the Prime Minister of Samarkhand, who tells his concubine, "In Samarkhand I win, and in Dharmapuri, it's the President [who wins the war]" (Vijayan, 1989, p. 69).

The industrial growth of Dharmapuri is another farce as it promotes the export of cadavers to the White Confederacy. Adults are killed so that their bodies can be used for medical sciences in the West, while young children are slain in factories and their meat is exported as food to the White Confederacy. As revenue, the ruling party is paid with candy, aphrodisiacs and concubines. Interestingly, Dharmapuri's "House of Healing" either directly or indirectly kills people, after extorting money from them for 'treatments'. The guardsmen of the house says, "...Under the Crisis Laws you can be killed and shipped straightaway...If however you add a thousand silvers to the bargain,...you can slip away to freedom through this trapdoor" (Vijayan, 1989, p. 64). The "trapdoor" he talks of, is the entrance to one of the many rooms of

“therapy”, where doctors churn out corpses. Medical Science in Dharmapuri is then, intricately linked to Monetary Science. The only people, who can avail of medical facilities, are the rulers. These dignitaries visit hospitals in the White Confederacy when they are taken ill. We have very clear analogies of these in the context of Indian politics wherein political leaders use state funds for foreign tours and state of the art medical facilities available in Europe and USA for their own benefit.

These instances of satire are obviously exaggerated illustrations of the reality of political and social problems that occur worldwide- futile wars, industrial advancement at the expense of certain sections of the society, capitalist and other forms of imperialism, a media that is no longer trustworthy and so on. As Bakhtin points out one of the main features of the Carnavalesque lies in its use of almost nightmarish hyperbole, wherein both the mighty and the powerless are mocked and society itself is turned on its head. Vijayan then very cleverly uses the Carnavalesque to create Dharmapuri and thus to mock at the realities of a developing nation that could very easily be India.

Grotesque Bodily Imagery

Having provided an outline of Dharmapuri’s condition, we can look specifically at Vijayan’s complex use of bodily images. Vijayan specifically concentrates on three bodily functions- eating, defecating and fornicating- the three most natural impulses of the human body. However, throughout the novel these three aspects are deliberately used by the author to bring about a feeling of disgust within the psyche of the reader. Pages have been devoted to the President’s defecation and its consumption by the masses, as has already been described elsewhere in this paper. Quite clearly the President’s excrement and its consumption by the masses is a symbol of how the masses are willingly hoodwinked into believing everything that they are fed in the name of nationalistic propaganda.

Apart from this aspect, this very same excrement also becomes a tool of empowerment for the President when the President attends the Confederate Banquet organised in honour of him and his

family. The President and his family eat and excrete at the table of their host and literally force the White Father, leader of the White Confederacy, to pay heed to his words. The White Father hastily assents to the boasting words of the President, disgusted and rather alarmed by the quantity of excrement the President and his family produce (Vijayan, 1989, pp. 20-21). This subversive element of bodily functions is an aspect that is rarely addressed when dealing with a novel like *Dharmapuri*. What Vijayan is almost implying is that imperialism can only be (momentarily perhaps) beaten with the very same dirt that the imperialists themselves help in creating with their puppet governments. This would not be so bizarre if we look at terrorist groups like the Al-Qaeda that have their roots in the Russia-US cold war and were initially funded by the US.

There are also several scenes wherein Government officials use women to satisfy their bodily urges, in the name of patriotism. Laavanya, the kitchen maid of the Minister of Sorrowing, is raped at least four or five times within the course of the novel. When the Minister tries to sexually exploit Laavanya, she tries to use Marxist principles espoused by Engels and Lenin to keep him at bay. He gently admonishes her not to use classical sayings out of their context and continues to molest her. In a last bid to keep him away she blurts out his wife's name, and immediately the ravisher loses his desire. He goes limp as he remembers that his wife is with the President that night. It is clear that the Minister himself is exploited by those above him, as he has to send his wife to the President, when the latter requires sexual favours. Out of commiseration for his sadness, Laavanya goes through with the sexual act (Vijayan, 1989, pp. 29-34). Here there is a clear reversal of roles- the ravisher becomes the ravished and Laavanya exerts a kind of power over the "powerless, limp" Minister.

In each of these scenes there are elaborate descriptions of how the body exercises power or is used as an object over which power is exercised. The signification is clear- bodies within the novel are used to symbolise power/lack of power. For instance, the body of the President can naturally be linked to the corruption flourishing in the state of Dharmapuri at large. His epicurean and sexual excesses are in stark contrast with the starved bodies of citizens. The citizens are both hungry and sexually starved. In one scene, a

common citizen of Dharmapuri contemplates selling his aged parents and children, so that he can make love to his wife in the privacy of his hovel (Vijayan, 1989, p. 102). The wives of the soldiers, who have been sent away on various missions, indulge in orgies among themselves to satisfy their urges (Vijayan, 1989, p. 49). The body of a citizen like Laavanya is the site of state atrocities on the common man. She is not only raped but urged to believe that she is being honoured by the sexual attentions of her masters. In one instance within the novel, it is said of Laavanya: "she saw the struggle of the subject peoples and the triumph of statesmen shrink into...the triviality of an incompetent act of lust (Vijayan, 1989, p. 33).

Quite clearly Vijayan uses the body and its functions as a site of disempowerment, just as he uses it as a tool of empowerment. It is not just enough to use people to fatten one's own pockets, but also necessary to make them see it as their "duty" to their country. This is in keeping with Bakhtin's theory of the ambivalence of "grotesque reality".

Conclusion: Body, Nation and Spirituality

If the author is derisive of Dharmapuri's "impotence" in bearing with its political leaders, it would seem he uses spiritual signification for a different purpose altogether. The appearance of Siddhartha, the King of Kapilavastu, who has abandoned his kingdom with the intention of helping mankind, is of prime import. He reminds us of Lord Buddha on his quest for enlightenment. Siddhartha seems to be the only sane witness to all the atrocities in Dharmapuri. Yet, slowly people start awakening to his presence. Laavanya, the kitchen maid who is raped several times over in the name of nationalism and her sick son, Sunanda find peace through him. It is his laughter that inspires the General to take up arms against the President. Persuaders and citizens join the General in this endeavour.

Siddhartha's character, serving the role of a moral compass, is a union of leadership and compassion for the masses. This is in stark contrast to the persona of the repulsive President. Prathyaksh Janardhanan's paper, "Subverting the tyranny of the nation state

through the Grotesque body imagery: A Bakhtinian Reading of O. V. Vijayan's *The Saga of Dharmapuri*, contrasts the role of the President and of Siddhartha thus:

The analogy of the body to the nation is also seen in the description of the body parts with reference to the characters. The President is referred through the lower body stratum imagery of shit and semen...Conversely, Siddhartha has been referred throughout the novel through the image of the head (the upper body stratum): the aura that surrounds it, the head that emits cosmic light which heals citizens such as Lavvanya (Vijayan, 214) etc. This distinction between the upper and lower part of the body, as discussed in the novel cognates with Bakhtin's argument in "The Grotesque Image of the body" where he argues that the artistic logic of the grotesque image overlooks the closed, smooth and impenetrable surface of the body (Bakhtin, 316). Thus, the imagery of the lower body stratum and the mockery of the same enunciate the debasement of the nation state...(Janardhanan, 2016, p. 2).

Thus, clearly the character of Siddhartha is Vijayan's ideal of how the nation and its leadership must be. However sadly, it is the President with his epicurean, sexual and excretory excesses that is the reality of the newly independent Dharmapuri, and by extension of the newly independent India.

The character of Siddhartha also acts as a foil to that of the Mendicant Father. It is the Mendicant Father, reminiscent of Gandhiji, who brings the people of Dharmapuri freedom from Feringhee (foreign) rule. However, he is imprisoned and eventually murdered by the Presidency. It is also implied in the novel that had the Mendicant Father lived, he could have done little in saving Dharmapuri, for he conveniently chooses the peace of the prison walls, rather than fight for the cause of emancipation. Siddhartha like the Mendicant Father preaches peace. He knows that violence is not an answer to the problems in the country. He realises that the Presidency, even if over-thrown will only be replaced by another bunch of tyrants. He asks of himself and his Gods, "Why do men

turn away from the bed of love and the consuming pyre to garner wealth and rule over nations?" And again, "How many more ages? How many more incarnations? How many more unfulfilled covenants?" (Vijayan, 1989, p. 120). In answer to his questions, the Gods of the river valley pluck out their eyes and throw it into the river and walk away from him. It is perhaps to be understood that no God can save a race committed to evil.

In Siddhartha's revelatory vision (his enlightenment), he climbs up an edifice wherein he asks leaders seated there as to who desires war and who profits by it. The leaders direct him upwards. He poses the same question to the people there. At every floor he is directed to the floor above. Finally upon reaching the topmost tier, he witnesses an ape-like creature that bears its fangs at him, simultaneously shredding the chronicles of the earth. This creature symbolises the most primitive of desires- the lust for power. He realises that megalomania is embedded in our genes and is as old as our race itself. With this realisation, his quest comes to an end.

The novel ends without any real resolution. The war waged by the General turns out to be a failure as people desert him to go back to their old unseeing ways. Siddhartha is transformed into the pipal tree, the symbol of enlightenment. Siddhartha could be read as a personification of the human conscience. His arrival is synonymous with the awakening of the people to the injustice that reigns. His departure signifies the silencing of this same conscience. This being more convenient and less of a hassle, is the path that people often choose.

The character of Siddhartha at once complicates the plot of the novel, as he is a personification of the ideal leadership and nation, human conscience, compassion and mercy. In concrete terms, he achieves little by way of changing the circumstances in Dharmapuri. However, it is he who unlocks the doors to a deeper understanding of the human condition at large.

The Saga of Dharmapuri offers no solutions. It poses questions and several possibilities. It satirises historical and political events and situations that prevailed and continues to prevail in a newly independent nation struggling to find its roots. It offers nothing but a deeper understanding of the plight of the common man. Vijayan,

as has been demonstrated in this paper, uses satire (in the lines of Bakhtin's 'Carnavalesque') and 'grotesque bodily images' to depict the plight of a nation state held to ransom by the ruling elite.

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