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## Reading Taboos as Allegory in O. V. Vijayan's *The Saga of Dharmapuri*

**Summary.** *The Saga of Dharmapuri*, written during the days of political Emergency in India, and published when the emergency was lifted, is a poignant satire upon the then Indian political administration. The decoders of this allegory find Dharmapuri in parallel with Delhi, and that of the King with Jawahar Lal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India. The beginning of the novel with the visible apocalypse of etiquette and decency in public mannerism, connotes its leanings towards postmodernist announcement of the end of grand tradition, and making even taboos to work as allegory in formal discourse. The present paper is an attempt towards decoding different metaphors and allegories used in *The Saga of Dharmapuri*.

**Keywords:** allegory, Dharmapuri, Delhi, apocalypse, public mannerism

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The beginning of *The Saga of Dharmapuri*, with its visible apocalypse of etiquette and decency in public mannerisms, connotes its leanings towards the postmodernist announcement of the collapsing of the grand traditions, making even taboos work as allegory in elite discourse. The point in question is better supported by the opening lines:

As the president squirmed on his throne, and signaled his intent to defecate, a tremulous disquiet passed over the gathering in the audience hall, for it was not yet sun-

down, the hour of the Second Defecation. Ever since Dharmapuri attained freedom, its President had kept the Hour, defecating at daybreak and sundown, in the rhythm of sovereign nationhood; and these hours were solemnized by the broadcasting network, which played the national anthem to reassure the people that all was well.<sup>1</sup>

Originally written in Malyalam, during the days of the Emergency in India, and published when the emergency was lifted, this poignant satire reflects upon the then Indian political administration. The decoders of this allegory find Dharmapuri to be parallel with Delhi, and the character of the king with Jawahar Lal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India. In *The Saga of Dharmapuri*, the citizens of Dharmapuri are mostly pimps, whores, decadent ministers, corrupt administrators, sycophants, gigolos, and perverts of all kinds. There is a doctor who has sexual intercourse with a corpse. The mothers in the city routinely sleep with men other than their own- mostly powerful-men, and their children are allowed to watch the scenes of copulation.

Suddenly, Siddhartha appears on the scene in Dharmapuri. His character is modelled on Gautam Buddha. Siddhartha brings the message of love and peace. The novelist, through this narrative, has presented a glimpse of the political and social decay. Siddhartha symbolizes the harbinger of change. He does not confront the king but tries to introduce changes in the Fabian way. His Fabian tool is his morality. To cite Sandeep, one of the early reviewers of the novel, the salient features of the novel come out as the following:

The Saga is rich both in political overtones and symbolism. The courtiers that collect the king's "turd," in turn distribute it to children who wait for it with plates which they in turn bring home for the family to eat: the younger generation eating the shit of its predecessor. What's more, this shit-eating is done wantonly. The duplicitous king, who takes money both from the "imperialists" as well as from the Red country, just about summarizes what the Non-aligned Movement stood for. Then there are all sorts of shady pacts his ministers and courtiers carry out with other nations, symbolic again—and proved now by the Mitrokhin papers—of the near-total degeneration of the 70s. The language is extremely crude. I can only call it the linguistic equivalent of the monstrous movie, *Caligula*. It is disturbing, but perhaps appropriate for the subject and required reading.<sup>2</sup>

Thus Sandeep presents the traces of the *Veebhatsa Rasa* (the grotesque) in the novel. Further, M.A. Orthofer's remarks make the symbols and connotations more candid:

<sup>1</sup> O.V. Vijayan, *The Saga of Dharmapuri*, New Delhi 1988, p. 182.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.sandeepweb.com,book-review-the-saga-of-dharmapuri> [14.03.2015].

Vijayan's satire is devastatingly sharp, from what amounts to the opening scene, in which the President squirms on his throne in his ritual „Hour of the Second Defecation“ (disconcertingly an hour earlier than usual for his evening... ablutions). Dharmapuri is a country where even every last bit of the President's excrement is venerated (they take their shit seriously in Dharmapuri...) and each bowel movement examined by the press („Magnificent,' said one; „great stability,' said a second“) – suggesting that this has become a land of mindless, groveling courtiers, oblivious to reality.<sup>3</sup>

Such examples from the novel lead us to an uncanny situation “which is a text that appears to address itself (consciously) to the possible admission of not knowing what is going on”<sup>4</sup>. The novel creates a situation of both awe and fear – maybe it equates to “being buried alive, with claustrophobia and consequently being ‘not heard’ with animism and anthropomorphism (the mistake we make while we are assessing what is animate/human and what is not, and the desires that lie behind these ‘mistakes’), with the repetition of death and the methods we use to deal with its threat, its danger, its promise. The uncanny thus has to do with foreign bodies and border guards; it has to do with what appears constantly to invade our self-definition, with the other that may always already appear to be within our own ‘precinct,’ despite our apparent efforts to exile it.”<sup>5</sup> The examination of every bowel movement by the press is a satire of the media which is seen as sometimes pampering the centres of power, forgetting its sacred role of being the fourth pillar of democracy, and the custodian of civil liberties and rights. By showing a chain of movement through the commentary on weaponry, imperialism and different taboos, the writer presents an explicit sexual imagery:

The opportune hour was a joint deployment of Tartar and Confederate aphrodisiacs on the President; for well over an hour the President's genitals had been massaged with these, although, to the mortification of the donor ambassadors, watching from the wings, the President's organ had not arisen. All affairs of the state were suspended, and the Communards, in ritual alarm, ran berserk on spy-hunts.<sup>6</sup>

The use of aphrodisiacs and many more ancillary acts mentioned here are nothing but the trajectories of satire on the failure of the administrative machinery which has led to the state of complete chaos. In the chapter, ‘Laughter frees the Persuaders,’ the maid complies in the following words, “Beloved President, she read, the moon

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.complete-review.com/reviews/india/vijayan2.htm> [14.03.2015].

<sup>4</sup> D. Punter, *Anti-canon theory, in Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. P Waugh, New Delhi 2006, p. 526.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 527-528.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 217.

grows and dwindles and clouds nest in our pubises; grinding thigh against thigh we fulfil ourselves, while our men waste away on frontiers. The moon has waxed and waned a full twelve years; like snowy mountains colliding, our thighs produce a cold and infernal fire..."<sup>7</sup> Again, there is a description of a love making scene between two women:

She began to cry, and Mandakini bent over her and kissed away her tears; then she kissed her on the lips. Neither woman knew how long the kiss lasted ...And in such ways were quenched the rest of the ten thousand Persuaders' wives." Further, the writer narrates a case of homosexual love making, "beyond Sapphic fulfillment, the wives dreamt of wilder loves; Mandakini and Sreelata, as they slept together, dreamed together, and in it they dreamed they petitioned the Enemy."<sup>8</sup>

The state of Sapphic loves presents the irony of family relationships. The nuptial bonds are loosely knit and shallow. Srilata and Mandakini are presenting their unfulfilled desires in the discourse. To quote from the novel, "our presidency has promised us invasions time and again, but the promise has not been kept. All we have got is a decrepit state of siege which only Prava supports. Our men idle on the frontiers, waste their seeds away... the dreaming women... opened their flowers of lust."<sup>9</sup> Ultimately 'the scent of woman and woman together hung in the moonlight like ancient incense. The deserting soldiers found Mandakini and Sreelata in bed asleep in deep embrace: "If we analyse the cause of this same sex love in Foucauldian terms, we can find that it is due to a specific homophobia. Foucault has said that it was Western homophobia that produced strong gay and lesbian identities. In the context of the novel, the fear of the 'other' in the family and social set up has given rise to such a situation.

Another heinous practice, popular in Dharmapuri, is that of selling corpses. The guardsman says, "Remember, a clean Dharma corpse fetches twenty thousand silvers worth of hard currency in the Confederacy."<sup>10</sup> This is another uncivilized act in Dharmapuri. Almost every human civilization and religion in the world marks its respect for the dead body. The bodies are subject to civilized ritualistic practices, given as last rites. Moving ahead, the discussion of the non-functional genital in the novel symbolizes the non-functional social set up and the defunct administrative machinery. Like the king of the Hindi play *Andher Nagari*, as portrayed by Bhartendu

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<sup>7</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem, p. 218.

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem, p. 220.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, p. 234.

Harischand, the king of Dharmapuri is a great sycophant. This symbol represents many things that are not averred by the surroundings, due to the terror of the chair. Since *The Saga of Dharmapuri* employs symbols and metaphors, it may have overtones of the issues of psychoanalysis. "The symbols and metaphors are both instruments of symbolization. They promise to tell more but also lead us in opposite directions. The symbols lead us back to a posited and given reality while the metaphor stands for the hope of future possibilities."<sup>11</sup> Here, the symbol of the non-erecting genital represents the vertical failure of the system in administration and the loss of communication under the Managerial Information System. This also has connotations with a lack of will power.

Throughout, the author sways on ideas wafting from the nooks and corners of the text, culminating in contemporary discourses. Buddha, Marx and Gandhi reel on from one direction, and the fading visions of William Blake's 'London' comes and goes over the other corner of the sky. The wit and humour is tinged with a hint of G. B. Shaw, in other places other it is reminiscent of Mark Twain. The impact of Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Jose Saramago is also evident in Vijayan's inclination towards magical realism. When Siddhartha comes forth and the author starts working on his personality, he talks of philosophy imbibing the traits of Dostoevsky, Kafka and Kazantzakis.

The interpretation of the metaphors and symbols in the *Saga*, "lies at the heart of the analytical practice. Raising the association of Joseph Conrad's seminal work one may say that it lies at the 'Heart of Darkness' as interpreting the unconscious involves the encounter with 'O'<sup>12</sup> – the dark matter of our inner world<sup>13</sup>, or the "dark spot that must be illuminated by blindness."<sup>14</sup>

The defiant creativity of the author is bursting with immaculate energy which is manifested in his careful selection of words that are simple, terse, mathematical and minimized, bringing forth sharp and subversive patterns which, in the words of Bihari, a classical Hindi poet, shows up a system in the same way as the couplets of *Satsai*.<sup>15</sup> In the words of K. Sachidanandan, "Vijayan was a true visionary intrigued by

<sup>11</sup> H. Enckell, *Reflection in Psychoanalysis: On Symbols and Metaphors*, "International Journal of Psychoanalysis" vol. 91, 2010, pp. 1093-1114.

<sup>12</sup> W.R. Bion, *Attention and Interpretation*, London 1970.

<sup>13</sup> J.S. Grostein, *Bion's 'transformation' in O and the concept of the 'transcendental position'*, <http://www.sicap.it/merciai/bion/papers/grots.htm>.web [14.03.2015].

<sup>14</sup> W.R. Bion, *Attention...*; J.S. Grostein, *Bion's 'transformation'...*; Y. Neuman, *Penultimate Interpretation*, "International Journal of Psychoanalysis" vol. 91, 2010.

<sup>15</sup> This refers to *Bihari Satsai*. It is said that the couplets of *Satsai* are just like the arrow's head, that looks small but make a fatal wound. The couplet is: *Satsaiyya ke dohre jyon nawak ke teer ,dekhan me chhotein lagen ;ghav karein gambheer*.

the paradoxes of history that he went on turning into words and lines. He represents a break in the history of Malayalam fiction as well as in that of Indian cartooning. His defiant creativity was full of a primordial energy that drew equally from the sage and the iconoclast in him.<sup>16</sup> One can find strong traces of similarity between Vijayan's *The Saga of Dharmapuri* and Bhartendu Harischand's *Andher Nagari Chaupat Raja*, except in their use of language. The following lines from the third scene of Bhartendu Harischand's *Andher Nagari Chaupat Raja* easily match the condition of Dharmapuri in Vijayan's *The Saga of Dharmapuri*:

The truth has lost all claims the rogues get all acclaim.  
 Suave lips send sordid heart – dispense in court greater part.  
 One truth is pimped & false rewarded.  
 Against the nexus of profligates, millions voice keep stand dumb  
 Should it be the snooty heart, let the bright hue surface  
 Just is unjust and unjust just, in the King's case it does reflect,  
 Content lost yet form lasts; the bureaucracy boasts the bliss  
 The kingdom looks pandemonium big,  
 The king as if, a slumber sees.<sup>17</sup>

The style of the above-mentioned texts, however, do not match. *The Saga of Dharmapuri* uses explicit sexual imagery, while *The Andhernagari* is written in a state of complete socio-linguistic decorum. The head of state in both works is in focus, and remains in a fool's paradise and overlooks the ideals of statecraft, eventually creating a bad administrative milieu. If we study popular practices on the Indian sub-continent, it appears that the anatomy of sexual organs and comparison with carnal activities and behavior is a fascinating phenomenon. An exhausted self bursts into the volcano of obscenity once it does not find a resort to sustain. The use of sex-infused words sometimes becomes a safety valve to sustain emotional equilibrium on a tender surface and trembling base. During my first reading of *The Saga of Dharmapuri*, once I got started with the frequent uses of carnal imagery and obscene metaphors, I collected the responses of one hundred people in a questionnaire. The sample was collected from a heterogeneous group in a closed questionnaire and the issue in question the motif behind the use of abusive words. 74% of the respondents opined that such comparisons and usages create an emotional release of tension for them, and that they feel light in a situation where they cannot help out with the real confrontation. *The Saga of Dharmapuri* pampered the ego of the author in

<sup>16</sup> K. Satchidanandan, *A sage and an iconoclast*, "The Hindu" vol. 22, no. 8, 2005.

<sup>17</sup> B. Harischand, *Andher Nagari Chupat Raja*, transl. R. P. Singh, New Delhi 2015.

the same way. He opposed the oppression of the Emergency in 1976 which was declared by the then government. The author put his point forward in an allegorical and symbolical note.

O.P. Vijayan has interwoven different symbols and metaphors in such a way that a rainbow hue is visible, showing up Brooks' irony or paradox, Empson's ambiguity, Tate's tension, Blackmur's gesture, and Ransom's texture. The use of terse and ambivalent language has a purpose to fulfill. The following statement by Adrienne Harris makes the point quite obvious, "language requires of its users a position in relation to desire and authority. Entering the world of language or acquiring speech constitutes subjectivity and genderedness for each individual."<sup>18</sup> The language of *The Saga of Dharmapuri* is well pitched for this purpose. In such a way, the novel becomes a seminal work in Indian literature in translation. Citing the view of K. Satchidanandan, we may infer that:

This novel literally revolutionised Malayalam fiction. Its interweaving of myth and reality, its lyrical intensity, its black humour, its freshness of idiom with its mixing of the provincial and the profound and its combinatorial wordplay, its juxtaposition of the erotic and the metaphysical, the crass and the sublime, the real and the surreal, guilt and expiation, physical desire and existential angst, and its innovative narrative strategy with its deft manipulation of time and space together created a new readership with a novel sensibility and transformed the Malayali imagination forever.<sup>19</sup>

Again, to move with the same critic, we find that:

Vijayan's visionary energy converts what could easily have been an ordinary naturalistic rural narrative into a magical experience of mythical proportions. The novel that came out in 1969, after 12 years of drafting and redrafting, became an instant hit with the young while infuriating conservatives and progressives alike, though for different reasons, the only common reason being its "sexual anarchy." It was "anti-status-quoist" in every sense; and readers with orthodox sensibilities charged it with obscurity, partly because of its new idiom and partly its play with space and time that went against the familiar, chronological narration."<sup>20</sup>

O.P. Vijayan has, thus, made a postmodern collage in *The Saga of Dharmapuri* where the political satires of Swift and Voltaire, the image of unethical politics, dwindling public opinion, ideological pretensions etc. come up in a salad bowl.

<sup>18</sup> A. Harris, *Baseball's Bisexuality*, "Contemporary Psychoanalysis" vol. 46, no. 4, 2010, p. 482.

<sup>19</sup> K. Satchidanandan, *A sage ...*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*.

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