

A Protest against Social Evils through Literature – O. V. Vijayan's *The Saga of Dharmapuri* and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Wizard of the Crow* – A Comparison

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The novels *The Saga of Dharmapuri* and *The Wizard of the Crow* were published twenty-one years apart, yet the condition of the countries portrayed in both these novels are uncannily similar. Both the novels have at the centre a despotic, grandiose President/Ruler surrounded by a sycophantic cabinet with least regard for the welfare of the people over whom they rule. O.V. Vijayan's *The Saga of Dharmapuri* (1985) was written during the period marked by political anarchy in India, when Emergency was declared by the then Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi. Ngugi wa Thiong'o wrote *The Wizard of the Crow* in 2006 with the avowed aim, in his own words, "to sum up Africa of the twentieth century in the context of two thousand years of world history". Ngugi resorts to the use of the rich and enigmatic tradition of African oral story telling. The novel is an allegory presented as a modern-day folk tale (complete with tricksters, magic, disguised lovers and daring escapes), it represents Ngugi's attempt to scrutinize his homeland by borrowing the same postcolonial magnifying glass that writers like Salman Rushdie and Derek Walcott have trained on India and the Caribbean. (Turrentine)

The novels were originally written in the mother tongue of the authors, i.e. Malayalam and Gikuyu respectively. In his book *Decolonizing the Mind*, Ngugi notes that the use of indigenous languages in fictional writing is a "liberating venture that enables the novelists to see themselves clearly in relationship to themselves and to other selves in the universe" (Ngugi 87). The authors themselves translated the novels in to the English language to widen the readership for the benefit of the audience world-wide. Even though the language of the coloniser is used by the authors, their aim is to reach the world audience and to sensitize them with regard to the actualities of their respective country's conditions.

Dr. O.P. Mathur feels that *The Saga of Dharmapuri* has been ignored in all the standard histories of Indian English literature though it deals with a highly meaningful theme, both of contemporary and universal relevance, through a novel means of attempting to create a repulsion for evil by employing erotic and even scatological devices producing what in Indian poetics is called

‘Veebhatsa Rasa’ or paradoxically, the pleasure arising from a display of repulsive objects... (Mathur 73)

Vijayan makes use of Veebhatsa Rasa, which regardless of arousing pleasure, indubitably rivets the attention of the reader through the display of repulsive objects. Ngugi makes use of the *reductio ad absurdum* (reduction to the absurd) technique along with magic realism for effectively highlighting the desolation and hopelessness as well as the collapsing public moral. These devices produce a powerful effect while holding a mirror to the realities of the political situation in both the countries.

The Indian Emergency lasted for 21 months, from 25 June 1975 to 21 March 1977 and is one of the most controversial periods in the history of independent democratic India. The President of India at that time, President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, upon advice of the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, declared a state of emergency under Article 352 of the Constitution of India, effectively bestowing on her the power to rule by decree, suspending elections, citizens’ civil liberties, freedom of the press and of the judiciary. The contemporary political scene in India was also murky. There were allegations of bribery and nepotism. The son of the prime minister was considered to have had too much influence on the policy making decisions of the government and the subsequent declaration of Emergency. During this period, there were forced evictions of people from the capital city of Delhi to various settlements far away and forced family planning operations to keep the growing population of India under control. Vijayan includes these episodes highlighting the life of India during the Emergency, which he terms ‘State of Crisis’ in the novel.

The Saga of Dharmapuri was originally to have been serialized in 1975 but had to be postponed to 1977 as the Emergency was clamped, and had to wait further, till 1985, to be published as a novel. The ‘Dharmapuri’ of the novel is an allegorical representation of India, engulfed in various shades of Darkness. The novel is about the machinations of the President playing on the patriotism of the people to cling to power and to amass wealth even if it meant the exporting of cadavers. The novel is filled with scenes where women are raped by men of all designation in government service, under the guise of patriotism. Child molestation, necrophilia, nauseating scatology, coarse and obscene eroticism and horrid cannibalism are also part of the narrative. Into this atmosphere arrives Siddhartha, a wandering mendicant, dissuading war and violence and preaching love and peace.

Ngugi wa Thiong’o has been writing about his country Kenya, the Mau-Mau struggle, the conflicts between Christians and non-Christians and the corruption that set in after the exit of the colonial rulers. Due to his writing about the injustices of the dictatorial government at the time headed by Daniel Arap Moi, in the Gikuyu language which reached even the poor peasants, Ngugi and his family were harassed and subsequently forced to live in exile.

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Wizard of the Crow is set in the fictional Republic of Aburiria, a country easily recognizable as Kenya. It is a country ravaged by greed and corruption, stagnating economy, ‘chronic “ape-manship”’ (Tembo 337). The head of this Republic is known as the “Ruler”. He is surrounded by sycophantic ministers, who yield their wives and daughters to their supremo to propitiate him. They come up with a deluded scheme to erect the tallest building in the world, a tower that would reach “to the very gates of heaven”, christening the project “Marching to Heaven”. Against this backdrop develops the love story of Kamiti an unemployed M.B.A. degree holder now turned beggar and Nyawira, an activist heading the Movement of the Voice of the People. They are both forced to flee from the police and Kamiti fabricates a sign ‘Wizard of the Crow’ for their hideout to mislead the police. Ngugi uses Kamiti to voice his opposition against the complacency toward despotism, repression of women and ethnic minorities, widespread corruption and the replacing of the colonial power, with multinational banks’ lending money and imposing themselves into the country. “In its best scatological moments, it stands as a vivid portrait of postcolonialism and the banality of evil” (Rev.) opines Simon Gikandi of the novel.

The Saga of Dharmapuri opens with the physical discomfort of the President who is ‘gripped by a colic’ (SOD 10). There is a detailed description of the process of defecation of the President while the national anthem is played. The physiological process is magnified and presented through the Veebhatsa rasa – the moist eyed mothers invoking the grace of the excrement on their children, the frenzy to secure a smattering of the excrement, its description by the reporters are a few notable instances. In the most fantastic of similes, the stability of the President’s excrement serves as an indication of the stability of his Presidency (SOD 13).

The banquet given by the President of the White Confederacy is another scatological description. The President of Dharmapuri and his dynasty are on a state visit and they greedily satisfy their “militant appetites” (SOD 20), while simultaneously “wallowing in dung” (SOD 21) at the dining table. This unrealistic description raises utter abhorrence in the reader.

In the next tableau, the President is shown eating the chocolates that the white man from the Confederacy tosses to him. “The white man flung it towards the president, who caught it in his outstretched hands and, undoing the wrapping, began eating out of it greedily. In the angst of that eating he shat” (SOD 114). When the white man announces that he would publish this ‘wretchedness’, the President requests him “‘Write if you must, O White Overlord,’...of the defecation, but spare us and do not write about the eating, for if you do so, we shall stand reduced in the eyes of the White world and may not be able to sustain our State of Crisis” (SOD 114).

Equating ‘State of Crisis’ with the Emergency, the eating of the chocolate can be seen as the enjoyment of despotic power by a few corrupt politicians. This, if divulged, would reduce the credibility of the regime in the eyes of the world. The message is brought out through the alienating verbal picture.

Vijayan uses erotic imagery as another instrument with which he evokes the Veebhatsa Rasa. The novelist points out in an interview that “the grotesquely revealed sexuality of power serves an anti-erotic function” (Pillay 93). Sex is spread over the novel, agonising both for the reader, the women involved and the witnesses like the little boy, Sunanda. He is the son of the kitchen maid, Lavanya, who counsels her son to ‘look away’. “Whatever your mother is doing is for the country” (SOD 38) she says. It is obligatory on the women who consider themselves loyal citizens to satisfy the lust of the men working for the government. This also relates to the main theme as Mathur says, “...the repulsiveness of sex and violence ... is a comment on the predominance of evil in social life” (Mathur 77).

Cannibalism is also a tool the novelist handles to evoke repugnance. The flesh of little children is exported to earn foreign exchange. The ‘State of Crisis’ demands that a child of ten years of age is also condemned for treason and put to death to pander to their perverted culinary tastes as it is the delicacy of the Royal dining table and when exported acts as an aphrodisiac to white women, while the brown mothers lament the loss of their children. The greed for money also tempts men to sell their aged parents to the food factory. There is a graphic passage wherein the novelist describes the effect of the cannibalistic admixture in the food of a white woman.

The seduction on the tongue grew frantic; she closed her eyes, and in despair and pleasure, like virgin sinning, swallowed her first mouthful. Another mouthful, and yet another; now she was crying and eating off the tray the flesh of humans from the black and brown condiments, processed by the alchemists and transformed into peaceable fruit and flower. She cried out deliriously, “Hold me, my husband!” (SOD139)

With the aid of these scatological, erotic, cannibalistic images - combined with his innate cartoonist’s wild exaggerations of reality - Vijayan portrays the subsistence of a festering political system.

With the presentation of Siddhaartha, as a combination of the Bhodisatva and Gandhiji, the novelist brings light and hope. Gandhiji is the ‘Mendicant’ in the novel about whom Lavanya repeats the prophecy that the Ancient One “will come back, though it is sedition to say so” (SOD 41). After witnessing the ignominious depths of human greed such as children’s flesh exported for meat, guards sexually assaulting dead bodies and people forced to undergo ‘treatment’ which later renders them unfit to live in society, Siddhaartha preaches love. It is in the message of love, “Love that flowed ... in great tides” (SOD 158), where in lies the panacea for all the ills of mankind. Vijayan, thus effectively paints the evil in politics and hence society by creating a repulsive atmosphere through his satirical and ridiculously hyperbolic situations.

What Vijayan did with the Veebhatsa Rasa, Ngugi does by using the principle of *reductio ad absurdum* (reduction to the absurd). The Wizard of the Crow is a parody of Kenya, and the ‘Ruler’

of Aburiria is a combination of dictators like Daniel Arap Moi of Kenya, Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe and Idi Amin of Uganda. Moi was the President of Kenya from 1978 to 2002. He was accused of having a hand in the death of dissidents, not allowing democratic elections to take place, wide scale corruption and nepotism as well as stashing of funds and assets worldwide. The Ruler is a self-obsessed tyrant, whose sycophantic cabinet goes to the extent of modifying physical features to please their Ruler. An ordinary MP, Machokali, undergoes plastic surgery to enlarge his eyes to enable him to see better the enemies of his Ruler and is rewarded with the post of Minister for Foreign Affairs. Sikioku is the Minister of State, who proves his devotion to the Ruler by having his ears enlarged to better overhear the enemies. These two ministers constantly try to prove their allegiance to the Ruler, even as they try to position themselves to accumulate more power.

To honour the Ruler on his birthday, this team comes up with the absurd scheme of building a modern House of Babel called “Marching to Heaven”. Aburiria would now do what the Israelites could not do: raise a building to the very gates of Heaven so that the Ruler could call on God daily to say good morning or good evening or simply how was your day today, God? (WOC 16)

When the citizenry is invited to speak about the project, a wizened old man hobbles to the podium and fumbles for the right words. Various words are suggested to him and in the confusion, he calls the ruler “a cheap arsehole” (WOC 17) attempting to correct it he further damns himself by saying “His Holy Arsehole” (WOC 18). By using this unsavoury image of the body, Ngugi allows the old man the freedom to speak against the meaningless project which has no bearing on the general welfare of the state.

The announcement that the Global Bank is expected to release money for this project, brings forth two sets of people – one looking for survival and the other are those willing to pay bribes to secure contracts to build the tower. Ngugi brings in magical realism when the queues forming in front of the construction company become a nation-wide epidemic and extend to infinity. Riders dispatched by the Ruler to search for the origins of the lines search vainly for days only to find that a queue ends where it begins.

Titus Tajirika being the Chairman of the Marching to Heaven Building Committee, finds his office overrun by those looking for a share in the stakes, bribing him with envelopes filled with cash. This overwhelms Tajirika who suffers from another absurd illness the ‘white ache’ (WOC 180). He dreams of becoming a white man owning a plantation to which he would eventually retire. Nyawira, his secretary, brings him to the Wizard of the Crow who provides the diagnosis and eventually cures him.

Kamiti, the Wizard of the Crow, is a well-qualified, unemployed youth who is reduced to begging, when the police chase him. Fleeing the police, he seeks refuge in a house along with another ‘beggar’ and fabricates the sign ‘Wizard of the Crow’ (WOC 77) to evade the pursuers. The sign launches another queue of clients who solicit the wizard’s counsel that includes the paranoid

Ruler and his ministers. The other ‘beggar’ Nyawira, Tajirika’s secretary, is part of an underground ‘Movement for the Voice of the People’. The Movement decides to shame the Ruler in front of the dignitaries of the Global Bank. Ngugi again handles the ‘reduction to absurd’ technique when he fashions a protest relating it in Nyawira’s words,

“... all of us in the arena suddenly faced the people, our backs turned to the platform. All together we lifted our skirts and exposed our butts to those on the platform, and squatted as if about to shit en masse in the arena ... it was a simulation of what our female ancestors used to do as a last resort when they had reached a point where they could no longer take shit from a despot.” (WOC 250)

The assembled foreign dignitaries assume that it is a ‘solemn native dance’, while the Ruler and his Cabinet are mortified.

The Ruler then decides to travel to America to garner support for his pet project and procure the loan. Not only does the Bank refuse to fund the project, a request to a popular television news channel for a primetime interview is also rejected. The peremptory dismissal of his loan by the Bank sears his soul and transforms his body which starts to swell. Holding the refusal letter in his hand, “[when] the Ruler opened his mouth, no word came out. ... suddenly his cheeks and tummy began to expand. No, not just the cheeks and the tummy but the whole body” (WOC 486). It is later diagnosed as SIE [Self-induced Expansion] (WOC 472). It is not satisfactorily explained how his strange illness was resolved, yet his reign continues: the triumvirate of fear, greed and corruption proceed unabated.

Kamiti, in a dream state, is able to fly above the capital city of Aburiria, smelling the stench of decay and corruption. He can also smell a person’s true character, “there are times when the foul and the fresh appear to struggle for the right of passage into my nostrils, like evil and good spirits fighting for the domination of the soul” (WOC 122). Ngugi reiterates his ancient African tradition through Kamiti’s interest in herbology which gains him a following as the Aburirian souls who look to the alternative medicine in search of cures for their ailments. It is through Kamiti, the eponymous Wizard, an avatar of folklore and wisdom that Ngugi expresses his disillusionment with the concrete socio-economic and political realities of the national ruling elite, on the one hand, and the neocolonial imperialists, on the other. With magic realism and *reductio ad absurdum*, Ngugi mounts a caustic political and social satire on Africa’s dysfunctions and possibilities.

Both the novels have a universal dimension. According to the Gita, the Divine incarnates himself whenever evil begins to dominate, concomitantly evil is a repeated occurrence. The only way to triumph over social evil lies in the message of love and hope.

Abbreviations Used

SOD - The Saga of Dharmapuri

WOC - Wizard of the Crow

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