



Subverting the tyranny of the nation state through the Grotesque body imagery: A Bakhtinian Reading of O Vijayan's *The Saga of Dharmapuri*

Prathyaksh Janardhanan

Phd Scholar,

School of Language, Literature and Cultural Studies
Centre for Comparative Literature and Translation Studies
Central University of Gujarat,
Gandhinagar, Gujarat (India)

Abstract: *Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) is one of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century. His concepts of polyphony, heteroglossia and carnival have provided analytic tools to articulate the nature of differences and diversity in the world. In his Rabelias and his World (1968), Bakhtin argues grotesque realism and lower body imagery as the expression of the carnival, which subverts dominant hierarchical structures. The Saga of Dharmapuri (Dharmapuram in the original), the second novel of the Malayalam novelist O V Vijayan utilizes stark and graphic images of the body to launch a scathing criticism of the modern nation state. This paper analyses O V Vijayan's The Saga of Dharmapuri in the light of Bakhtin's grotesque realism as argued in his Rabelias and his World, to argue that while Bakhtin's formulation of the body has been essentially positive and regenerative, Vijayan uses the imagery of the grotesque body to question and subvert the grand narratives of the nation.*

Key words: *Grotesque Realism, Body, lower body stratum, Bakhtin, Nation.*

In the Prologue to Michael Bakhtin's *Rabelias and his world*, Michael Holoquist mentions "grotesque realism" as a point by point inversion of the categories used in the thirties to define Social realism (Bakhtin, xvii). This implies that grotesque realism attempts the portrayal of a different reality. This can be explained through a brief description of the basic principles of grotesque realism. Firstly, grotesque realism relies primarily on the material body principle which is deeply positive, grandiose and exaggerated (Bakhtin, 19). The second aspect is degradation of all that is high, spiritual, abstract to the level of the earth element, which is both destructive and regenerating (Bakhtin, 20). This aspect of debasement shows how the grotesque realist style reverses all that is grand, sacred and exalted to the level of the material body stratum (Bakhtin, 371).

Bakhtin's *Rabelias and his World* (1968) and his arguments of grotesque imagery in "Grotesque Image of the Body" and "The Material Bodily Lower Stratum", portray the images of the body (particularly the lower body) through haunting images of shit, semen and the gaping mouth. The governing traits of the grotesque style are exaggeration, hyperbolism and excessiveness. (Bakhtin, 303). He defines the grotesque image of the body as:

The grotesque body, as we have often stressed, is a body in the act of becoming.....Moreover, the body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world....That is why the essential role belongs to those parts of the grotesque body in which it outgrows its own self, transgressing its own body, in which it conceives a new second body; the bowels and the phallus.....Next to the bowels and the genital organs is the mouth, through which enters the world to be swallowed up....Eating, drinking, defecation and other elimination (sweating, blowing of the nose, sneezing), as well as copulation, pregnancy and dismemberment, swallowing up by another body –all these acts are performed on the confines of the old and new body. In all these events, the beginning and end of life are closely linked and interwoven. (317)

Thus, the grotesque image of the body is a point of transition in a life eternally renewed the inexhaustible vessel of death and conception and lends itself to mockery and abuse (Bakhtin, 318). This paper analyses O.V Vijayan's *The Saga of Dharmapuri* using Bakhtin's grotesque realist imagery of lower body stratum and the use of abuse and praise to argue, how Vijayan blends the elements of grotesque realism such as use of lower body stratum imagery, abuse and mockery, along with archaic and Newspeak vocabulary to question the grand narratives of the nation.

To begin with, O V Vijayan (1930-2005) was an Indian author and cartoonist. He was an important figure in the modern Malayalam literature. He authored six novels, nine short-story collections and nine collections of essays and reflections. *Dharmapuram* (translated by Vijayan) as *The Saga of Dharmapuri* is his second novel. This paper bases its analysis on the translated version of the novel.



O V Vijayan's *The Saga of Dharmapuri* (1977) was written against the political background of the Emergency, which was declared in India in 1975. In brief, the novel pivots the story of Dharmapuri, which is ruled by a dictator known as President, who uses his faces (known as sacrament in the novel) to enslave the minds and bodies of the citizens. The novel begins with the President, declaring the order of Crisis (read Emergency), which essentially robs the citizens of their freedom, resulting in complete chaos, where the ministers and soldiers run wild, raping and murdering at will. They also engage in human cadaver trade for political gains (Vijayan, 233). In the time of chaos, the entry of Siddhartha, a wandering saint into Dharmapuri, initiates an ideological battle between the tyranny of the state (which the President represents) and the alternative system of compassion and love represented by Siddhartha. The novel ends inconclusively, where the Crisis has already run its course, leaving many citizens, dead, raped and maimed in its wake.

O Vijayan attempts to process the political reality of the time, through the use of excremental vision and archaic vocabulary to question the grand discourse of the nation (Ramakrishnan, 29). The grotesque imagery of the lower body stratum is seen in the opening pages of the novel, where the defecations by the President twice a day is seen as a national ritual. Vijayan writes:

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 solemnised by the broadcasting network, which played the national anthem to reassure the people that all was well. Children would choke and say, *ah, the Great Sire defecates*, and mothers, their eyes moist would invoke for their little ones the grace of the Sovereign Excrement. (182)

The imagery of the defecating, fornicating body narrated through a grand archaic vocabulary of a national ritual, as described in the quotation above, serves the function of debasing the grand and exalted to the trivial, which in turn criticises the machinations of the nation state.

The novel analogies the body with the nation. The debasement through the body imagery thus can be read as the criticism of the degeneration of the nation. The novel is replete with examples of sexual perversion and graphic images of the grotesque body. Some of the key examples which exemplify the analogy of body and the nation are: In the first chapter of the novel, the untimely defecation of the President is shown as the root cause which would eventually lead to the proclamation of the State of Crisis, which is described as a turd as big as a sewer rat (Vijayan, 193). His erections are sustained through ministrations and potions by the wives of ministers (Vijayan, 203) and by eating human flesh (Vijayan, 300).

All 'state of affairs' of Dharmapuri are portrayed to be dependent on the erection of the President (Vijayan, 218) and his ministers (Vijayan, 202). The citizens such as Laavanya are forced to copulate with secret policemen in return for their services or to escape being arrested or killed (Vijayan, 209).

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 (discussed earlier) and semen (referred to as stains in the novel). Further, he is also referred to as a worm named Pippalada (Vijayan, 292). 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 (personified through the President and the ministers).

Bakhtin's analysis of the grotesque imagery of the body, which focuses on the orifices or openings: which is the mouth and the anus (Bakhtin, 319) is also seen in the chapter titled 'The General'. Vijayan utilizes the grotesque imagery of both the orifices to trivialize the banquet that is held for the delegates and bureaucrats of Dharmapuri:

The Great White Father sat back, looking on in wonder at their militant appetites. As the chase for food got under way, one of the presidential offspring shat in the excitement of pursuit and circled the banquet table with a trail of slime. Then, another shat and yet another; soon the whole brood followed suit. Their indulgent grandsire, meanwhile fed avidly on a steak, until unable to hold it inside him, he opened his sluices as well; presently he was sitting on a sumptuous cushion of excrement, and seated thus, he addressed his host, 'White Excellency! We have our differences, but have much in common as well...' (191)

The banquet imagery as a crucial aspect of the carnival, in this context, thus subverts the discourse through exaggeration and mockery through the focus on the open apertures of the body such as the mouth (Bakhtin, 324). The effectiveness of the grotesque imagery is augmented by the ironic-satirical authorial voice used in the novel. Vijayan utilizes an archaic tone and the Newspeak vocabulary used by the media (Ramakrishnan, 30) to criticise the grand narratives of the nation.

Corollary to the use of language is the use of abuse-praise, which is an important source for the grotesque body (Bakhtin, 353). Bakhtin argues that most of the abuse-praise vocabulary is closely related to the forms of degradation which form a part of grotesque imagery (Bakhtin, 27). In the chapter titled "Material Bodily Lower Stratum", Bakhtin draws on Rabelais's work to demonstrate the style of praise-abuse, where a character named Panurge, frustrated seeks advice from Friar John in chapter 26 of Book 3:



“ O dumpy cod, stumpy cod, famous in birth, hamous in girth; O cod, rich in lactory secretions and heavy as lead.....O cod above all things fair,cod covered with hair;.....Hear me, I beseech you (Bakhtin,417)

The example shows how the praise – abuse vocabulary debases and trivializes the sacred. It must also be noted here that the praise abuse vocabulary utilizes the lower body stratum imagery. In *The Saga of Dharamapuri*, praise-abuse is used by the victims to un-silence the injustice faced by them. In the chapter titled The Kitchen Maid, Laavnaya utilizes the praise-abuse vocabulary as a last resort to resist the rape by the Minister.

Rumannuaan gripped her breasts tighter; she made the ritual chant, *We are not alone, the Tartar Republic is with us! Hoping, foolishly, to embarrass the Minister. When that ploy failed, she swore to herself in despair: Old lecher, carcass-eater, people of my class seldom live beyond fifty; I am thirty five, which leaves me another fifteen years in which to let my blood thin and my fats clot and my skin turn to parchment. Carcass-eater, the maggots are inside you, but with the rarest physic you keep your lust alive* (201)

To conclude, Bakhtin’s use of grotesque realism was primarily to trivialize the sacred and the grand, thereby creating an alternative discourse to contest the grand liturgical narratives. O V Vijayan utilizes the grotesque imagery of the body and utilizes it to question the grand narratives of the nation. In-*Fiction Interface in Indian English Novel* (1999), T N Dhar argues

The extensive focus on the President’s genitals and his fornication with concubines, from kitchen-maids to the wives of his ministers is significant because Vijayan uses sex as a metaphor for domination and subjugation.....The important point here is that the pleasures of the body, such as eating, drinking and sex, which stand for freedom and liberation in folk traditions, to which Dharmapuri claims to aspire, are made by Vijayan into symptoms of oppression and perversion (235)

In other words, it can be argued that while Bakhtin used the grotesque imagery of the body and the praise abuse vocabulary to question and trivialize the sacred and the grand narratives, his conception of the body has been positive. The debasement through grotesque imagery and the images of the lower body stratum typically meant the earth element, which signified regeneration (Bakhtin, 20). O V Vijayan’s use of the grotesque imagery of the body on the other hand, envisions the body as degenerative and corrupted. This is seen in the stark imagery of sexual perversion such as necrophilia (Vijayan, 232). It has been argued above that the President embodied the nation. In this light, extremes of the sexual perversion and violation of the human body is the violation of the nation state and the description of the unsettling images of the body can be read as a resistance which questioned the tyranny and injustice meted by the Nation state.

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