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THE FUNCTIONING OF A ‘POST-COLONY’ IN O. V. VIJAYAN’S
THE SAGA OF DHARMAPURI

Abstract

The paper seeks to study and examine the power struggle between the native ruler and his subjects in a post-independent state. Although it is popularly believed that political independence from foreign rule/colonial country was a kind of boon for the formerly colonized people as they entered a new era full of opportunities and new prospects, O. V. Vijayan’s *The Saga of Dharmapuri*, through its scathing and scatological satire, counters this idealistic narrative and demonstrates a world of a ‘post-colony’ where, despite the absence of the colonial master, the people under self-rule still face oppression and exploitation. The paper argues that though the foreign rule has been replaced by ‘native rule’, the power struggle between the native ruler and his subjects still continues. The native ruler operates in the same manner as did the erstwhile colonial master though through a different set of tactics. The native ruler is more like a puppet in the hands of global powers which refers to the continuing absencing presence of the colonial power in a ‘post-colony’ even though they departed long ago

Introduction

O. V. Vijayan’s *The Saga Of Dharmapuri* (1985) is a scathing political satire on a post-independence fictional state called ‘Dharmapuri’ which lays bare the subtle vile play of state-power and its handlers. It is a satire which comments through grotesque and scatological humour upon the grand promises made during the freedom struggle against the colonizer and how those promises have run aground and faltered in the post-independent state, which still appears like a colony, though not in imperial terms. It is a novel which demonstrates how the current rulers of a sovereign state like Dharmapuri, in the name of progress and liberalism, still maintain the same legacy of exploitation and

oppression upon their subjects, and thus serves as an allegorical subtext for the state affairs in any post-independent sovereign state in contemporary times. The novel also touches upon several other issues integral to a 'post-colony' like patriotism, the institutionalization of Presidential decrees by which the subjects have to, in all circumstances, abide by or perish, corporatization of domestic lands and other trades which can be decoded as a reference to the present day Globalization—a nuanced form of colonization or imperialism for which demarcation of borders and boundaries is no more required, and the state-sponsored violence which constantly proves to its subjects that any kind of conspiracy or resistance, internal or external, against the state will be dealt with heavy-handedly.

All in all, the text turns out to be a near-apocalyptic vision of Vijayan which holds little promise to any kind of redemption or relief to the subjects even after the country has attained freedom from foreign rule, which reminds us of Agamben's remark in his book, *State of Exception* (2005) that all forms of governing systems are "quasi-dictatorial" and all contemporary modern states are "totalitarian" in some sense "by means of state of exception...that allows for the physical elimination not only of political adversaries but of entire categories of citizens who for some reason cannot be integrated into the political system (Agamben, 2008)."

It is this argument that I would like to follow up in my paper and comment upon by showing how state-power just exchanges hands but remains almost the same and mostly unchanged in its very nature of exploitation and violence upon those who resist state sponsored integration tactics or policies. Besides, I would like to argue that the 'post-colony' still exists as a colony under the foreign powers, although there is no direct rule by the erstwhile colonizer.

Power and the Native ruler

Philip Abrams, in his essay, "Notes On The Difficulty of Studying the State" (1977) argues that "...the key political functions cannot be definitively assigned to any personnel, apparatuses or institutions but rather float with the tides of class power (74)."

What he proposes is that the function of political power remains almost the same and to a great extent ‘unchanged’ in all state set-ups. The nations having attained political independence continue to employ the same means and modes of power which the colonizer once employed. In other words, we can argue that the power wrested from the colonizer manifests itself in yet another form in the so-called decolonized cultures or countries. The State function remains the same, while only the functionaries get replaced. This argument is fairly linked with the state of Dharmapuri which is now one of the decolonized nations, but still in the invisible grip of the colonizer. The anti-imperialist battles waged on the frontiers or within the state signify nothing but a carefully crafted mode of assertion of power which carries the message forward to the subjects that the state is loyal to its subjects and is doing them a great service by shielding them from any foreign conquest. One can argue here that it is just an illusion being doled out to the people while, in actual sense, the President, the protagonist in the novel, himself is more of a puppet in the hands of global powers—powerful in his State but subaltern in global scheme of things. The President and his henchmen exercise power over the people in the same manner as once the colonial master did, albeit with a different set of meanings and significations. Besides, it is also arguable that the declaration of war is a powerful tactic in the hands of the State which arouses patriotic/nationalist feelings amongst the countrymen by inventing an enemy—the Other, which translates into avoiding any resistance to the State, particularly the President. In the novel, the declaration of war by the President against the local state of Samarkhand, the invented enemy, which diffuses all sorts of anti-establishment voices, can be read in support of the above argument:

“My beloved people,’ the President said in a midnight broadcast, ‘give me your freedoms, henceforth let them be hidden inside me, because it is to rob you of the insidious enemy has penetrated us.” (Vijyan, 23)

It is this post-independence nation-state that Franz Fanon discusses in his 1963-published book, *The Wretched of The Earth*, where he draws parallels between the erstwhile colonial master and the newly-emerged elite from the native country. He opines that although the power struggle between the colonial master and the native subject ends with the independence, however, ironically, the same power-struggle resurfaces once

again in a new form—between the elite master of the state and the native subject. The quest for power reveals itself in new forms and signs, and the subjects or the dominated remain in the same state of exploitation and oppression as they once were under the colonial master. In the novel, the eviction of the villagers from the minerals and resources-rich lands, their deprivation and violation of fundamental rights and the raping and killing of their children: all pay testimony to the above proposition. The power inflicts upon its subjects yet another blow in the name of patriotism and national service, and the national service in the land of Dharmapuri is but money-making against all odds. The following dialogue where a forester, Vedavrata, insists on getting back his taken land and trees which bore him fruits out of bounds, with the state-officials who have established workhouses and machines in the forest, sheds light on the power-struggle between the elite money-minded class and the helpless native subject:

“Brethren, I come from Gururgrama, the village of the ancient teacher, which is wild country. Before my village was despoiled by tradesmen and alchemists, its women had large breasts and they made love long and deep. But our trees are gone, and so are the shades; our foods are shipped over the seas for money...

You speak incoherently, aborigine. You have turned insane.

I want my fruit trees.

Do you not desire the country to be wealthy?

I do not know, I do not know (Vijayan, 148-49).”

This power-struggle between the elite master or the State and the helpless subjects leads to the second argument about the corporatization of forestlands and the pitfalls of globalization—a form of neo-colonialism.

Post-independent state and Neocolonialism

The White Confederacy has an instrumental presence in the state politics of Dharmapuri. The White Confederates—the erstwhile colonial masters, keep the economy of Dharmapuri going and theirs, flourishing by their subtle imperialist practices. The President’s fetish for candy and the man-flesh-turned sunflower and fruits that many of

his ministers feast on; the gift of artillery to the President as the State of Dharmapuri had no military budget; and the inflow of money in exchange of human corpses, especially the kids: are some of the practices that the White Confederates employ to rob Dharmapuri. The State police help the Confederates make way for the workhouses and factories on the forestlands inhabited by the villagers and hermits and incarcerate those who voice resistance against the Presidential decree. The nexus between the neo-colonial master and the state machinery is evident here and can be best understood with reference to the current struggle between the Indian government which is pressurized by the corporate giants, both foreign and domestic, and the Naxalites who occupy much of the forestlands in Chhattisgarh, Orissa and some parts of Andhra Pradesh. The corporatized Indian government is keen enough to evict the inhabitants of these forestlands in the name of development, without making any promise to rehabilitate or resettle them after their displacement. It can be seen as a re-incarnation of colonialism under the non-white master who is very much walking in the shoes of the colonizer. Also, the kind of bloodbath that ensues such confrontation too is evident in the novel when the rebels are butchered, their children metamorphosed into “canned meat”, their wives widowed and gang-raped to death. Characters like Laavanya, Mandakini, Sreelata, Shakuntala are some of the examples who meet such an ignominious and ruthless end.

It is to explicate this aspect of the post-colony that Achille Mbembe in his book, *On The Postcolony* (2001) argues that the post-colony is not only characterized by the “political improvisation” where the “distinctive identities are multiplied, transformed or put into circulation,” but also by the “series of corporate institutions and a political machinery that, once in place, constitute a distinctive regime of violence” (Mbembe, 102). In the light of the above argument put forth by Mbembe, we can argue that the State orchestrates the violence in the name of the nation and the model of development and violates its own laws and decrees. It is this scenario that many had experienced during the Emergency in 1977 under Indira Gandhi’s dictatorial rule whereby the State snatched away all the constitutionally granted freedoms and rights the people were entitled to, and launched into a rampage upon its own people. This brings me back to Agamben’s argument that in the state of necessity or emergency—which is nothing but a tactic to

suppress resistance from the anguished people which has the potential to topple over the power relations—“the State has the power to render illicit licit where the necessity has no rules or norms” (24).

Furthermore, as one knows that the novel was written during the Emergency of 1977 but could not be published until 1985, the novel presents the crisis of representation and, thus, turns out to be a mess, a disorganized whole where all mediums of representing the democracy hopelessly fail. There is also a crisis of excess in the novel which renders the novel very unrealistic. A grand promise was made after the political independence from the foreign rulers but the promise remains elusive and chimerical. The masses continue to suffer and languish in the game of state-politics, while the people in power derive a cannibalistic thrill by ruling over the people. The figure of Siddhartha or the Buddha comes into the picture and promises some kind of redemption to the masses, but he too fails in the end. He is rendered out of his agency by the mess that the State has created. As for the rebellion under Parashara, the General, who goes out to persuade the foot-soldiers to return home to their wives and children and drop their weapons, too fails when the President declares a war against the local state—Samarkhand and the rebellion stands as a failure. To argue, one can say that it is not only the President who is to be blamed for exploiting his masses, but also the masses who deludingly comply with the Presidential decrees. The reference to “the Hour of Second Defecation” and the following feasting ceremony by the masses who “secured mere smatterings [of the Excrement], which they mixed with rare and valuable spices and feasted on”, is a telling example how even the masses are complicit in the structural violence that they receive from the State (11). It is similar to what we see in Marquez’s *The Autumn of the Petrarch* where the masses cannot see meaning to their existence without their General and are, thus, equally blamable for the violence inflicted upon them as the General is.

Conclusion

To conclude, one can say that O V Vijayan’s *The Saga Of Dharmapuri* is an allegory of power on the post-colony. It is an account of neo-colonial practices in the

postcolonial world where the white colonial master's presence is still as strong as it was during the colonial period. It is a story of the disillusionment that followed after the grand and larger-than-life promises of political independence from the foreign rule. The exploitation and oppression of the masses continues unabatedly. The only difference is the oppressor is none other than the native ruler himself. The novel also questions and challenges the discourse of patriotism and nationalism, and how such discourses serve people only in the higher positions and delude the masses. The President has been shown as a puppet of foreign powers, impotent and powerless. Instead of enforcing norms, he is contemplating what is to be done and what not, which is a clear indication of his puppet-like status playing in the hands of foreign absenting 'rulers.' The state of Dharmapuri, despite its democratic status, is a totalitarian state in some sense. The State feeds the illusion to the masses that it is people-friendly and is devoted to the development of the nation and a holistic advancement of the people. But, as we have seen in the discussion above, the very idea of development or progress comes at the expense of the people and their resources, and to curb any rebellion from the masses, the state has to create an exception in which all laws and freedoms stand nullified. Thus, the novel gestures toward a world where no promise of redemption can sustain itself and only State-violence can prevail.

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