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O.V. Vijayan's 'The Saga of Dharmapuri' a Political Fiction: An Overview

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Abstract : Political Fiction explores the convergence of politics and human experience, attempting an inter-penetration of personal sentiments and political ideology. Politics in such novels integrates with the pattern of lives of the characters and functions as the germinal nucleus which ferments the human story. Post-Independence political situation of India proved to be a fertile ground for the blossoming of a number of literary talents. The present research paper deals with a close reading of the work of O. V. Vijayan's 'The Saga of Dharmapuri'. This represents a distinct form of political imagination attuned to the paradoxes of living under a totalitarian system. The genre of political fiction has invited a large body of critical writing. Various theories were formulated giving plenitude of definitions ranging from the elementary to the most sophisticated for the term 'political fiction'. Contemporary political novelists evince a sustained enthusiasm in portraying the trivialization and desecration of human values under authoritarian regimes. This research work provides new dimensions to the understanding of the twentieth-century Indian society.

Keywords: Political Fiction, convergence, inter-penetration, germinal nucleus, totalitarian system, trivialization, desecration of human values.

Political Fiction is considered as the direct descendant of the nineteenth-century social novel. The complex realities of a rapidly evolving society which eluded the attention of the social novelist, constituted the raw materials for the political novelist. A political novel invariably depicts the complex dynamics of the society and offers the reader a means for understanding the important aspects of the society in which he lives. In such a novel, action, characters and settings are firmly grounded in politics. It can enrich our sense of human experience. A political novel generates such intense heat that the ideas it appropriates are melted into its movement and fused with the emotions of its characters. A political novelist

endows the political ideology with the capacity for striving character into passionate gestures and sacrifices.

The genre of political fiction has invited a large number of critical writings. Various theories were formulated giving plenitude of definitions ranging from the elementary to the most sophisticated for the term 'political fiction'. Contemporary political novelists evince a sustained enthusiasm in portraying the trivialization and desecration of human values under authoritarian regimes. They exhibit a striking similarity in their response to the abuse of political power. Political degeneration seems to be the major preoccupation of many of the post-Independence Indian English political novelists. There arose a new crop of political novelists whose aesthetic perception was modulated by innovative strategies of demystification. They took liberties with the presentation of Indian politics and the life of individuals by fashioning new fictional methods. O. V. Vijayan, Salman Rushdie, and Shashi Tharoor share the same artistic temperament in experimenting with techniques of clarification.

Political fiction is a fairly new form of literary expression which has come into vogue in the post-war period of the twentieth-century. The sensibilities of a group of responsive writers who were disturbed by atrocities perpetrated by power-hungry fascist regimes, found eloquent expression in new fictional patterns woven around political themes. Their works were characterized by and intricately patterned interlocking of political ideology and existential concerns. They focus down the impact of power politics on the hopes, fears and angst of the post-atomic humanity. The dominant issues of the contemporary world associated with economics, war, race, gender and justice also found ample space in their creative exuberance.

Any attempt to define a political novel will be problematic since it does not represent a distinct form of fiction. The line of demarcation between

art and politics has become unusually thin in the twentieth-century. A writer of political fiction may find it difficult to put life, art and politics into watertight compartments. At an extreme level, any novel that evinces the close relationship between literary imagination and socio-political reality can be called 'politics'. It envisions a multidimensional picture of the society with all its discrepancies and vicissitudes. Political novel is a direct descendant of the nineteenth-century social novels which gave a realistic reflection of the contemporary social life. Gradually there emerged a shift in emphasis in the social novels from the gradations within the society to the fate of the society itself. Taking the cue from the various theories suggested by critics, it can be inferred that a 'political novel' is a literary piece which gives a fictional treatment of politics, economics and culture and also depicts its effects on the saga of human existence. In such a novel, action, character and settings are firmly grounded in politics. Stendhal's 'The Charter-house of Parma', Fyodor Dostoevsky's 'The Possessed', Conrad's 'Nostromo', Arthur Koestler's 'Darkness At Noon', Albert Camus' 'The Plague' and George Orwell's 'Nineteen Eighty-four' are some of the earlier novels which come under the category of political fiction.

Oottupulackal Velukkutty Vijayan, popularly known as O. V. Vijayan is a writer who has first written his novels and short stories in his regional language, Malayalam. Being a student of English Literature, he felt a need to translate them into English and he has done it. It would not be an overstatement to register here that a great novelist has been kept away from the common readers, for the courses unknown. O. V. Vijayan's Indianness lies in his choice of stories and characters taken from myths, legends, folktales and historical events. He used the form and artifice of Indian Classical and Folk Tradition. He deals with the evils of caste politics, fascism, and biased treatment of women in his novels. 'The Legends of Khasak' is the magnum opus of O. V. Vijayan, offers a fitting study for asserting his stance among the literary genius of the nation which forms an area of study of comparative literature. O. V. Vijayan's 'The Saga of Dharmapuri', is a novel with a flavour of its own. The book written originally in Malayalam could not see the light of day in 1975, because of the Emergency. In 1977, after the lifting of Emergency, it was serialised, but was cried down as lurid, obscene etc. Dharmapuri is a

recently de-colonised state with a President. All it has to show for itself is talk about its glorious past. "At a banquet by the deported coloniser", writes Vijayan, "Dharmapuri's President went on to assert that, of their two countries, his was richer in tradition and wisdom. Vijayan uses Satire to make a scathing criticism of India's social and political culture. The depravities of the president of Dharmapuri are shown by concentrating on his main activities; eating, defecating, and having sex. Some of the scenes showing the cruelty and oppression of the state border on the surreal. But the picture is not entirely pessimistic. Vijayan introduces a note of hope through the character of Siddhartha. By showing the neighbouring state of Samarkand, Vijayan shows that his political satire is applicable to post-colonial societies in general, but Tharoor's novel is no specific the Indian subcontinent. O. V. Vijayan's 'The Saga of Dharmapuri' is one of the few novels where the use of mythological motifs has a directly political and even teleological implication. Here, Siddhartha is represented as the Christ figure and the President, the Anti-Christ.

In 'The Saga of Dharmapuri', Dharmapuri is an imaginative version of a country which has recently become free from the colonial yoke. It is ruled by the President who is the focal image of depravity and corruption; he is a tyrannical dictator given to sensual pleasures. The president has besides a host of servile Ministers who enjoy office because of their wives' ministrations to him, a pampered progeny of candy-eating children whose gluttonous appetites have found their way into the annals of Dharmapuri. In one of his banquets to a visiting president, his dynasty numbering around one hundred and fifty, as he states:

"Waylaid the stewards even before the banquet had formally begun, and seized the food with whoops of delight..... As the chase for food got under way, one of the presidential offspring shot in the excitement of pursuit and circled the banquet table with trial of slime"¹.

Vijayan draws a disturbing picture of the games resorted to by the politicians of these countries. They bombard their people with "printed excrescence", which is propaganda suited to the continuation of the governing class. If it does not work, and the situation looks like getting out of hand, they take to the strategy of resorting to war with their neighbours; such wars are described by the author as the "wars of togetherness", for they

are manipulated by two countries to divert the attention of their people from their pressing political social issues. That is why such wars are characterized by a paradox: both the warring sides win in their respective capitals; the only losers are the people who die on both sides. The Presidents and his Ministers, who are busy keeping themselves in favour, are totally oblivious to the poverty and misery of their people, who live in state of perpetual nightmare. Vijayan draws gruesome pictures of their political and economic exploitation. The people are forcibly removed from their houses to fight on the borders of their country and anybody who questions the legitimacy of the actions of the officers is branded a traitor and then liquidated. Poverty drives the people to sell their near and dear ones to be converted into exportable cadavers. Life in Dharmapuri is so risky and uncertain and the people are so terror-struck that "Each hut become an island; in these isolations the men waited for their pots of broth to boil"². A figure like Siddhartha is totally inconceivable in any of the political novels, whether of the anti-utopian variety or other types, belonging to the European tradition, Vijayan had created him. In recent times, Mahatma Gandhi, with the kind of rhetoric he employed and the strategies he pursued during the struggle against the British, again illustrated that there could be only spiritual answers to basic political problems in the Indian situation.

Dharmapuri is not threatened by the prospect of occupation by a foreign army, as is the case with Czechoslovakia in Kundera's novel. But something worse has happened there in terms of the erosion of the national honour, and loss of the original ideals which had inspired the country's fight against colonial domination. The ruling class in Dharmapuri is shown to be hopelessly sold out to foreign interests. There are two super powers identified in the novel whose dirty manoeuvres surface with increasing clarity - the White Confederacy which stand for America and the Red Tartar Republic with its obvious resemblance to Soviet Union. The White Confederacy is one of the 'traditional enemies of Dharmapuri', yet it replenishes Dharmapuri's armouries, and supplies the president with candy. The president and the operators around him carry on their clandestine dealings with the White Confederacy while persisting with their loud anti-imperialist rhetoric which is mainly meant for the consumption of the illiterate masses in the country. The Red Tartar

Republic has entered into an alliance with Dharmapuri. Under cover of 'progressive ideology' The Republic has chosen to pamper the vanity of the president and lend assent to all the repressive measures unlearned by him against his people. The president requires the backing of both the super powers to prop up his floundering regime and to perpetuate dynasty rule in the country. What the novelist tries to unmask here through the farcical touches he has provided to some of the well-known twists and turns in India's foreign policy in the duplicity which has come to be the hallmark of the political leadership of the developing countries in Asia. O. V. Vijayan's novels, in which political ideas play a dominant role, will have a very pointed attitude towards time. Political Fiction explores the convergence of politics and human experience, attempting an inter-penetration of personal sentiments and political ideology. Politics in such novels integrates with the pattern of lives of the characters and functions as the germinal nucleus which ferments the human story. Post-Independence political situation of India proved to be a fertile ground for the blossoming of a number of literary talents. This attitude of time is intricately linked with the ideas of Beings. Being stands for those things that already exists which is in sharp contrast to things that are imagined or imperfectly remembered. A political novelist's interest in politics is a reflection of his concern for the way things would happen; in the way he would confront and overcome problems and the resistance he might face at amelioration.

In the summing up, the traumatic ambivalence between the political and the personal within the post-Independence Indian society sensitized Indian creative writers to undertake significant literary projects. They relished in dealing with an entirely different genre of Indian writing. Multiplicity of problems encompassed by their fictional realms makes their novels incomprehensible. The personality of the characters in these novels evolves out of the interaction between their emotions and ideology. O. V. Vijayan tried to reflect the concerns of a society in the throes of modernity and also of the preoccupations of the post-Independence political situation of the country. O. V. Vijayan makes a devastating and dilemmas attack on the corroding power structures of independent India using totally unconventional strategies of politics. Reflecting on the concerns and predilections of the times, Vijayan makes an innovative exploration

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into the impact of colonial encounter on the cultural, social, and political lives of India.

The existing expressive devices were found to be inadequate to depict the post-Nehruvian political realities in India. Vijayan gives an unusual treatment to the subject with extraordinary images and symbols in order to shock the readers. The Saga embodies the victory of the oriental culture over the mechanized world. Vijayan reiterates the futility of war and the repeated failure of revolutions of the conventional variety. This represents a distinct form of political imagination attuned to the paradoxes of living under a totalitarian system. The genre of political fiction has invited a large body of critical writing. Various theories were formulated giving plenitude of definitions ranging from the elementary to the most sophisticated for the term 'political fiction'. Contemporary political novelists

evince a sustained enthusiasm in portraying the trivialization and desecration of human values under authoritarian regimes.

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