



The Architecture of Lies: Post-Truth Consciousness in O. V. Vijayan's The Saga of Dharmapuri

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Abstract

Contemporary post-truth studies examine emotions, personal beliefs, and subjective narratives. Many Indian writers such as O. V Vijayan explored concepts associated with post-truth well before they became popularized in the intellectual quarters. His works such as The Saga of Dharmapuri predicted the authoritarian and manipulative aspects of post-truth. Vijayan was an Indian cartoonist, pioneering novelist and short story writer, and a leading figure in Malayalam literature. In addition to cartoons and journalistic articles, on such subjects as politics and the environment, he produced several novels and a number of short stories.

His novels The Legends of Khasak and The Saga of Dharmapuri introduced a blend of magical realism, existentialism, and deep philosophical reflections that deviated from the traditional focus on social realism and cultural identity in Malayalam literature. Vijayan's novels often explore the metaphysical and spiritual, set against the backdrop of Kerala's landscape.

This paper argues that The Saga of Dharmapuri anticipates the contemporary post-truth condition through its depiction of propaganda, linguistic manipulation, grotesque state power, and the commodification of human life.

Keywords: Post-Truth Politics, Authoritarianism, Language Manipulation, Grotesque Satire, Body Politics.

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Introduction

In the 21st century, post truth highlights a sociopolitical landscape where factual truth carries less weight in public discourse. Truth is often hijacked by emotion and personal disbelief. It becomes vital to become conscious about the impacts of post truth because it can even pose a threat to democratic foundations, sabotage our trust in democracy, and creates divisions in the society.

O. V. Vijayan is a Malayalam writer of the modernist and postmodernist era of Indian literature, he is often seen as a pioneer of existentialism, political critique, myth, and deep spiritual journeys. The relation of Vijayan's work to post truth consciousness has not been studied in an in-depth manner. Previous studies have explored the aftermath of post-truth among the works of Indian writers such as Samit Basu, Gautam Bhatia, Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh, Meena Kandasamy, Salman Rushdie, Perumal Murugan and many others. Studying social phenomena is an essential part of our lives because our lives are shaped by invisible forces that shape our belief systems, behavioural patterns and daily lives.

The main argument of this paper revolves around the observation that O. V. Vijayan has depicted the ideologies of post-truth much before serious discussions emerged on post-truth.

The study focusses on the specific techniques and tools which he has employed in his novel titled *The Saga of Dharmapuri*, published in the year 1988, right after a decade of emergency period of India. Though the emergency is often considered as a suppression of democracy, the connection between emergency and post-truth lies on the basis of several key dimensions.

Through a close reading of the texts and its various methods of writing, the paper studies the unique path which O. V. Vijayan has constructed to explore the political themes involved in the emergency period of India. The paper analyses the novel's representation of post-truth through various aspects of emergency such as political deception, language, propaganda, state power, body politics and commodification. Through an in-depth analysis of these themes, the distinct way in which O. V. Vijayan has intricately woven the fabric of post-truth narrative is clearly visible in his work.

It may be argued that Vijayan's *The Saga of Dharmapuri* is not just a tale of dystopian fantasy or political satire but also a crucial work that studies, investigates and travel through a landscape of post-truth. Behind a veil of existential philosophy and sardonic political satire, Vijayan makes serious discussions about post-truth and its multiple dimensions.

A pioneer of the modernist era, works like *The Saga of Dharmapuri* plays an integral part in the trajectory of Malayalam literature as well as in the history of narratives that depicts post-truth. Unlike other Malayalam writers like Paul Zacharia, M. Mukundan, K. Satchidanandan or Anand who had represented post-truth in their works, O. V. Vijayan's

search for the layers of post-truth through his poetic, highly localized prose creates a striking difference from his contemporaries.

Objective

This paper examines how O. V Vijayan's *The Saga of Dharmapuri* employs post-truth politics to construct multiple facets of post-truth through his portrayal of the emergency period in India.

Theoretical Background

Post-Truth and Political Deception: Cristophe Jaffrelot and Pratinav Anil's *India's First Dictatorship: The Emergency, 1975-1977* is a significant work that connects post-truth and Indian Emergency. This book gives a detailed study of Indira Gandhi's twenty one -month suspension of Indian democracy. The book differs from other studies due to its finding that the Emergency revealed deep-rooted corruption and moral decay that crept into Indian institutions. They also make a comment that the emergency paved the way for the ideological currents that shape today's political landscape. According to the findings in this book, propaganda machinery, suspension of rights, centralised authoritarianism, personality cult, etc. are some of the core political mechanisms during the Indian emergency. The book psychologically explains facets of Indira Gandhi's authoritarian personality, saying; "In brief, she showed affinities with the rightist values fortifying the F-scale: nationalism, militarism, a notion of welfare in which the poor must pull themselves up by their bootstraps, albeit with some chivvying from the political classes about national renewal. This in essence was paternalistic authoritarianism. "I feel that India is like a baby," she said on 25 June 1975, hours before declaring the Emergency, "and just as one should sometimes take a child and shake it, I feel we have to shake India" (Jaffrelot & Anil, 2021, p. 284). The authors identify this as a kind of centralized authoritarianism. Such political conditions are successfully illustrated by O. V Vijayan through his work *The Saga of Dharmapuri* with the use of techniques like sharp political satire and body politics.

Serbian American playwright Steve Tesich is widely credited with coining the term "post-truth" in his 1992 article, "A Government of Lies", published in *The Nation*. Tesich coined the term in a period when the President's administration was exposed for corruption. In this work, Tesich states that the real danger is not just corrupt leaders but a society that avoids truth. He observed that society prefers emotional satisfaction over factual truth. He argues that political leaders such as George Bush normalized decision-making based on "lesser evils". Tesich contends that modern politics has become detached from ethical and democratic ideals. Tesich (1992) argues that modern societies increasingly prefer emotional comfort over factual truth, referring to a deepening ethical, intellectual and cultural decline.

Tesich uses the example of George Bush's popularity to explain public attitudes that prevailed in his time. He argued that politicians engaged in "moral compromise" for survival. Tesich discusses complex social realities like loss of national myth and erosion of democracy. The

prominent German-American political philosopher and theorist Hannah Arendt is a key foundational theorist for understanding post-truth, known for her emphasis on the importance of active citizenship, political freedom, and the dangers of ideology. Hannah Arendt's *Lying in Politics* (1971) is a critical analysis of how government officials during the Vietnam War used deception, image-making, and self-deception to manipulate public opinion and maintain the illusion of American power. She argues that politics is fundamentally rooted in action and that deception is inherent to political systems.

Arendt (1972) argues that a sophisticated form of deception comes from highly educated experts such as academicians, think-tank analysts and policy strategists. Through the example of the Pentagon Papers, Arendt demonstrates how governments deliberately manipulate truth. She used the U.S. intervention in the Vietnam War to describe conditions like image politics and how politics merges with media control and image strategy.

Arendt elucidates that modern political systems are organized denial of reality. She argues that such practices gradually weaken democratic structures from within. The government tried to create a “state of mind” of a superpower by treating Vietnam as a “test case”. She made a powerful statement that a free press acts as a fourth branch of government, providing unmanipulated factual information. “Truthfulness has never been counted among political virtues” (Arendt, 1972, p. 4).

Lee McIntyre (2018), defines post-truth as a belief that feelings are more important than facts. He is a prominent American philosopher of science and public intellectual. In his work *Post-Truth*, he argues that postmodernism led to post-truth culture. “Fake news is intentionally false news. It’s a key tool in the pursuit of post-truth because it muddies the waters of reality. Once misinformation is in the public sphere, it is impossible to remove. The more fake news saturates the information market, the more jaded the target population becomes” (McIntyre, 2018, p. 118).

Democracies like the U. S. share a tendency to distort reality. Trump is an example of spread of ‘bullshit’ in politics, comments Meera Nanda in her essay. Post-truth condition gives fabricated evidence. In *A Field Guide to Post-Truth India*, Meera Nanda defines post-truth as the victory of emotion over reason. Post-truth politics has increasingly emerged as a global political phenomenon. In her work, she also discusses complex concepts like “deep-lie” and ethnoscience, a dangerous form of post-truth. George Bush attempted to teach the theory of intelligent design in schools, such blind faiths in religious allusions are very evident in *The Saga of Dharmapuri*. The rituals performed by the “Celestial Birds” are evidence that deep lies masquerade as scientific truths.

Thinkers like George Orwell and Sinclair Lewis have long critiqued totalitarianism. This is especially evident in works such as *1984* and *Animal Farm*. A classic example of Orwellian “Newspeak” can be found in *The Saga of Dharmapuri*. For instance, by changing the name from soldier to persuader, the state is attempting to hide the violent reality of its military

power. They are controlling language to control how people think. While the terror in 1984 is explicit, the horrors presented in Dharmapuri are often manufactured subtly by the ruling government.

American philosopher and linguist Noam Chomsky views "post-truth" not as a new phenomenon, but as a modernized form of propaganda and elite manipulation where emotional appeal and subjective beliefs supersede objective facts. To him, news is shaped by business interests rather than pure truth. According to Chomsky, consumer culture replaced serious political discussion. This is reflected in the material excess of Dharmapuri, where "limousines and aphrodisiacs" are consumed in order to satisfy the ruling family. Vijayan suggests that lavish food and drink are tools used by imperialists to distract and control decolonized leaders. The President in Shantigrama always sits on his throne, sucking candy, a symbol of greed of the ruling class. Only the elite has control over the media content.

Language, Propaganda, and State Power

The way in which Vijayan uses language in the novel is very powerful. When the king says "a million good coins for every minute". He is actually calculating how much wealth is spending on his concubines, thus reducing a biological need to a mere financial transaction. "Hun sorrows" is a term that the bureaucracy of Dharmapuri uses to present themselves as the victim. This becomes evident in the Minister's statement:

"I am pleased that you realize our laws are God-given and administered to justify God's ways. Now, coming back to your husband, on second thoughts, I decided against liquidation, because where your husband to be removed, you would become mine and mine alone. (Vijayan, 1988, p. 236)".

These lines are addressed by the Minister to common men who are sent as "Persuaders" for war. His emphasis upon the word 'God-given' takes the reader back to the historical facts such as the Divine Right Theory which asserts that a monarchy's authority comes directly from God and the common man does not possess any right to question their decisions. Such theories, which originated in medieval Europe, still retain relevance today. The ruling class has no hesitation in using politics and religion to meet their selfish needs.

"The Prime Minister went on, 'Clausewitz has said that war is the pursuit of politics by other means, but he never understood that wars could be agreed on for common purposes. Our problem and Dharmapuri's are similar, and their President have been enquiring recently if we, for the common good, could have another war of togetherness.'" (Vijayan, 1988, p. 236). These lines elucidate the power-hungry ruling class and their desire to witness war. According to them, war is only a means of adventure where they can reap profit. Strange phrases like "war of togetherness" are put forward to carefully distract the people from the horrors and atrocities of the war.

Later in the chapter “The Legion of the Baptised” we come across situations where the oppressed also make use of language to exhibit their resistance. “From the crowd of blaspheming wives, Mandakini stepped forward, and said, ‘Leader, Partisan! Intercede with the Motherland, and pray that she takes back the medals and returns the genitals” (Vijayan, 1988, p. 236). By using words explicitly to express their raw emotions, Vijayan is giving voice to the resistance of the common man through giving them the tool of language. Language is not an instrument that the ruling class can hoard in their palaces.

In the following chapter ‘The Celestial Birds’, Vijayan mocks all discourses, theories and ideologies. A husband beats his own children to drink milk from his wife’s breast. The husband then talks to the Partisan, “Go on with your discourse, sir. I am listening. I stroke her breasts so that the milk wells in them” (Vijayan, 1988, p. 251). This foregrounds the absolute and extreme kind of poverty that the state reduced its citizens to mere animals who must fight for survival. They are reduced to the condition of animals. Thus, Vijayan’s use of language not only depicts the evil deeds of the bureaucracy or the resistance of the oppressed but he also uses language to express his own rebellion against the imperialist state.

Though many readers expressed unhappiness regarding the book’s perceived “obscenity”, O. V Vijayan has successfully used the tool of the abject as discussed by Julia Kristeva to analyze the post-truth condition. In Kristeva’s *Power of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, the abject is defined as that which disturbs identity, system and order. In *Shantigrاما*, even the “state of crisis” is not announced through a dignified speech, but is literally “excreted” by the President. This is how Vijayan makes use of the abject and the grotesque to suggest the crude impulses underlying political authority.

The ruling elites’ consumption of the President’s excrement is deeply disturbing to readers. The scene transforms governance into abjection, suggesting that state is immersed in corruption and decay. Kristeva in her work says that writers and artists use the abject to challenge established social, moral and cultural boundaries. “The clean and proper (in the sense of incorporated and incorporable) becomes filthy, the sought-after turns into banished, fascination into shame” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 9).

The Minister’s assault upon Laavannyai illustrates the grotesque allegory in which the author describes the minister. He is described physically using words like “creaked like rusted weapon”, “pestinential stench”, “brittle bone”, “cartilage”, “parchment”, “crevices between his teeth”, “smatterings of the sacrament”, “carcass eater”, “maggots”, “fingers like slow-jointed spiders” to indicate his predatory impulses despite his high political position. The general is introduced sitting on a chariot, holding a “jewelled turd”. The “jewelled turd” is another example where Vijayan uses strange grotesque symbol. When readers imagine the grotesque image of the jewelled turd, Vijayan is using language to subvert normal standards in writing.

The soldiers are called “Persuaders” in the novel. This is to show that in post-truth environments, language is constantly used to hide state monitored violence and normalize injustices.

Body Politics and Commodification

By presenting corpses as a commodity, Vijayan gives an indirect reference to the Vietnam War and similar imperialist interventions in Asia. In Shantigram, the war conveniently ensures “a steady supply of coloured corpses”. Vijayan exposes the extreme commodification of human life under global capitalism and imperialism. Third world bodies are reduced to mere raw materials – teaching tools for Western media schools – and war is reframed as a supply chain solution. Post-truth and commodification of human life are inextricably intertwined.

When “cadaver shortage” happens, Dharmapuri is shown as stepping in to “rescue” the imperialists with a “generous offer”. Every single dead body shipped out to the “confederacy” brings money directly into the state exchequer. A clean “Dharma corpse” fetches twenty thousand silver coins in the dystopian state. The money earned from selling these dead bodies is used to fund massive, expensive political campaigns against imperialism. The media describes it as a “barter of corpse for candy”.

The phrase “barter of corpse for candy” illustrates Vijayan’s critique of bureaucratic euphemism as a technology of post-truth governance. The grotesque exchange of human cadavers is linguistically reframed as economic transaction, thereby stripping violence of its ethical horror. Vijayan demonstrates how administrative language does not merely conceal atrocity but reorganizes public perception by converting death into market logic. This reflects Chomsky’s argument that institutional language functions ideologically by filtering moral reality through politically acceptable discourse. In The Saga of Dharmapuri, language ceases to describe reality and instead manufactures emotional consent for dehumanization.

Vijayan introduces the theme of the “mendicant” to expose the ways of the ruling class. In Shantigram village, speaking of the mendicant is considered treason by the government. Totalitarian regimes attempt to control the future by completely erasing or rewriting past history and nationalist folklore. The state uses language as a powerful tool to carry out its propaganda. This is the reason why the “hun sorrows” is the state’s term for the ongoing conflicts taking place during the emergency. Using specifically coined words, terms, slogans or incantations, the state is always conscious to romanticize war as noble, national sorrow or a sacred sacrifice to keep the populace emotionally engaged with the war. This becomes a defining feature of the post-truth phenomenon. In a post-truth era, truth is constructed to suit ideology.

Laavannya’s body is treated as state property by the Minister and the Congregation of Persuaders. A realization dawns upon her that grand theories of Marx, Freud and Skinner can never be applied to the current social reality of her life. Critics like Marx and Engels

are used as a mask to justify the current abuse and authoritarianism. The readers comprehend the fact that Dharmapuri is not just a fictional village, but functions as an allegorical political space through which Vijayan critiques authoritarian ideological structures across national contexts.

Discussion

In imperialist states, concepts like national security becomes a joke. Vijayan criticises such regimes by saying “They guarded the Palace and the city, and the dreary length of the country’s frontiers; at the heart of this impenetrable encirclement, in its dark and central privacy they guarded a malodorous mouth and an incomplete orgasm” (Vijayan, 1988, p. 247). Vijayan suggests that in imperialist regimes, everything revolves around a single individual or a few ruling elite who dominate others.

The shocking and taboo sexual imagery during the encounter between the Minister and the maid functions to humiliate and degrade the “revolutionary” figure embedded within Laavannya. The double colonization faced by women all over the world is expressed through the character of Laavannya. She is astonished to find that wife-sharing exists at the highest levels of power. Even the elites like the Minister are compelled to surrender their wives to the supreme leader, the President.

Laavannya’s husband Vaatasena, the soldier, is also starved and exploited. No one is truly free in this totalitarian regime. Their broken family is a living witness that many families collapse under the weight of the state. The secret policeman who interrogates and violently attempts to abuse Laavannya is symbolic of a central mechanism of post-truth politics because brutal invasions are primary catalysts and enablers of this phenomenon. The pitiful way in which she undresses before the policeman for survival demonstrates that this voluntary action is manufactured by the state. The episode reflects Chomsky’s argument that systems of power manufacture consent through ideological control.

In chapter ‘The Tartar Republic and the Eucharist’, the chairman of the state utters a protective incantation, that is, “we are not alone, the Tartar Republic is with us!” Here, a delusion of brotherhood is created by utilizing language.

The ruling party of the communists try to preach a “popular front against international floods” to starving villagers whose parched land is covered in unburied, dead cattle. The episode satirizes the ideological instability of party politics and the disjunction between centralized political rhetoric and local suffering. This resembles what occurred between the United States and Vietnam. As Hannah Arendt argues in her essay, the U. S. fabricated lies on the advice of educated, rational experts who justified deception. Treating politics like science made these experts dangerous.

By forcing reality to fit theory, they participated in long-term deception for the state. Even the U. S. military reports were manipulated to show off success. The main concern was

reputation of U. S and its president, and goals were fabricated accordingly. This demonstrates a total disconnect from reality. Historically, the ground realities of Vietnam, as a peripheral nation, were ignored. Likewise, the suffering of ordinary people of Shantigrama was neglected. The actions of the ruling class of Shantigrama prove that the leadership is completely out of touch with their own country's geography. Vijayan satirizes the dependence of postcolonial political elites on foreign geopolitical power structures.

In The Saga of Dharmapuri, the totalitarian bureaucracy intellectualizes, documents, and normalizes state-sponsored violence and purges, which is fundamentally linked to the architecture of post-truth. Cruelty becomes a metric, a set of notes to supplement their secret, mystical knowledge, rather than a human tragedy. When the pilgrims are attacked in the novel, they flee while shouting ritual slogans for "proletarian solidarity" – and their Tartar pursuers, who actively beat them, joins the chant. Here, both the oppressor and the oppressed have to sing the same slogans of "unity" and "brotherhood" while one group violently destroys the other. The language of the revolution has been entirely rewritten from its actual meaning. In a post-truth scenario, dishonesty exists at all levels – politicians, military, civil servants.

Vijayan references historical events such as the U. S. pursuing an imperialist global strategy by continuing to spend massive resources on Vietnam. The U. S. imposed its own model on unfamiliar societies like Vietnam, who suffered extreme violence and millions of lost lives under the geopolitical ambitions of nations like the U. S.

Denial is a powerful psychological tool the ruling class of Dharmapuri uses against its people. The minister for trade flatly denies any knowledge of the corpse compact, hiding behind formal, diplomatic language to deflect ethical responsibility. Vijayan targets the language of international relations. While human beings are being slaughtered and traded, the parliament spends its time debating definitions, semantics, and media intimations, completely detached from the human suffering on the ground.

A democracy depends on shared facts. It needs a well-informed public for its smooth functioning. But imperialist regimes like Dharmapuri thrive on secrecy and invasion. The Minister cunningly stonewalls the questions against him by refusing to answer, stating "we have no information". When a member from opposition asks if "imperialists" transmigrate, to which the Minister evades by stating they do not comment on the internal affairs of other countries. Transmigration is a concept that actively intersects with post-truth dynamics. The trading of cadavers is also another massive state secret.

The corrupt institutions in Dharmapuri, such as the regime's medical school which openly sells fake diplomas to funnel more cash into the political campaign are a core element of the post-truth phenomenon. The brutal sexual exploitation endured by women like Laavannya in Dharmapuri is one of the major consequences of post-truth politics. If Siddhartha, Laavannya, and the child can pay a bribe of one thousand silver on top of

surrendering her, they can escape to freedom through a “secret” trap door. Secrecy is an all-prevailing theme of the novel.

The Prime Minister’s calculations regarding financial matters highlight the financial excess and ethical deterioration of the regime. This reflects the ethical collapse of governance in Dharmapuri. In the post-truth era, personal emotions and beliefs are prioritized over objective facts.

Prime Minister of Dharmapuri states that war is the pursuit of politics by other means. He is of the opinion that wars could be mutually agreed upon for common purposes. The president also inquires if they could orchestrate a “war of togetherness” for their mutual benefit. A fabricated war is engineered by rival political regimes only to distract their populations and stabilize their regimes. As many critics and philosophers say, a desire for war is frequently an element of the post-truth condition. The Minister teaches us a lesson that electoral victory does not guarantee moral legitimacy. For the “doctored mandate”, electoral victory becomes a justification for authoritarianism. The episode recalls authoritarian indifference toward famine and poverty represented in earlier political literature such as the Dickensian novel *A Tale of Two Cities*.

Conclusion

The persecution that the common people of Dharmapuri endure reminds us of many other works such as Franz Kafka’s *The Trial*. The successful bank clerk Joseph K. is arrested on his 30th birthday for a mysterious crime by an invisible authority. Innocence becomes irrelevant within the legal system he inhabits.

Look at my eyes, my King, said Kaanchanamaala. Merciful Lord! Said Siddhartha. I see dead orbs, white and sightless like sparrows’ eggs! While I slept in my mother’s womb, said Kaanchanamaala, no one fed my little eyes. They fed their wars instead, and I came sightless into this world. My little one, O my little one, said Siddhartha. Look at my palm leaves, my King, said kaanchanamaala. I never wrote on them. (Vijayan, 1988, p. 197).

Similarly, Kaanchanamaala is one such innocent child who lived in Dharmapuri, whose eyes are described as “dead orbs, white and sightless like sparrows’ eggs.” She died of extreme poverty and hunger. This is because the state fed “their wars”. Kaanchanamaala may be read as a symbolic figure of futures destroyed by militarized political systems.

Vijayan successfully employs narrative styles such as satire, magical realism, fragmentation, absurdity and allegorical structure through the character of Siddhartha to depict forms of otherness embedded within post-truth political culture. The persecution faced by Siddhartha indicates that society does not want politically conscious individuals.

O. V. Vijayan, through his novel, depicts serious emergency realities like press censorship, arrest of dissidents, personality cult, suspension of rights, propaganda machinery and many others. One of the most important thoughts invoked by the author is that citizens willingly

obeying the state constitutes one of the most dangerous conditions that can dawn upon any democratic society.

In imperialist societies, the state has absolute control over its citizens, their bodies, sexuality, reproduction and private life and not even their cadavers can escape. Forced family planning policies, sterilization campaigns, and the state's intrusion into personal life illustrate the body politics Vijayan has depicted through his work in Orwellian 1984, "war is peace". In O. V Vijayan's Dharmapuri, oppression is discipline, slavery is freedom, and violence is national duty. The novel remains strikingly relevant to contemporary political cultures shaped by propaganda, surveillance, and ideological manipulation (Yadav, 2024, pp.1-5).

O. V. Vijayan's critique of authoritarianism remains deeply relevant to contemporary political cultures shaped by ideological polarization, surveillance, and mediated spectacle. His novel The Saga of Dharmapuri predicts the anxieties of the 2020s. It reveals that post-truth politics does not merely suppress truth; it reorganizes ethical perception itself through spectacle, repetition, and bureaucratic language.

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