



Sangam Literature Contemporary Relevance of Tamil-Malayalam Ethical Traditions: Special Reference with O. V. Vijayan's Novel: The Saga of Dharmapuri

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ABSTRACT

The ethical traditions of Tamil and Malayalam cultural ethics have long been rooted in literary and philosophical texts that advocate for moral conduct, civic responsibility, and human compassion. This paper explores the continuing relevance of Tamil-Malayalam ethical traditions in contemporary society, particularly O. V. Vijayan's novel "The Saga of Dharmapuri" in Malayalam "Dharmapuranam". South India's literary traditions, especially the ethical frameworks found in Tamil classics such as the Tirukkural, and shared Tamil-Malayalam cultural values, have historically guided individual behaviour, social conduct, and community morality. In O. V. Vijayan's dystopian satire set in an imagined post-colonial state, ethical erosion caused by political corruption and social decay is juxtaposed against timeless moral principles found in Dravidian traditions. The paper argues that the ethical visions embedded in Tamil and Malayalam cultural histories, such as virtue (aram), duty, compassion, and civic responsibility, remain deeply relevant today, offering guiding ethical paradigms against modern political and social challenges. By drawing on classical Tamil ethics and examining the moral subtext of Vijayan's narrative, this study highlights how traditional ethical frameworks can illuminate contemporary socio-political discourse.

KEY WORDS

Malayalam and Tamil ethics, Contemporary Relevance, Tirukkural, Ethical Traditions, Political Satire.

INTRODUCTION

The word 'Sangam' means association, referring to the assemblies of Tamil poets under the patronage of Pandyan Kings. It describes the three Kingdoms of

ancient Tamilakam the Cheras, Cholas, and Pandyas and highlights their thriving trade with the Roman Empire

Sangam literature represents the earliest known body of Tamil literature, composed by over 400 poets between 300 BCE and 300 CE (mostly 100-250 CE) in three ancient assemblies, or “Sangams,” in Madurai. These 2,300+ poems focus on love (*akam*) and heroism/warfare (*puram*), providing vital details about society, culture, and trade in ancient South India. Sangam literature is essentially a “secular” body of work in nature, focusing primarily on human emotions and life rather than religious dogmas, although it mentions various deities.

The ethical traditions of South India particularly Tamil and Malayalam cultural ethics have long been rooted in literary and philosophical texts that advocate for moral conduct, civic responsibility, and human compassion. Ancient Tamil works such as the Tirukkural, attributed to Valluvar, present an ethical vision that transcends religion and time, emphasizing virtue, right conduct, governance, and social harmony. Malayalam literature, though distinct in its linguistic identity, shares deep historical and cultural intersections with Tamil ethos due to geographic proximity, centuries of cultural exchange, and common Dravidian heritage. These traditions provide ethical paradigms that continue to inform contemporary societal thought in both communities.

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. Among modern Indian writers, O. V. Vijayan stands out as a transformative figure whose works illuminate emerging perspectives on history, politics, ecology, spirituality, and human consciousness. O. V. Vijayan is famous for his major novels such as ‘The Legends of Khasak’, ‘The Saga of Dharmapuri’, ‘The Infinity of Grace’, and ‘The Path of the Prophet’.

Myth is a traditional or legendary story, usually concerning some being or hero or event, with or without a determinable basis of fact or natural explanation, especially one that is concerned with deities or demigods and explains some practice, rite or phenomenon of nature. Literature with its immense scope and appeal that goes beyond the horizon of zeitgeist demands a touchstone with equally infinite bounds, as it is a cultural product of humanity, and an offshoot of this Sangam literature which concerns itself with the basic structures which underlie every kind of literature.

There is, “In theory, no limit to its scope”. Translation Studies, another important offshoot of Sangam literature, suits the kaleidoscopic richness of the multilingual scenario of India. Indian novels are best read from the multiple perspectives of comparative literature, translation studies and critical theory. ‘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. A self-translated rendering of a masterpiece that resets the history of Malayalam fiction, The Legends of Khasak is also a rich specimen for translation studies. ‘The Saga of Dharmapuri’, a satirical and dystopian fiction. *The Saga of Dharmapuri* (1985) is a scathing, allegorical political satire of post-independence India, utilizing grotesque realism and scatological humor to critique authoritarianism, corruption, and the failure of democratic promises. It exposes the continuation of colonial exploitation by native rulers, representing a profound disillusionment with power.

Background: Malayalam-Tamil Ethical Traditions

The Tirukkural, one of the most celebrated works in Tamil literary history, is a collection of couplets focusing on virtue (*aram*), wealth (*porul*), and love (*inbam*). The first section *aram* deals directly with ethical conduct, truthfulness, non-violence, humility, and self-restraint. Its emphasis on ethics is universal and secular. Unlike religious prescriptions limited to a faith community, the moral principles in the Tirukkural are targeted toward all human beings ‘commoner ethics’ that guide individuals and rulers alike. Tamil culture also includes concise ethical aphorisms such as those in *Athichudi*, attributed to the poet Avvaiyar, which teaches moral behaviour through simple, memorable verses. These texts illustrate a deeply embedded tradition where morality is not separate from daily life or community well-being.

Cross-Cultural Currents in Malayalam Ethics

The early history of the Malayalam language and literary culture draws from the multilayered Dravidian heritage, with influences from Tamil literature, moral philosophy, and shared South Indian socio-ethical values. Though distinct traditions evolved in Kerala, influenced by Kerala's specific socio-political history the shared Dravidian ethical sensibility remains a touchstone.

While Malayalam literature has its own pantheon of ethical texts, its ethical undercurrents often reflect a human-centric moralism that resonates with classical Tamil ethical philosophy. The Malayalam literary tradition, similarly, explored ideas of virtue, justice, and duty long before modern literary forms.

O. V. Vijayan's 'The Saga of Dharmapuri': Synopsis and Ethical Discourse

O. V. Vijayan (1930–2005) was a major Malayalam writer known for his inventive narrative style and political as well as philosophical concerns. In 'The Saga of Dharmapuri' (in Malayalam 'Dharmapuranam'), Vijayan crafts a grotesque political satire set in the fictional state of Dharmapuri, a symbolic post-colonial society ravaged by corrupt Governance and the erosion of ethical norms. 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.

The narrative exaggerates political corruption, grotesque bodily imagery, and the collapse of civic morality to underscore a fundamental ethical crisis. Characters embody social decadence and political manipulation, revealing a dystopian world where power supersedes principle. Central to the narrative is Siddhartha, a mendicant figure whose moral compass contrasts sharply with the corrupt state. He advocates peace, ethical living, and spiritual integrity. Siddhartha becomes a symbolic beacon of moral resistance against cultural and political nihilism. Thus, while Dharmapuri depicts ethical collapse, the novel's structure invites a reading in terms of ethical and moral ideals echoing classical visions of virtue and righteous conduct.

Ethical Themes in 'The Saga of Dharmapuri'

The contemporary relevance of Tamil-Malayalam ethical traditions lies in their capacity to provide a moral, ecological, and spiritual counter-narrative to the dehumanizing effects of modern industrialization, political corruption, and state authoritarianism. In O. V. Vijayan's dystopian novel *The Saga of Dharmapuri* (Dharmapuranam, 1985), these traditions are invoked through ironic contrast, challenging the "filth" of modern power and providing a framework for spiritual resistance.

- **Satire as Ethical Critique:** Vijayan's use of grotesque realism, where bodily functions and absurd political theatrics are foregrounded, acts not merely as shock value but as a critique of ethical degradation in political structures. This technique allows him to expose how power, when divorced from moral responsibility, leads to systemic corruption. The grotesque exaggerated and provocative imagery reduces the lofty rhetoric of leaders to crude reality, underscoring moral decay.
- **Moral Leadership and Siddhartha:** In contrast to the corrupt President and his minions, Siddhartha embodies ethical principles, compassion, non-violence, and self-sacrifice. The narrative positions him not as a political revolutionary but as a moral teacher whose presence challenges the prevailing ethical collapse. This echoes ancient ethical leaders in Tamil and Malayalam traditions, where moral philosophy is lived, not merely spoken.
- **Public Apathy and Ethical Responsibility:** Dharmapuri's citizenry, indoctrinated by propaganda and conformity, reflects a society that has abandoned personal ethical judgment. This moral apathy parallels contemporary global concerns where citizens, overwhelmed by power, media influence, and political spectacle, often delegate ethical thinking to leaders rather than internal moral reasoning. Vijayan, through social carnivalesque, encourages readers to reconsider individual ethical agency.
- **Satire, Political Power, and Dystopia in Dharmapuranam:** Dharmapuranam (1985), translated as *The Saga of Dharmapuri*, is Vijayan's most politically charged work. Written during the Emergency era, the novel employs satire, grotesque imagery, and dark humour to critique authoritarian power.
- **Political Allegory:** Set in a fictional country, it serves as a biting commentary on Indian political administration, particularly the excesses of the Emergency era. It reflects the decay of democracy into authoritarianism through the depiction of the President and the state.

- **Grotesque Realism:** Vijayan employs a literary style that defies conventions of propriety, using “grotesque realism” a mixture of the disgusting and the absurd to reveal the ugly truth of the political scenario.
- **Post-Colonial Critique:** The novel highlights how post-independence nations often replicate the oppressive tactics of their former colonial masters.
- **Prophetic Vision:** It anticipated modern issues like the commercialization of politics, surveillance, and the erosion of ethical standards in governance, maintaining relevance as a critique of power.
- **Environmental Commentary:** It addresses the consequences of rapid, unchecked industrialization and urbanization, showcasing the degradation of the environment and the destruction of the local ecology.

Contemporary Relevance of Tamil-Malayalam Ethics

- **Ethical Frameworks and Modern Discourse:** Classical Tamil ethics, such as the Tirukkural, remain relevant in modern ethical discourse because of their universal approach to morality, honesty, justice, and compassion are encouraged not merely as spiritual virtues, but as pragmatic pillars of social cohesion. In a political climate where corruption and moral ambiguity often dominate public conversation, these timeless principles can serve as ethical anchors.
- **Intersections with O. V. Vijayan’s Narrative:** Although O. V. Vijayan’s Dharmapuri depicts moral collapse, the underlying architectural critique aligns with ancient ethical codes. The novel prompts readers to recall ethical frameworks like aram emphasizing duty and moral action as remedies against political and social decay. As Siddhartha’s role suggests, individual virtue can resist systemic corruption. Thus, ancient Dravidian ethics provide perspective where Dharmapuri shows collapse, the classical traditions provide ideal benchmarks to aspire directions.
- **Social and Political Relevance Today:** In the 21st century, when democracies globally grapple with polarization, unethical governance, and erosion of civic responsibility, the ethical traditions of Tamil-Malayalam literature remain relevant. The ongoing cultural dialogues in India concerning ethics, justice, and moral governance are enriched when classical ethical texts are consulted as foundational ethical guides.
- **Ethical Tradition and Modern Literature:** Bringing together ancient ethics and modern literary critique provides a space where moral philosophy and artistic imagination intersect. Many scholars argue that literary works like Dharmapuri extend ethical conversations by dramatizing ethical breakdown and reimagining moral repair. Thus, reading O. V. Vijayan’s novel alongside Tamil-Malayalam ethical frameworks encourages an integrated ethical appraisal of modernity, classical ethical traditions help contextualize contemporary moral dilemmas.

Contemporary Relevance of Tamil-Malayalam Ethical Traditions:

- **Ethical Resistance to Authoritarianism:** The traditions, rooted in Bhakti literature and classical Tamil ethical works (like the *Thirukkural*), emphasize accountability and divine justice, which contrast sharply with the absolute power and decay depicted in *The Saga of Dharmapuri*.
- **Critique of Neocolonialism and Corruption:** The ethical framework of the Kerala-Tamil region provides a lens to view the “White Confederacy” (neocolonialism) and the degenerate “President” of Dharmapuri as betrayals of indigenous moral principles.
- **Ecological Consciousness:** The Tamil-Malayalam tradition, often rooted in rural, agrarian life (similar to the setting of *Khasakkinte Ithihasam*), offers a vision of life in harmony with nature, contrasting with the environmental and human waste in modern industrial societies.

Arguments in O.V. Vijayan’s *The Saga of Dharmapuri*:

- **The Scatological Satire of Power:** Vijayan uses “Grotesque Realism”—scatological and sexual imagery to break down the “propriety” of totalitarian states. The President of Dharmapuri is constantly associated with excretion, symbolizing the material and moral rot of the post-colonial Indian state.

- **The Fall of Modernity and Need for Ethical Rebirth:** The novel depicts the total breakdown of modern politics. The character Siddhartha, modeled on the Buddha, represents a spiritual return to ancient wisdom and ethics, providing an alternative to the “filth” of politics.
- **The “Wasted” Citizenry and Resistance:** Vijayan argues that the citizenry has been complicit in its own oppression, becoming “wasted humans.” The novel challenges this by inviting the reader to find “thing-power” in the very filth and despair, using it to provoke a re-examination of personal and national ethics.
- **Dissidence against the State:** The novel is a profound rejection of the state power, reflecting the experiences of the 1975-1977 Indian Emergency, arguing that unethical state practices require a “spiritual and anarchist” resistance, rather than mere political change.

CONCLUSION

The ethical traditions rooted in Tamil and Malayalam literary culture offer profound insights into personal virtue, social conduct, and moral governance. These traditions, exemplified in texts like the Tirukkural, articulate values truth, compassion, duty that are just as relevant today as in ancient times. O.V. Vijayan’s ‘The Saga of Dharmapuri’, through its satirical and dystopian portrayal of a society’s ethical collapse, invites readers to engage with these traditions critically. By juxtaposing ethical decay with philosophical ideals embodied in figures like Siddhartha, the novel highlights the enduring importance of ethical narratives in cultural critique. In essence, *The Saga of Dharmapuri* argues that contemporary society, having abandoned traditional ethical sensibilities for a corrupt, hedonistic, and authoritarian modernism, is in a state of absolute decay (“human waste”), and only a return to a more profound spiritual consciousness can provide redemption. In an era of political and social turbulence, revisiting classical ethical paradigms from Tamil and Malayalam traditions can illuminate paths towards personal moral responsibility and collective ethical discourse.

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