

**Conversion of Power: From Commanding to Capitulation with Reference to  
O. V. Vijayan's *The Wart and The Foetus***

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**Abstract**

The frequent allusions of the element of power in quite ambiguous and allegorical ways instill more potential for research into the works of O. V. Vijayan. His novels and short stories consist of multiple variations of vilifying ways of accessing authority, especially by political and religious leaders. He brings bitter realities on surface, applying the tinge of magic-realism, in his writing. But it is also multi-faceted. Especially, focusing on short stories, readers realize the journey of round characters – of leaders, authority. In the two short stories – *The Wart* and *The Foetus* – the two main characters, with the same names, represent power and perform as major characters. Though it is said that ‘power corrupts’ but in these stories, ‘absolute power’ doesn’t always ‘corrupt absolutely’, but the same power gets transformed absolutely: transition from commanding to capitulation. The reasons behind such transition can be understood by studying psycho-social arena of the stories. Since the motive of this research is to bring a different facade of power into light, the present paper analyses the major characters of both the short stories through psychological perspective along with involving other social theories, through which one more layer of meaning, of such massively complicated pieces of work, can be unfurled.

**Key Words:** Power, Freedom, Influence, Control, Command, Capitulation

**Introduction:**

**“It is not power that corrupts but fear. Fear of losing power corrupts those who wield it and fear of the scourge of power corrupts those who are subject to it.” - Aung San Suu Kyi**

The above quote by Aung San Suu Kyi (present and first ever Burmese state counsellor) enables to look the traditional access of power through a diverse angle. If the quote is elaborated, it seems to counter John Dalberg-Acton’s words “Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely”. But actually, Aung San Suu Kyi has taken the statement a step further by diving deep into the psyche of the people who endure authority, face its

challenges and those who face the consequences caused by the authority. In the real world, many incidents and actions of people remain covert due to the bondages of time and place but those possibilities can be uncovered through the medium of fiction. Hence, fiction acts as an essential aid to comprehend reality. Here, a study of O. V. Vijayan’s short stories can become instrumental to know the nature of power and in return the stories themselves acquire another interpretation and utilization that further augment their significance.

O. V. Vijayan, born in 1930 in Kerala, studied in Madras, is a renowned Malayalam writer who worked as a lecturer and later as a cartoonist and writer

of political satire with Shanker's Weekly, Patriot, The Hindu and The Statesman. Socio-political and economic satire have remained Vijayan's domain of expertise. Being a Malayalam Regional writer first, Vijayan mainly has written all his writing in his mother tongue - Malayalam only. But he himself has translated some of his works in English and for some; had done collaborated translation which have been collected and published under the title – *O. V. Vijayan: Selected Fiction*. Similar to his novels, his short stories also presents political allegories and in this book, there is also a collection of short stories published under the title: *Allegories of Power*.

The two major short stories – *The Wart* and *The Foetus* – allegorise the nature of power in a bit untraditional way. Both the short stories firstly shows the rise of power of two vulnerable things, the wart and the foetus, respectively and with the development of the story both the characters get abundant power and start exercising it which reaches at the pick along through the multiple incidents of molestation, rape and murder. Surprisingly, other characters get influenced, instructed and start obeying them. At the end, both, surrender, got transformed – though in different ways – from the social milieu of the stories and become vulnerable and innocent, again.

#### **Concept of 'Power':**

The term *power* has been defined and deconstructed by a lot of sociologists, psychologists, economists, diplomats and many more. The term *power* commonly means to have influence and control others' actions. And at the same time, each leader customizes the same concept and has access on it in various ways.

Joseph Nye has defined the concept of power in very simple words. He says,

“Power is the ability to influence the behaviour of others to get the outcomes that one wants. But there are several ways to affect the behaviours of others. You can coerce them with threats; you can induce them with payments; or you can attract and co-opt them to want what you want.”

Nye further philosophically talks about the approach of people towards power and ways to exercise the same by saying,

“Power is like the weather. Everyone depends on it and talks about it, but few understand it. Just as farmers and meteorologists try to forecast the weather, political leaders and analysts try to describe and predict changes in power relationships”

Through these lines, it is clear that power is a governing agent and there are several ways to exercise it. And here in the present paper, its understanding is must in order to interpret the stories and transition of the two characters – the wart and the foetus.

#### **The Element of Power in the stories:**

In *The Wart*, the narrator – a husband and a father – had got a wart below his lower lip. He was a true follower of old native medicaments and was quite unwilling to opt for allopath to cure his wart. Initially he assumed the wart, being instrumental in evoking his wife in making love, however, it wasn't true. When asking on multiple times and referring as contagious by Suma, his wife, the narrator went to stream side 'dense herbal beds' and picked the 'leaves and roots' he needed and made a medicament to apply on the wart. But the wart, consuming the medicament, was

growing fast, instead of drying or decreasing which made him even more reluctant to go for other herbal medicaments.

Gradually, it turned into massive lump of flesh under his face because of which his mobility decreased, he remained hidden in an attic room of his house, his wife ceased to send their son near him, thinking the wart to be contagious. After some time, once he attempted to cut his wart with the knife of his dead uncle. He remained unconscious for three months. In this duration his wife eloped with their family doctor – Aechchu Menon, leaving him behind in the care of their head serf – Chaaththan. Soon after this, the wart grew organs like human being. The wart started to command him and had control over all his actions. Under its influence, the narrator attempted rapes and murder.

At the end the wart got detached from his body and converted himself into an elephant, after reading the ancient scriptures of Dhanvantari, and fell in the hands of temple people who wanted him for religious purposes. The wart converted the narrator into a worm who later found the freedom and realise Almighty's will into that form.

In *The Foetus*, in a small village, a widow of past sovereign, conceived. The discussion between the astrologer and the priest conveyed that it was not a pure conception, the planets ceased answering cowrie shells of astrologer and the Goddess was angry with the village folk. After three months people started dying at night and the marks of sticky slurps of foetal fluid were seem to go from the respective dead bodies and vanish into the widow's fortress. Soon people were bewildered and horrified by such frequent

incidents. Some young scions had also started following him, accepting him as their sovereign. Later, the foetus initiated to come out of the womb, out of the fortress, among people, even in day light, terrifying, molesting, raping and killing people. He also made other foetuses to come out of the womb unnaturally and did not let them born normally. Soon, he gathered an army of little foetuses and young scions of gentry. All of them were afraid of the holy book that the temple priest used to carry with him.

When in early evening a peasant couple tried to escape from the village, the foetus killed both of them and when the priest and the astrologer reached there, they saw that the foetus also raped the dead body of the peasant lady. The priest, with the deepest faith and utmost involvement talked to the foetus and made it realise that it needs to return to its mother's womb and what it is doing is against nature. Surprisingly, the foetus went back to the widow's womb and some days later village folk came to know that

"The lady delivered. The child was still-born and the mother too passed away."  
(Vijayan, p. 490)

Once again the Goddess was pleasant enough and the planets resumed responding to astrologers' cowrie shells. Once again the village folk continued living normal life.

#### **Phases of Power:**

#### **Origin and growth: From Nonentity to Commanding Element:**

The common point in both these stories is both the characters – the wart and the foetus – in reality, are very vulnerable and to be taken care of. Both of them are harmless and negligible in terms of

thinking about the source of terror or danger. It can be said that the wart has grown to such immense size more due to the lack of narrator's proper actions to cure it and to a certain level of neglecting while on the other side, the village folk accepted the unnatural as supernatural and started following it as their sovereign. So, power rose from a source from where it was never expected and began to dominate more powerful people, then them.

In *The Wart*, of course, the human being is more powerful than a wart, a flesh of meet on his body. As a human being, as a thinking-feeling person, has the ability to take actions and remove it. But the narrator couldn't see the mischievous thing as a cause of bigger problem of future. Some times in utter negation, sometimes to be stubborn to opt for other modern medicines, he invited his doom. He regrets his inaction and calls it as a sin when he says,

"I remember my wife Suma discovering the wart, tiny as a seed, below my lower lip. I remember, too, my surgeon-kinsman who said he could cut it away, and how I declined, because my people had never needed surgery – all their healing came from the riverside and the mountain slopes, whose tender-shooted specifics were revealed to them by the sage Dhanvantari, the lord of health. Generations of my people had meditated on this seer with trust, and I could see no other path for me either. This was my sin, and this now my moment of unburdening..." (Vijayan, 460)

Similarly in *The Foetus*, the source of this tremendous power is the fetus which generally considered as a most vulnerable

entity and from there it rose as a chief cause of terrorism in the village. The warty and the fetus became from vulnerable to violent. Utter negation on part of narrator and submissive approach of village folk can be observed as one of the chief cause of rapid growth of both the elements, in respective stories.

#### **Development of Power:**

Later on when the narrator's wife attempted to suggest him to go to the doctor, he cut her sentence and assured her that it is a simple mole which is not contagious. Formerly, it was tiny as a seed, and then it started growing the size of gooseberry, lemon, tomato, and coconut and even bigger than that. The time of his control over the wart had gone, now the wart began to control his actions. The wart made him to call it as brother. It made him to throw the knife into the well, made him lustful to seduce naani, molest her, made him to murder naani, Chaaththan and his wife, made him to rape naani's corpse multiple times and ate her decomposing corpus. Even due to the weight of the wart he was not able to move in the house freely. Whenever he tried to reason with the wart, it punished it by pocking searing javelins of pain into his bloodstreams. The narrator even asked the reason of taking away his freedom from him,

"You were born of my flesh. Why did you take away my freedom, the freedom of the one who gave you your being?" (Vijayan, 474)

But the wart didn't reply straightaway and caused him more pain. He tormented the narrator beyond limit and when he thought anything against the wart, it caused anguish. Once, at night, a dramatic change came to his nature, usual thinking pattern and emotions which brought even a bigger

change in his life. Vijayan narrates the same as,

“One night my thoughts dwelt on Suma and Unni with an intensity I had never experienced before. I sought them in the scalding darkness of my sorrow. I floundered and fell and wept. The wart listened. Once in every man’s lifetime, once perhaps his sorrow rises to enormity, and like the will of the king, sweeps away everything before it. This was the moment of my grief and power.” (Vijayan, 475-476)

Where in *The Foetus*, the foetus used to come out of its mother’s womb and kill the people who think and attempt to go against it. Though, it was unnatural and in priest and astrologers’ viewpoint, unholy, other people accepted reduced to oppose and started to follow it. It killed the head cook of the fortress first, and then onwards, many more murders and rapes took place. Once, he almost killed the priest when he went to the school and watched the Foetus near the teacher’s bare legs. Vijayan explains the same as,

“‘Rape!’ the priest cried, seized with rage. The next instant a bludgeon stunned him, but even as he sank into the blank dark, he chanted the litany in his mind. When he came to his senses there was no sign of the teacher or the Foetus. The gentry too had disappeared. On his neck and temples were abrasions, as though a giant snail or leech had tried to bleed.” (Vijayan, 485)

Another action he took was to drive other fetuses out of their mothers’ womb to build an army. So there could not be any hidden pregnancy. Babies ceased to be born in the village. At various occasions, it

can be observed that the priest and astrologer confronted the foetus, army of other small foetus and the gentry of young scions. But at all times, due to the book of litany, they could save their lives from the rage of them.

### **Extreme Terror and Demise of the Elements of Power:**

The wart grew bigger by sucking all the nutrition from the narrator’s body, now the narrator himself was like an appendage on the body of the wart. Now one day he read the old palm leaves manuscripts, brought the leaves and roots for the riverside, applied on the connection, from where the narrator was connected to its body. The narrator shrunk to the size of a worm. Days later, the wart changed into a great elephant. The people from temple took it to use in procession and offered it food.

Taking it symbolically, we can say that after growing to the fullest, satisfying all its lust at the end the wart itself was fed up of the role it was performing. It also needed a place where it can rest and cease the path it has already taken. It has grown from the inaction, negation, procrastination, blind faith, lack of considering reality and ignorance of the greater purpose of life. Observing the power of grief experienced by the narrator, the wart changed its course of actions and somehow it freed the narrator once he got everything out of him.

Moreover, in *The Foetus*, it seems that the foetus hypnotized other people or the people themselves tend to follow it due to the fear of the torments given by the fetus. Here Aung san suu kyi’s sentence can be observed as true. Common village folk did not attempt to resist due to the fear of the scourge they might be witnessed of the foetus. The young people also were

commanded in ‘mysterious emanation of night’, ‘to celebrate the advent of the Foetus’. Further actions are explained as,

“At the end of these carnivals, the youth would march to the fortress with offerings at the gate; the gate would open at night when the Foetus woke, and the hounds would tug the offerings inside.

The leader of the youth spoke to his flock, ‘the Foetus is our new Sovereign, and we are his soldiers. The old order is crumbling.’

In time, the office of the village council was overrun and occupied by the youth. The old councilors, wise elders, were driven away...The Lustig and the worship grew like tide of neurosis, the seeped out of the council-hall and engulfed the village.” (Vijayan, 481-482)

The young people did not have any other source of wisdom and understanding where they can have faith, like the priest and the astrologer had the book of litany. So they simply behaved by their reason. In *The Foetus*, at the end when a peasant couple tried to flee from the village, the foetus killed both of them and raped the pregnant woman and drove her foetus out as well. Out of great rage, the priest made it realize what it was doing and to his astonishment the Foetus surrendered the gentleness of the priest. When the saddened foetus started heading down the lane, the priest landed support to the tender foetus,

“The priest handed the book to the astrologer and stopping over the foetus, said, ‘son, you are not

an embryo. The gravel on the lane will hurt your tender skin. I shall carry you.’

The foetus let itself be carried, unresisting, like the unborn infant it was. Nestling in the arms of the Priest it wept again. The three of them made their journey to the fortress.” (Vijayan 489-490)

So the Foetus, same way as the wart left being authoritative sensing more powerful truth than itself and sought refuge.

### **Conclusion:**

In both the stories the element of power raised from diminutive elements, from which it is least expectant. Both, the Wart and the Foetus, started having command over the people around them, tormented the people extremely and in the later part, suddenly ceased everything and changed into neutral and vulnerable elements. On one side, the Wart, read the palm manuscripts, got ancient knowledge, brought riverside roots and leaves, made medicament, detached the narrator from its body, and turned itself into a more meaningful entity – an elephant. On the other side, the Foetus got touched by the words of the priest, realized and became emotional and went back to the womb, left the womb a week later, died. In both stories, the authority left the power when its impact on other people was on peak. This brings one more fact that the people on power also observe the truth and can assume its outcome. Sometimes, they themselves get so tired of the situation, felt such an extreme obscurity and nihilism that they leave everything, get rid of their own selves and attempt to become neutral entity again.

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