

## Manifestations of “Chanakya Neeti” in David Malouf’s “An Imaginary Life”

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### Abstract

*One undergoes a lot a pleasure and pain in life through one's journey from birth to death. Each and every individual wish pleasure and shuns pain and suffering. Therefore, which is the right way (Dharma) to approach life with a positive attitude? Renowned philosopher and teacher, Chanakya in his “Chanakya Neeti” propounds that it is essential to impart an individual with all practical facets of life. David Malouf a prominent Australian writer give shape in his fiction “An Imaginary Life” to the Roman poet Ovid's life in exile by taking hints from Ovid's own works such as Fasti, Tristia and Metamorphoses. Malouf also discusses about aspects such as language, culture and tradition. This paper tries to analyse the aspects of Chanakya Neethi in the life of Ovid, through his journey towards Metamorphosis.*

**Key Words:** Dharma, Metamorphosis, language, culture, relegation

### Introduction

Chalaa Laxmishchalaah Praanaashchale Jeevitmandire.  
Chalaachale cha Sansaare Dharma Eko Hi Nishchalah.

- Chanakya Neeti

An Imaginary Life is a fiction by Australian writer David Malouf. In this he outlines the life of Roman poet Ovid after his relegation to Tomis. Ovid leads a hedonistic life in Rome under the regime of emperor Augustus. His indecent poems regarding court-life of the nobles leads to his relegation to Tomis located at the outskirts of Rome. It is fate that makes a king a beggar and beggar a king or a pauper a rich man and vice versa. Chanakya articulates this thought when he opines,

Ranka Karoti Raajaanam Rajaanam Rankmev Cha.  
Dhaninam Nirdhanam Chaiv Nirdhanam Dhaninam vidhih.

Though Malouf does not mention about Australia directly in this fiction, Ovid's struggle to adapt to the 'native' language and culture of the villagers is analogous to the white settler's struggle to adapt to the Australian Aboriginal culture, though it has a negative impact. Ovid's life in Tomis and his death remains a mystery till today. This unknown fact gives the possibility to bridge the gap between history and fiction. Malouf bridges this gap through his fiction taking hints from the poet's own compositions such as *Fasti* and *Tristia*.

## 1. Initial Stages of Relegation

### 1.1 Alienation & Suffering

Svayam Karma Karottyaattamaa Svayam Tattphalamashnute  
Svayam Bhramati Sansaare Svayam Tasmaaddvimuchchayate.

According to Chanakya, one is free to act according to one's will. But one must be ready to face the consequences of one's actions; be it good or bad. Thus, one's liberation from the cycle of birth and death is under one's control. As a consequence of writing a poem regarding court life, Tomis is in exile to Tomis, located in the outermost realm of the Roman empire. According to Ovid, his initial years in Tomis as something terrible that cannot be described. Rome is much advanced in civilization, and being one of the three canonical poets along with Horace and Virgil, he is extremely popular and enjoys certain privileges. In Tomis, he is placed under the care of the village headman, Ryzak who according to Ovid might even kill him as per the emperor's order.

### 1.2 Acceptance & Personal Growth

Janmajanmani Chaabhyastam Daanmaddhyayan Taphah.  
Tenaivaabhyaasyagen Dehi Vaabhyaste.

According to Chanakya, be it capacity to learn, do penance or to dole out alms, it is only after constant practice, one can master the art. Ovid considers the villagers as primitive and barbarous. He

does not understand the “native” language of the villagers. It is through language one perceives and understand things. In part VI – Language and culture of the applied domain, *The Routledge handbook of language and culture*, the postmodernist view of language is presented in the following lines “Language is a social semiotic that both expresses and constructs emergent thoughts, a process in which identities are constructed through repeated subject positionings according to the demands of the situation” (Sharifian 2015). Ovid prepares his mind to accept things as it is when he looks at a poppy seed in Tomis for the first time. He wonders at the interconnectedness of elements in Nature and remarks “What else is death but the refusal to grow and suffer change?” (Malouf 1999)

## 1.2 Language & Nature

Prattutthaanam cha Yuddham cha Samvibhaagashcha  
Bandhushu

“Learn from the cock the following four things: getting up at the right time, fighting bitterly, making your brothers flee and usurping their share also!” (Chaturvedi 2013). It is only through self-preservation; one can accustom to all the hardships of life. Ovid gradually learns the villager’s native language. Their language, perception and expression are direct and wild like the extreme weather conditions in their village. Their life as well as language and culture is attuned to Nature. They cultivate in summer and hibernate in winter. Latin Ovid opines, because of the socio-cultural and political influence, divides the people. In the later part of the fiction, Ovid befriends a ferry boy who teaches him the unstructured ‘true language’ of being one with Nature.

## 2. Process of Transformation

### 2.1 Culture & Nature

One’s childhood experience leaves a deep impression in one’s memory and shapes the character of an individual. Though he is an urban poet, he spends his childhood in his father’s rural farmland.

He develops friendship with a child in his imagination and communicates with him in a strange language. He considers that the child should be the one whom the villagers consider as a werewolf that changes its form in moonlight. As Ovid grows older, the child disappears and he forgets the language. In the later part of the fiction, when he meets the ferry boy in the forest, he associates him with the child he met in his childhood. He thinks that what has gone has come again to complete life's circle. The circle symbolises the cultural and linguistic boundaries that separates and unifies human beings. It is human being greed that is the dark force that separates and subjugates each other and destroys peace. It is compassion that unifies people and Nature

Shaantitullyam Tapo Naasti Na Santoshaatparamsukham.  
Na Trishnayaaparo Vyaadhirnacha Dharmo Dayaaparah.  
No penance is greater than the one done for maintaining peace, no happiness is better than the one received from satisfaction, no disease is more damaging than greed and no Dharma is better than the one having compassion for all.

Yasya Chittam Draveebhootam Kripayaa Sarvajantushu.  
Tasya Gyanen Mokshena Kim Jataa Bhasmalepanaih.  
He, whose heart is full of compassion for all beings, does not need to seek any other knowledge, or Moksha (liberation) or care for rubbing ash all over his body (like the celebrated hermits).  
(Chaturvedi 2013)

## 2.1 Frivolity & Practicality

According to David C Funder, "Personality can be defined as an individual's characteristic patterns of thought, emotion, and behaviour, together with the psychological mechanisms – hidden or not – behind those patterns" (Funder 2007). Chankya says that people who crave for materialistic and physic pleasures, can never taste the nectar of peace and happiness. He writes,

Yattsukham Shaantireva Cha.Na Cha  
Taddhanlubddhaanaamitashchetashch Dhaavatam.

Ovid's frivolous lifestyle as a *metropolitan poet* makes him difficult to adapt to the tough and harsh environment. He hates villagers' extreme value to utility and lacking sense of aesthetics. He plants a garden at home, which Ryzak's daughter-in-law and the village women consider a waste of time.

### 2.3 Destiny & Identity:

Yathaa Dhenu Sahastreshu Vattso Gachhati Maatram.

Tathaa Yachcha Kritam Karma Kartaaramanugachhati.

According to Chanakya, one cannot escape from the consequences of one's action. Like a calf, that find his mother-calf amongst thousands of cows, one's karma will have an effect upon that individual. Ovid performs the rituals for the dead soldiers along with the village men. He is thoughtful of his brother's death. Among them Ovid's brother is more responsible. He regrets his death as his misfortune. Ovid shuns his ancestral position and becomes a poet against his father's will. So, he does not welcome Ovid idea to become a poet. He thinks Ovid writing verse as useless. In his work *Tristia*, Ovid mentions about his state of writing verse and his father's opinion in the following lines

“saepe pater dixit ‘studium quid inutile temptas? Maeonides nullas ipse reliquit opes’”. (*Tristia* 4.10.21–22)

### Translation

My father often said, ‘Why try a useless Vocation? Even Homer left no wealth’.

### Conclusion

Though, Ovid becomes a poet against his father's wish, destiny brings him back to his traditional position as a warrior. In chanakya's words, it is one's destiny that guides one's action.

Taadrishee Jaayte Buddhivaryavsaayoapi Taadrishah. Sahaayaasstaadrishaah Eva Yaadrishee Bhavitavyataa.

Ovid guards Tomis along with the villagers from the raiders. Taking Ryzak and the villagers help Ovid captures the ferry boy

who he meets in the forest and brings him to Ryzak's home. He teaches him the language of the villagers which indicates that he has accepted his life and culture of Tomis. But the villagers consider the ferry boy as dark force. Ovid in order to protect the ferry boy and his own self, leaves Tomis.

Ovid, without even informing Ryzak's family members, crosses River Ister along with the ferry boy and reaches the wilderness. The crossing of the river symbolizes transformation from one phase of life to another and this transformation helps him approach life with a positive attitude. In the wilderness, Ovid learns the '*true language*' from the ferry boy. The ferry boy takes the form of the bird and imitates it while communicating with the birds. Ovid understands that one has to find oneself with the Nature in order to truly comprehend the complexity of Nature and belief in God. A similar thought is articulated by Chanakya when he opines,

Pushpe Gandham Tile Tailam Kaashthe Vahannih  
Payoghritam.

Ikshau Gudam Tathaa Dehe Pashyaattmanam Vivekatah.

God dwells in our bodies, life fragrance in flowers, oil in oil seeds, fire in wood, ghee in milk, jaggery in the sugarcane. The wise should understand this. Na Devo Viddyate Kaashthe Na Paashaane Na Mrinnyamaye. Bhave Hee Viddyate Devastmaad Bhaavo Hee Kaaranam.

God doesn't dwell in the wooden, stony or earthen idols. His abode is in our feelings, our thoughts. (Chaturvedi 2013)

Ovid lies down on the earth and observes the child. He surrender's himself to the earth, he feels the warmth of the land and sunlight and attains Metamorphoses as he write "I have taken my last step, though he does not know it yet, as he moves away as usual to forage for our evening meal. From here I **ascend**, or lower myself, grain by grain, into the **hands of the gods**." (Malouf 1999)

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