

Vaikom Muhammad Basheer: A LONE TRAVELLER

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Vaikom Muhammad Basheer, a Malayalam fiction writer was one of the prominent figures behind the artistic, economic, and social reformation of the Kerala Culture. In the Malayalam Literary arena, the legend Vaikom Muhammad Basheer owns a unique and remarkable position. A humanist, freedom fighter, novelist and short story writer, Basheer is noted for his path-breaking, disarmingly down-to-earth style of writing that made him equally popular among literary critics as well as the common man. He is regarded as one of the most successful and outstanding writers from India. In fact, his unique ebullient intellect is the rarest of the rare kind who revolutionised Malayalam literature and took it to a whole new level.

Fondly known as Beypore Sultan, he was contemporary of writers like Karur Nilkanta Pillai, Kesav Dev, Ponkunnam Varki, Lalithambika Antharajanam, Thakazi Sivasankara Pillai, S.K. Pottekkat and P.C. Kuttikrishnan. In early 1930s, the Progressive Writer's Movement made its impact on Malayalam Literature and writers wrote extensively about socialist themes, about poverty, unemployment and hunger. Basheer was the man who paved the way of his own. With his profound and simple writing, touch of satire, sarcasm and black humour, Basheer had woven a style of his own and marked his presence as a unique literary figure. Forging a style-which was the requirement of his subjects and themes, he introduced the Malayalam readers to a new-way of looking at things. His racy humour, pungent satire, tendency to debunk rhetoric rather than be enslaved by it, all was refreshingly different from the convention-ridden works of his contemporaries.

Basheer revolutionized the Malayalam literary scene, especially the art of storytelling, not just by bringing in radical themes and subjects but also by rejecting Sanskritised Malayalam in favour of the colloquial and the vernacular. His colloquial style and his unconventional subjects made Basheer an unparalleled genius in the selection of themes, characterisation and narration. The rogues, the dimwits, the prostitutes, the eunuchs, the pickpockets and the wicked as well as the innocent all made an appearance in his works. His characters were the poor and the marginalized and in his view their experiences were as worthy of literary treatment as were the experiences of the kings and queens. In consonance with his real life characters, his literary vocabulary consisted of words drawn from the daily life of common people. Basheer knew that it was absolutely necessary if he wanted to make his stories work and give them the flavour of pulsating reality. He saw no difference in the language that

articulated their experiences and the so-called literary language or the language of literature. His first story 'Ente Thankam' (My Thankness) had an immediate impact on the Malayalam literary scene as it broke away from the traditional concepts of romantic fiction. Basheer's heroine was not a slim, fair, beautiful, maiden but a dark complexioned hunchback. Thus Basheer marked his difference from others in this departure from tradition. His later works proved the point further when not only were his subjects and themes different but their treatment too was markedly different from the Malayalam literary conventions.

Basheer was a literary legend of international acclaim. An awardee of the Padma Shri in 1982, translations of his works into other languages have won him worldwide acclaim. He was also honoured with the Sahitya Akademi award in 1970 and Kendra Sahitya Akademi award in 1982. His notable works include *Balyakalasakhi*, *Shabdangal*, *Pathummayude Aadu*, *Mathilukal*, *Ntuppuppakkoranendarannu*, *Janmadinam* and *Anargha Nimisham*. He wrote extensively for the weekly *Jayakevlam*. His columns 'The True and the False' appeared regularly in *Narmada*, a daily paper.

Vaikom Muhammad Basheer and controversies are synonymous. Be it his literary career or personal life, another name for Basheer was 'controversy'. He was born and brought up in a God-fearing Muslim family. In his youth, Basheer fell in love with a Hindu Nair girl. Inter Community marriages were not approved of in that society. The girl was all set to face strong opposition from her family and from the conservative Kerala Society too in order to marry Basheer. It was only when the girl's parents threatened to take their own lives in case she married a Muslim that he appealed to his beloved to forget him and marry someone of her parents' choice. Well into his forties, he surprised many of his acquaintances by marrying a woman much younger than him (Fabi Basheer) and settling down to a life of quiet domesticity with his wife and two children, Anees and Shahina, in Beypore, on the southern edge of Kozhikode.

His whole life was under scrutiny because of his revolutionary nature, his love interest, his stay at notorious places, his involvement in freedom struggle, his different identities and stay in prisons.

Professionally, controversy arose when he became the first Malayalam writer to treat writing as any other paid profession and to demand remuneration. In his play *Kathabeejum* he touched upon this novel issue of writing as a paid profession and drew upon his personal experiences as a writer. An argument is shown in the play between an impoverished and starving writer and his publisher. When the Writer demands to be paid for his work, the editor advises him that he should be satisfied with the fame he is getting as a writer. What does he need money for? At this the writer replies;

“People spend money on films, the theatre, and cigarettes. But when it comes to reading, which is also a form of entertainment, they expect to get it free. The writer needs sustenance and space for writing. I am not talking about myself, but on behalf of writers, men and women like me”.

The Editor in the play however, characteristically retorts “I dont intend to make the sacred temple of Literature into a whorehouse!” Basheer struggled against such a mindset and such double standards throughout his life.

Basheer was a writer who did not care about the grammatical correctness of his sentences. Initially, even his publishers were unappreciative of the beauty of this language; they edited out or modified his conversations. Basheer was outraged to find his original writings transcribed into ‘standardized’ Malayalam, devoid of their freshness and natural flow, and he forced them to publish the original one instead of the edited one.

He is also regarded as the translators’ nightmare because of the colloquial touch he added to his writings, which ethnically speaking would lose its humor and meaning when translated to other languages.

As a controversial writer, his works had been banned several times because of their being candid. The weekly *Pauranadam*, which he had launched with a purpose of finding a platform for his satirical writings, was banned. Another newspaper *Ujjevanam* (The Revival) of his catered to the spread of the terrorist movement. Needless to say, once again the police came into action. The paper was banned, all subversive material was confiscated and Basheer, along with his other mates, had to go under-ground in order to evade arrest. His novel *Shabdangal* (The Voices) was once banned due to its ideas of a feudalistic society.

Basheer was a writer entirely made up of his own adventurous and diverse life. His ‘picaresque’ life provided him with ample material for his creative work. In his own words ‘agonizing experiences and a pen’ were all the material he had when he ventured into the literary world. So varied were his experiences that no two stories of his shared any similarities.

Basheer was at an impressionable age when Mahatma Gandhi came to visit Vaikom in March 1924 as part of the Satyagrah movement Already drawn towards the freedom struggle and towards leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru, Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad and others, Gandhi’s visit proved a watershed for Basheer’s nationalist leanings. Since there was no active independence movement in Travancore or Kochi – being princely states – he went to Malabar to take part in the Salt Satyagraha in 1930. He ran away from home to participate in the freedom struggle and reached Calicut which was the hub of nationalist activities in Kerala. Here he joined the *Al-Amin* newspaper and took part in the Salt Satyagrah on the Calicut beaches. His arrest was inevitable and along with the other freedom fighters he too was imprisoned and sent to the Cannanore Central Jail. Basheer had quite painful and

tortuous experiences at the jail. He was subjected to a number of atrocities which in turn wrought a drastic change in him. A man of action, from one extreme he went to another. Abandoning the Gandhian doctrines of Ahimsa he turned towards terrorism and saw in it an answer to curb foreign domination. Now he wanted to follow in the footsteps of Sardar Bhagat Singh, Raj Guru and Sukhdev. After Independence, Basheer was disillusioned by the behaviour of political leaders who were after power and position and did not care for the people's suffering. He showed his resentment by discarding khadi, which he had been habitually wearing, and shunning all political parties though he never made a secret of his support for the underdog. Once India achieved control of its destiny after obtaining Independence from British rule, he showed no further interest in active politics, though concerns over morality and political integrity are present all over his works.

Basheer's life was a life of extensive travels. Throughout his life, he travelled all over India, Pakistan, reaching as far as the shores of Arabia. In all his years of wandering he had to resort to the use of various disguises in order to avoid recognition. At times he posed as a beggar, at other times as a palmist, an astrologer and what not. He worked as a magician's assistant, a private tutor, a loom fitter, fortune teller, cook, newspaper seller, fruit seller, sports goods agent, accountant, watchman, shepherd, hotel manager and also at a tea shop. In addition to these few he took up many other odd jobs during his various sojourns. His occupations ranged from that all these to living as an ascetic with Hindu saints and Sufi mystics in their hermitages in the Himalayas and in the Ganges basin, following their customs and practices, for more than five years. At one point in time he even tried to join the Bombay film industry but failed because he did not know Marathi. In fact after he left his home Kerala, he embarked upon a long journey that took him across the length and breadth of India and to many places in Asia and Africa for seven years, doing whatever work that seemed likely to keep him from starvation.

Basheer tasted every facet of Indian life. He stayed for some time in Kamattipura which was a notorious haunt of prostitutes, eunuchs and thieves. He came in close contact with these people while living there and learnt of the rhythms of the lives of these marginalized beings. His writings were not limited to any particular community. In fact, it was the human community which interested him and of particular interest were the issues which were of concern to the present generation. He did not believe in art for art's sake yet, he did believe that "the ultimate end of life and art was '*Nanma*' (goodness) -- the betterment of the self and humanity."

Basheer's uniqueness as a literary figure lies in the fact that he wrote about socialist themes, about poverty, unemployment and hunger and drew upon his personal experiences of sordidness and poverty like his contemporaries but with a difference. His seminal work '*Sabdangal*' (Voices), which appeared in 1947 was almost a microcosm of the surrounding world and dealt with issues like poverty, unemployment, death and destruction. He had seen

it all at first hand yet unlike his contemporaries, he chose to be objective rather than sentimental, while recording his experiences.

His writings amazed the readers because of the sheer variety contained in them and also the manner in which he ‘transformed the biographical into historical, the transient into the perennial and the trivial into the sublime,’ (M.N. Vijayan). An astute observer of human character, he skilfully combined humour and pathos in his works. Love, hunger and poverty, life in prison are recurring themes in his works. There is enormous variety in them – of narrative style, of presentation, of philosophical content, of social comment and commitment. Basheer drew upon his everyday experiences and yet could delineate equally well the sublime and the infernal. As M.N. Vijayan observes ‘whether it be the crook or the nitwit, the wicked or the innocent, the “I” of his tales gazes at “god’s plenty” spread out before him and presents this to us, distilled in the alembic of his rich humour.’ For Basheer, life provided a model for art. Whatever he wrote and whoever he wrote about, compassion and acceptance remained the key to his humour. It was seldom malicious. He never philosophised, never sermonised against oppression but, all the same, man’s inhumanity to man came through with telling effect. Readers who chuckled at his way of telling found that tears were not far behind. This quality of Basheer’s writing is what made him unsurpassable as a storyteller.

Basheer had a religious stance peculiar to his own. He travelled extensively in the Northern part of India and visited almost all the sacred pilgrimages of Hindus, Muslims as well as Christians. During his stay at Ajmer, he stayed in a Dharamshala, posing as a Hindu. For three and a half years he lived as a Sanyasi with other Sanyasis and then went on to spend as much time with the Sufis. For Basheer there was no conflict between the Hindu belief ‘*Aham Brahmasmi*’ and the Sufi notion ‘*Anal Huq*’ both of which carry the same meaning, ‘I am the truth’. His mind was open to all religions and he found his experiences with the Hindu Sanyasis and the Sufi brothers very fulfilling. M.N. Vijayan commenting on Basheer’s varied experiences and adventures, in his ‘Introduction’ in Vanajam Ravindran ed. *Vaikom Mohammad Basheer: Short Stories* has rightly stated, “Politics and prison, asceticism, pick-pocketing, homosexuality, all were grist to his mill”.

Basheer had an eye for the positive in every experience he went through. Basheer’s experiences at this prison featured in many of his short stories like ‘Tiger’, ‘*Itiyan Panikker*’ and ‘*Mathilukal*’ (Walls). It is said that he even wrote stories on request from the prisoners who were sick of reading the Ramayana and the Bible. A hilarious love story ‘*Prerna Lekhanam*’ was the outcome of such a request. He also had to suffer from mental illness and was twice admitted to mental sanatoriums. He wrote one of his most famous works, *Pathummayude Adu* (Pathumma's Goat), while undergoing treatment in a mental hospital in Thrissur. To conclude, the most apt tribute that can ever be paid to Basheer is given in The Frontline (FEB. 6, 2015):

“VAIKOM MUHAMMAD BASHEER was very much a loner on the Kerala literary scene. In the simplicity of his writing, in the themes of his stories, in the humour and satire which cloaked the profundity of his observations on life and living, Basheer could be compared only to Basheer. The uniqueness of his ebullient genius stands out like a resplendent star on the horizon”.

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