

The Tales Of Beypore Sultan: An Enquiry Into The Narratives Of Vaikom Muhammad Basheer

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Abstract

Vaikom Muhammed Basheer (1908-1994), also known as Beypore Sultan was a Malayalam fiction writer, actively submerged in the Gandhian ideals, influenced by religious compassion and intellectual precision of observance of Kerala society. Basheer is often looked up as a perfectionist with not more than 40 titles to his name in his literary career, a small feat in terms of quantity but an idiosyncratic achievement in terms of its finesse. K. Satchidanandan, a famous contemporary Indian poet and literary critic traces Modernism in Malayalam literature with Basheer (60). The simplicity of his language, the satiric touch of words and charmingly unique meta narratives were surely a rejuvenation to the Malayalam literary history marking a departure from the charms of the highly polished and sophisticated literary usage of the Malayalam language that predominantly survived on the high poetics of Sanskrit. Basheer employed the largely colloquial/oral tradition of language to write and establish the social realism in Malayalam literature which reflected a humane and physical manifestation of natural human engagements with life. Basheer's identity as a Muslim individual in the twentieth century of emerging middle classes and subsequent conservatism in Kerala, his political leanings, admirations and adulations in the backdrop of the nationalist movements for independence in India as well as his spiritual inquisitiveness as a Muslim fakir and Hindu sanyasin all lead upto some of the finest pearls of Malayalam literature. This paper aims to look at certain famous works of Basheer to trace a trajectory of his narrative style and their uniqueness of form, language and content that ultimately made Basheer the writer with no parallels: A Sultan, not only the heir of magnificent stories but also the creator of an unparalleled narrative style. An inquiry into the sultan's world to understand the modernist tendencies of the author and a post modernist eminence of his works would be a major preoccupation. Sincere efforts will also be made to unearth a relationship (if any) between Basheer's personal choice of genre as well as the development of the form of short stories and novellas in Malayalam literature at a time of intensely artistic poetics of language.

Keywords:

Vaikom Muhammed Basheer, colloquial, oral tradition, narrative style

Introduction

Vaikom Muhammad Basheer donned many avatars and played key roles in a multidimensional reformation of Kerala society. A fiction writer, a freedom fighter, saint, seer, sufi and a script writer, Basheer effortlessly used multiple domains to positively affect human culture. In the Malayalam literary space, the legend Basheer holds an idiosyncratic legacy that has found no

parallels yet. Basheer's uniqueness is his path-breaking, disarmingly down-to-earth style of writing that gave him mass popularity as well as critical appreciation. He was the man for all. He is also regarded as the translator's nightmare, mainly because of the colloquial touch he added to his writings, which would lose its humor and meaning when translated to other languages. His unique ebullient intellect is the rarest of the rare kind which revolutionised Malayalam literature and took it to a whole new level (Sharma, 351).

Basheer was fondly known as Beypore Sultan and his contemporaries were doyens like Karur Nilkanta Pillai, Ponkunnam Varki, Lalithambika Antharjanam , S.K. Pottekkat, Thakazi Sivasankara Pillai , and P.C. Kuttikrishnan. Basheer was an incisive observer of human character and he proficiently combined humor and pathos in his works. Love, hunger and poverty are themes that are predominant in his works. His works have an array of varieties of narrative technique, philosophical and social commentary as well as staunch commitment to humanity. His interaction with the Indian Independence movements, his never ending travels and conditions of his neighborhood and people around him, all had a poignant impact on Basheer's works. Some of his famous works are, '*Premalekhanam*' (1943), '*Baalyakaalasakhi*' (1944), '*Ente Uppuppakkoruana Undayirunnu*' (1951), '*Jeevitha-nizhalppaaduka*l' (1954), '*Paaththummayude Aadu*' (1959) and '*Vishappu*' (1954). This paper aims to understand the various tenets of Basheer's style of writing with particular reference to the narrative style that he adopted, something which the Malayalam literary circle acknowledges as a Basheerian way of writing.

Basheer lived an eventful life, navigating through meagre resources in a large Muslim family in Vaikom, dropping out of school to join the Independence movement after being mesmerised by Mahatma Gandhi, travelling throughout the lengths of the country, recurrent visits to jail for

writing and eventually becoming a distinctive presence in the Malayalam literary scene. Basheer later also ventured into writing screenplays for movies like *Bhargavi Nilayam* which like his published works was a great success as well. Basheer settled for a family life in his forties after much wandering through influential experiences, meeting people and creating strange, colloquial, closer to reality stories. He married a younger woman Fabi Basheer and started a family in Beypore, Kozhikode and lived there until his death. The Muslim dominated Malabar region in and around Beypore gets extensively featured in the later parts of his work making him the king of representing the people of the region. Wilkie Collins once famously proclaimed that the successful formula for writing a novel is to "Make them laugh, make them cry- make them wait" (Schmidt, 252). Precisely what Basheer does is making the readers laugh, cry and wait. That is, engaging the interests of the readers in all senses. This is one of the features that makes Basheer the creator of a foolproof narrative technique. Basheer's subjects of prose aren't grand tales of kings or wars. Structurally, his works can be identified closer to high burlesques with the subject matter of the novel sometimes being something as trivial as his own nose (*Vishvavikhyatha Mookku* or The World Famous Nose). His first protagonist was a dark skinned lady with a hunchback in his story *Ente Thankam* (translated as My Darling). The startling deviation of the archetype of a malayalam heroine was inaugurated by Basheer through this work and a debunking of literary prototypes have followed in all his subsequent works. A conventional narratology is difficult to follow in Basheer's works because of a lack of binarity of theme and absence of homogeneity of character types used by Basheer. The tracing of seven spheres of action as prescribed by Vladimir Propp would be an uphill task because Basheer doesn't seem to be following a literary convention like his predecessors used; rather he created something of his own. The first step towards that was the use of language.

K Satchidanandan describes Basheer as “one of those rare artists who love the world with all its imperfections rather than one of those who go on trying to change it since they can love only a perfect world”. (61) Basheer’s understanding of the world as a complex place with good, evil and mediocrity as organic compounds of the universe becomes apparent in his literary choices of theme and content. Basheer consciously dismantles the hegemony of superiority of genre and theme by sticking to prosaic form to express his impressions of everyday life with literary space being claimed by mostly the marginal voices of the society. It is this quality in Basheer’s writings that makes him truly a postmodernist. The deviation from the high poetics and ornamentation of Sanskrit and Tamil languages in Malayalam was predominantly known throughout the ages as Manipravalam language. When writing became a recurrent activity in Kerala, there came a strict classification between *achadibhasha* and *vaaymozhi*, translated as written language and oral language respectively. The generation of Basheer and his successors like O V Vijayan, MP Narayana Pillai, Paul Zacharia etc followed this style of breaking this demarcation of language. Basheer further went a step ahead in making the Malayalam literary circle and the general reader realize the classist nature of written language and how realism in its entirety could only be achieved through a Basheerian style of writing. That is to write as it is spoken. His language is full of dialects, idioms and every day callousness which is very real and became path breaking for Malayalam literature. And to add to this, Basheer invented a lot of his own expressions in Malayalam which elevated the literary quality of his works as well as enriched the literary field itself.

Basheer’s works are primarily set in the towns of Kerala where the characters are everyday people moving with life and its preoccupation. The first person usage is a consistent feature in all his works, although the agency of the narrator varies depending upon whose story is being narrated. For example, in the work, *Janmadinam (Birthday)*, Basheer himself features as the I,

who writes about an entire day of his life which happens to be his birthday. We see Basheer's life from his own eyes and language expressing different happenings in the span of a single day. The author vividly described an hour-by-hour account using simple words and expressions. This style of a writing can be understood as rooted from a conscious path that Basheer chose for himself. Basheer represented a new wave of writing in Malayalam. As against the traditionalist, who was a product of the feudal ethos in which life was an extended leisure, as against the modernist, who wrote about the disillusionment induced by the breakdown of social fabric; and the social realist, who dealt with a utopia where all were equal (Thomas, 2): Basheer wrote about the real world, first and foremost, as a patriotic and humanist Indian and as a Keralite who didn't have any formal training in the art and craft of writing. Hence, he carved his own style which became a model for the generations to come.

The unpretentious language of Basheer adorns simple metaphors and imageries. The subjects are profoundly ordinary. However, a typical Basheer written work has something insanely unordinary about it. It can be understood as an amalgamation of fact and fiction, truth and imagination. M.N Vijayan, a notable critic of Malayalam literature, noted that "in Basheer there seems to be no rift between the man and the writer" (Satchidanandan, 64). It is difficult to draw a line between fact and fiction if we try reading his works with his life and experiences at the center of expressions. As Basheer himself has proclaimed many times, almost all of his works contain autobiographical elements. Does that mean everything Basheer wrote was autobiographical? Not really, except of course his autobiographical work which is titled as *Ormayude Arakal* or *Chambers of Memory*. A deep analysis of Basheer's works would reveal that the characters he chose or the circumstances they deal with in the story are fictional but not far from reality. He doesn't write anything that hasn't happened before or too unreal to happen. The language that he writes in or the dialect in which each character speaks is also very close to

the real world. The real life experiences are woven by Basheer in the most simplistic narrative technique of orality which gives us a “too good to be not true” sort of story. This literary expedition was undertaken at first by Basheer and with utmost finesse. One such example of an intermingling of fact and fiction in Basheer’s work can be found in the story *Mathilukal* or *Walls*. Basheer’s personal struggles in the Independence movements have led him to prison a number of times. One such prison experience led him to write this story *Mathilukal* which describes the tale of a prisoner and his love with a woman prison inmate across the wall that they share in the compound. Within that piece, Basheer addresses himself, his writing and the reason that led him to jail which can be counted as the truthful content of the story and the love story that is unfolded later as the imaginative content of the story.

Mohammed Karinkurayil notes in another scholarly study on Basheer that the author while playing with the mysticism of imagination and realism of reality, also “pleads to be taken seriously as the chronicler, and assures us repeatedly of the factuality of the incidents he is narrating” (30). He uses Basheer’s *Ntuppoopakkoranendarnnu* to illustrate the same. Basheer enthralls the reader with his authorial voice that emerges from creaks between the dialogues of the characters where the emphasis on reality is through natural and excruciating epithets which can be understood as a display of protest, of observation, of commentary and of invention which prioritises blocks of truth in heaps of stories.

Through a dialogic lens of analysis as prescribed by Mikhail Bakhtin, we can see that the ‘primary component in the constitution of narrative works, or of literature generally—and of general culture as well—is a plurality of contending and mutually qualifying social voices, with no possibility of a decisive resolution into a monologic truth’. (Abrams, 84) In Basheer’s works we see that the omnipresent reliable narrator is not a monolithic voice of Basheer the author himself. Instead, the voice is a collaboration of Basheer’s imaginative prowess as well as the

various people that he has come across in real life. Basheer's fictional world is cohabited by his consciousness, his narrative voice and a sustained tension of opposition and mutual definitions. One of his finest stories is *Premalekhanam* translated as *Love Letter*. *Premalekhanam* is a simple story of Keshavan and Saramma, two adults belonging to different religious beliefs falling in love together. A love story isn't a novel idea or something that has never been successfully treated before. However, in Basheer's hands, this love story unfolds in a rather slow and serene way. The protagonists are simple and real life people. Keshavan being courageous enough to love someone outside his faith and woving to be Saramma's everything till forever is the representative of an educated malayalee in the 20th century. He is a conflicting mix of progressiveness and conservatism with Saramma being an equally opposite reckoning force in personality. It is only at the end of the novel that the love between them is professed by both and they decide to elope together. The entire conversation that the lovers have between them is so full of reality that they are always grounded in their own individual truths constantly reminding us that we are rather eavesdroppers in their love affair. What's worth noting here is the treatment of a simple plot and story and a familiar style of narration that is not a fairy tale but a reality of people. Reality of the differences that human beings have created between themselves and how even when a number of external forces are still thriving hard to keep human beings divided in the name of caste, religion, culture, etc, the hope of a coexistence isn't perhaps lost altogether. Thus, Basheer's "fictional world of multiple everyday voices brings in an alternative view of a society which was previously not treated in literature through such a lens. Basheer's narrative style became a tool to achieve this holistic universe which was transcending the realms of previously established literary conventions.

One thing that is to be discussed here and a major preoccupation of the paper is to understand the dynamics of genre and Basheer. Basheer has extensively written in prose which includes novels,

novellas, short stories and autobiography. The high poetics of Malayalam language has been effortlessly ruptured by Basheer using the prosaic forms. Basheer's fiction is very varied and full of contrasts. On more than one occasion he declared that one of his aims was to create a Muslim literature in Malayalam, but even a superficial reading of his stories reveals a deeper concern with an examination of universals of human behavior. Although a large proportion of his narratives is set among the Kerala Muslim community, with characters speaking in the peculiar Malabar accent of Malayalam which is both refreshing and humorous at times, critic R.E Asher notes that this phenomenon "is probably to be ascribed principally to two factors. Firstly, novelists commonly feel more comfortable with a setting with which they are really familiar. Secondly, he wished to redress the balance from what he had learnt from his reading while studying at the English school at Vaikom"(109):

"From the Malayalam novels that I read ... a true fact emerged. You should remember that this happened twenty or thirty years ago. At that time Malayalam literature was the province of upper caste Hindus and members of princely families. What was the true fact that I observed in Malayalam novels of the time? — The Muslim community was an assemblage of thieves, murderers and generally vile people! All the low characters in novels were Muslims!" (Basheer, 203)

As he grew older, Basheer was to come to recognize that this was not a true picture as far as the mainline history of prose fiction in Malayalam was concerned. Asher adds "For instance, one of the two great pioneers of this genre and the first to introduce Muslim characters into his stories, the historical novelist C. V. Raman Pillai (1858–1922), portrayed them no less sympathetically than he did members of other groups. The boyhood misconception may nevertheless have influenced Basheer's thinking on the direction his writing should take"(109). Basheer was also

an avid traveler and has met so many people. And his journeys were impactful on his memories as some story during his journey later resurfaced in his works. As he was fond of people's stories, Basheer seems to have rightfully turned to the opportunity of telling stories through writing. Thus, we were gifted with many stories that dealt with stories of people who were previously not given a space or voice in literature. Alternatively, we can call Basheer the creator of a 'third-space' in literature for the marginal classes in the society.

Conclusion

The Malayalam writers of the early 1930s wrote extensively about socialist themes, primarily about poverty, unemployment and hunger inspired by the wave of Progressive Writer's Movement that was gradually sweeping its way through the country. Basheer however, was often alluded as '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 works of his contemporaries' (Sharma, 351). While each of his works differed in the characters and their preoccupation in the story, the narratorial voice of Basheer in his classic Basheerian language remained a constant. Basheer embraced the outcasts, endorsed the neglected and championed a non-classist realism, plunging deep into the darker shades of human life.

Basheer once proclaimed, "I am the story; what I write is language", "I am an artist" or more philosophically, "I am the flower, I am also the garden" (Satchidanandan, 62). Basheer's own understanding of his writing is as beautiful as his works because what we see in Basheer's works is a world that is envisioned through an individual's eyes. It is a microcosm of a close world of

an individual co-inhabited by different people. Thus, the relevance of the works is sustained by its timelessness. A very recent creative experiment based on Basheer's Mathilukal is a great example to illustrate this point. A short film titled *Ente Narayanikku* (2021), reimagines Mathilukal in a pandemic ridden world where the protagonist is in quarantine and develops a familial bond with a stranger across the wall. Basheer's works are about people who see, feel and react to the circumstances around them as naturally as possible which leaves the prospect of placing them in any space and time.

To conclude this paper, I'd like to quote an observation given by K Satchidanandan which brilliantly sums up Basheer and his oeuvre of work. He says, Basheer "was avant-garde in the true sense for what he challenged was not just literary conventions, but the institution of 'Literature' itself. He showed us how card-sharpers, prostitutes, homosexuals, holy men, all create languages that tell the world what they see, feel and undergo; so it is not the special privilege of the writer to articulate experience or to create languages to express them". (65)

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