

**VOICING OF MARGINALITY IN THE WRITINGS OF**  
**VAIKOM MUHAMMAD BASHEER**

**(WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO VOICES AND THE CARDSHARPER'S DAUGHTER)**

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**Abstract**

*In the present paper ,I intend to study the voicing of marginality in Basheer's 'Voices', published in Malayalam in 1947 and 'The Cardsharper's Daughter' Dr, published in Malayalam, in 1951.The translation which I have used is Basheer Fictions ,edited by Vanajam Ravindran and published by Katha. The paper attempts to present Vaikom Muhammad Basheer's voicing of the pain, oppression and suffering of the ' masses'. In Basheer's 'Voices', the 'masses' which include the soldier, party workers, male prostitutes, eunuchs, transvestites, hijras, the old blind man, the mother and son ,a young woman who worked as a prostitute and 'the sick, the blind ,the beggars' are the marginalized .The 'mill owners, ministers, presidents and generals' are the oppressors. In 'The Cardsharper's Daughter ', the constables, the 'beastly policemen', the cardsharper, 'the hated establishment', hoarders, the black-marketeers and the 'bourgeois reactionaries' are the oppressors. Mandan Muthapa, 'the universally acclaimed leader of the masses' and the people, are the marginalized. The paper goes on to show that if 'Voices' presents the helplessness and frustration of the 'masses', 'The Cardsharper's Daughter' presents the vanquishing of the adversary and victory for the 'masses'.*

**Keywords:** *voicing of pain, masses, oppression, marginalization, oppressors, vanquishing, victory.*

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## **VOICING OF MARGINALITY IN THE WRITINGS OF VAIKOM MUHAMMAD BASHEER**

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Marginality is a term that expresses the subordination and oppression experienced by people on the grounds of race, class, gender or religion. Basheer's writing focuses on poverty and hunger, the experiences of women, prostitutes, homosexuals and hijras. The young Basheer was pained by the fact that the wicked characters i.e., robbers, murderers, rascals and pick-pocketeers presented in the books he read, were portrayed as Muslims. Basheer says in one of his interviews that he, who had led a spotless life, was pained by this portrayal. He decided that when he grew up he would portray Muslims as good characters in his writing. This agenda of showing Muslim characters with 'nanma'-goodness, is a major concern in Basheer. Basheer takes up cudgels on behalf of other marginal voices including those of a blind man, a short-statured man with a foot-long moustache, a person with a long nose which goes down to his navel, murderers, petty thieves, pick-pocketeers, prisoners, madmen, sadhus, political detenus, abandoned children, orphans and even bald men. Basheer is a revolutionary in the use of language as well. Basheer's characters speak the ordinary language that real people speak, without paying attention to the correctness of grammar and vocabulary. He was the first Muslim writer to challenge the prevalent literary conventions of sanscritized Malayalam.

### **Voices**

The narrator in the 'Voices', the 'midnight visitor', does not have a home, a job or food to eat. He had been a soldier along with 4-5 million others. After the war was won, they had been discharged from the army. The midnight visitor had not brushed his teeth, had not washed himself, had not

cut his hair or trimmed his beard. His clothes were stinking .He had not taken a bath since what seemed to be ages. He is disillusioned by the army.

‘What is a soldier’s duty? Kill as many people as you can! And I killed, so that a few despicable creatures could rule over this country. I am referring to leaders the world over. Not one of them was on the battlefield, nor their kith and kin. People armed with lethal weapons destroyed one another. A people’s war indeed! Which people I ask you?’(102)<sup>1</sup>

The visitor does not know who his parents were, has no family, was found abandoned on the way side - ‘A new born babe ,swaddled in rags ,left alone in the dark’(103).He had not ever ‘suckled at a mother’s breast’(103). The visitor says that ‘Ordinary soldiers usually end up with cheap prostitutes. As your rank rises the social status of the woman you get also goes up.’ (106) As a result ,the visitor says, nine out of ten men in the army contract diseases like gonorrhoea or syphilis ,which are cured by expensive medicines that only the rich can afford.

In the ‘Voices’ ordinary people are shown as victims of party-politics .Recounting an experience the midnight visitor says,

‘The sun hadn’t set .Imagine the city as a huge forest infested with predatory animals. Imagine the city growling, snarling, roaring ...The deafening sound of speeding vehicles, a seething mass of humanity racing in different directions. Each sporting its own bit of cloth...Multi-coloured flags, each a symbol of a party...Every bit of painted cloth is a sign of the people, isn’t it ?..The flag bearers...all of them subscribe to their own party agenda, don’t they? All of them address people’s issues, don’t they?’(110)

The creative writer answers in the affirmative and says ‘Yes, members of different parties say different things’(110).The ‘midnight visitor’ goes on to

describe his experience of a riot.

'A godown full of explosives belonging to a certain group caught fire. A procession taken out by one group clashed with a rival group. And then there was a rain of hand bombs, stones and broken soda bottles. Knives were thrust into human hearts. Slogans were followed by counter slogans. The entire thing was a blood bath, a dance of death. ..Six storeyed buildings were catching fire like heaps of dry leaves... People were charred to ashes...' (111).

'Voices' goes on to talk about male prostitutes – eunuchs, transvestites, hijras or hermaphrodites. The initiation ceremony is described in detail. The male prostitute narrates his story to the midnight visitor: a story of sexual abuse of a fourteen year old boy – by none other than his male teacher! One can see victimization of a young boy, by a person who was supposed to be his mentor. Working as an attendant in a hotel, he contracted gonorrhoea from a colleague. He left the town and after wandering around for some time, he drifted to the city. He stayed with the midnight visitor's host's driver for a while and then moved into the bungalow. At first he was just a servant, later he was required to massage his host and also the mistress of the house. At last he became an acknowledged male prostitute. The visitor admits that he caught syphilis and gonorrhoea from this male prostitute. The visitor had to leave his host's bungalow as he was ill. He had no money for treatment. No food and nowhere to stay. In this story one can see the spiraling tragic trajectory of abuse.

The 'midnight visitor' goes on to describe his experiences as he sat under a tree outside the city, near an old graveyard. Behind him rose the ruins of an ancient temple. A vast and solitary waste land stretched before him. The visitor dozed off out of sheer exhaustion. He woke up at night. The world was bathed in moonlight. He heard several voices – that of an old blind man, a mother, who was a prostitute, and her son, a woman who had given birth to a child by the wayside, unable to say who the father of the child was, a

woman's voice saying, 'My mother gave birth to me in a gutter. Still I managed to get two husbands and nine children. Mother says my father is in the military.'(123), another young woman's voice which said ' I had a motor car drive today!' , another which asked ' Who rode you?'(123) The visitor then goes on to recount a communal brawl, talks of people puffing away on ganja beedis, and a person who committed suicide on a railway track – his head was severed. In the words of the visitor:

'...The sick, the blind, the beggars... True! ... In the forest, big trees and small trees. And snakes and tigers, lions, bison, rabbits, rats and elephants... In the city, mill owners, ministers, presidents and generals ... Is our blood the same as theirs? Blood is red ... Even of dogs and pigs!... But dogs and pigs can eat anything.' (124)

We can see that the people, the 'masses', are the marginalized in Basheer, and the 'mill owners, ministers, presidents and generals' are the oppressors.

'A voice from a distance asked, "Want to hear something new? I thought he would have a lot of money. So I strangled him at a street corner. But there was only a fake one-rupee coin in his pocket... And what did you do with it? a woman asked.' (124)

Basheer here describes a horrendous world where after hearing about a strangulation, the woman only asks what was done with the fake one rupee; she does not enquire about the strangulated person – whether he was alive or dead! The insensitivity, the lack of empathy, shows the unfathomable divide between the 'rich' and the 'poor', the marginalized and the oppressor.

The mother of the child asks for money to be given first, before she allows the customer to touch her. The customer says,

'...you think only of money. And I come all the way because I love you... She laughed, choking with pain, Love and lust can't fill my son's stomach or mine... How much?... One

rupee. Give it first ... Here it is. One rupee. Woman, have you any disease?...Disease indeed!.. Haven't you eaten anything today? ... To hell with your fine talk. Do what you want to do and get lost!...' (124)

A glimpse into the hellish life of the woman who has to leave her child to be bitten by ants and entertain her customer with her body, in order to fill her and her son's stomach, is given here.

The visitor goes on to describe the people in the open ground before him:

'It (the crackers) lit up the faces and the bodies of the men and women huddled together. The lumpens with nothing special to do. Nowhere to go. No name nor land of their own. Nothing. Yet they had everything that human beings need on earth. The citizens of the world are born in that society – without any privacy. They grow up, they procreate. Out in the open ... I went up to the abandoned child. There he was, a future citizen of the world! ...' (127)

The visitor in the 'Voices', stricken by disease, having no money, having nowhere to go and having 'Not a soul in this world either to love me [him] or hate me [him],' decides to commit suicide. Looking back at his life, he says, 'To be honest, no one has ever shown any kindness to me.'<sup>130</sup>) His heart was filled with sorrow. He decides to take his life, on the railway track. Weeping bitterly, he fell asleep. When he woke up, the sun had not yet risen. The sea was a vast stretch of darkness. He felt utterly alone in the universe. Suddenly he '...remembered the cold, primeval sense of things. God is the last refuge of the lonely and the destitute. For a while, I[he] was immersed in that thought.' (130)The visitor goes on to say that, he even lay down on the railway track, waiting for the train to grind him to pulp. The visitor lived to tell the tale because the train sped past, along the track next to where he lay.

## **The Cardsharpener's Daughter**

Ottakannen Pokker is the 'tragic protagonist' of the story. Mandan Muthapa is introduced as 'the villain, though, as the story progresses, he steadily rises in stature to become the hero, the chivalrous knight who takes up arms against Pokker.'(27). Zainaba, Pokker's daughter loved Muthapa. She was in the narrator's words, '... Muthapa's 'comrade- in-arms in the battle.'(27) She belongs to the 'ranks of the people'. The other villains include Thorappan Avaran, Driver Pappuni, Anavari Raman Nair, Ponkurissu Thoma and Ettukali Mammoonhu. The constables are presented as 'stooges of the tyrannical regime'. Basheer presents a huge canvas of 2200 villagers, and a 'floating population of about twenty six hundred men and women who appeared only on Tuesdays and Saturdays, the village market days.'(28)

Mandan Muthapa was a young man of twenty one, jet-black in complexion and slightly cross-eyed. He had lost his mother in his childhood. His father had died a martyr's death in prison after a pitched battle with a bunch of 'beastly policemen' over some misunderstanding about a burglary. As far as he could remember, he did not have any kith or kin. People just called him 'Mandan Muthapa, the pickpocket'. 'Mandan' or 'nitwit' had been prefixed to his name by none other than Pokker. Pokker had taught Muthapa the technique of exhaling smoke through one's nose. He had demanded a fee of a rupee for the lesson. Muthapa had paid him only five and a half annas. 'That bastard Mandan owes me ten and a half annas.', Pokker would say angrily, 'I taught him to blow smoke through his nose'(29). Muthapa had just begun his career as an apprentice to Anavari Raman Nair and Ponkurissu Thoma. Pokker's statement prompted them to have second thoughts about Muthapa and Muthapa was left to 'fend for himself in a wicked world.'(30) Before he started picking pockets, Muthapa had tried to enroll himself as Pokker's pupil in card-sharpening. But Pokker had refused to oblige. 'Get lost, you donkey. It needs boys with brains to do this stuff.', (30) was Pokker's response.

Mandan was at a disadvantage because of the fact that he was a 'full

head taller than most men in the crowd that thronged the village on market days.'(32) As soon as he arrived on the scene, there would be a cry from the crowd, 'Hey you, be careful! Mandan Muthapa has taken a liking to you.' (32) The narrator makes special mention of the fact that '... none of these zealots belonged to the village. They were all outsiders, henchmen of the hated establishment. They had closed their ranks against Mandan Muthapa.'(32) The constables squeezed Muthapa to the tune of one rupee each market day. The narrator notes that 'The politically conscious villagers had no use for these representatives of the powers that be and opposed this high-handedness'. It is evident that the people were on Muthapa's side .That made no difference to the constables who were determined to have their share of Muthapa's earnings. Basheer begins his story with 'The tale which I am about to unfold before you describes how Mandan Muthapa, the nitwit, vanquished his nimble – witted adversary and won the hand of ...' (32)

On a Saturday, Mandan presented himself before Ottakannen Pokker. Pokker insulted him saying, 'Hai raja,...come on ... two for one ...any Mandan ass can try.'(33) When Muthapa placed his anna on what he judged to be the joker, Pokker turning the card, again insulted him saying 'Get lost, you ass'. That day, when Pokker stepped into his house, the first sight that greeted his eyes, was that of Mandan Muthapa, his head reclining in Zainaba's lap. Here are the narrator's words on the issue: 'What more was required to break a poor father's heart? A dark, cross-eyed stupid pickpocket nestling in your daughter's lap! One rarely comes across a father who would find it funny.' (36) Pokker was furious. He flung a piece of tapioca at Muthapa which struck him square on his chest. Though it hurt him considerably, Muthapa announced, 'Mama, [one's maternal uncle or wife's father] you know I am going to marry Zainaba'. Pokker shaking with rage screamed 'Get out of my house, you thieving scoundrel!' Ignoring that Muthapa said, 'Zainaba says I should stop picking pockets. So I'm not going to any more. I want to set up a small restaurant ... Mama, will you lend me ten rupees for it?' (36) When Muthapa tells him 'Any day before the end of the month would suit me for the wedding', Pokker roared, 'Get out, you blasted Jew. ... Don't get any such ideas as long as I am alive.' Muthapa however, was not deterred

by this. 'Mama, I'll marry Zainaba long before you die.' (36) This was the beginning of a long struggle, 'a fight to the finish' says the narrator. In the beginning, the two constables were staunch supporters of Pokker. But soon, they along with the vast majority of the villagers shifted their loyalties to Mandan Muthapa. Right from the beginning, Mandan Muthapa's offensive met with remarkable success. He was the 'universally acclaimed leader of the masses.' Pokker on the other hand, was '...denounced as a hoarder, a black marketer and above all, a bourgeois reactionary.' Slogans like 'Mandan Muthapa zindabad! Ottakannen Pokker murdabad!' rent the air. There was no dearth of people to buy tea and lunch for Muthapa whenever he needed them. On the other hand, Pokker found it difficult to get even a pinch of slaked lime for his betel and nut.

On the next market day, Muthapa presented himself before Pokker. He had with him a one-rupee note which he said Zainaba had given him. Muthapa scrutinized the cards carefully and placed his note on a card. Pokker winced as if 'he had been pricked with a pin'. When the cards were turned, a collective gasp was heard. Muthapa's note was on the joker! Pokker grudgingly gave him another rupee. That day, Muthapa won sixteen rupees. The crowd was ecstatic. 'There was universal rejoicing. It was a victory for the people' (39), in the words of the narrator. Muthapa opened a tea shop. On the first day, Muthapa counted his earnings and presented himself before Pokker. Pokker lost twenty rupees that day. In the words of the narrator, 'A dozen market days passed by.... Pokker was at the end of his tether, broke and neck-deep in debt. And finally, he admitted defeat. "Son, leave me alone, please", he pleaded with Muthapa.'(40) Muthapa agreed on the condition that he be allowed to marry Zainaba. But Pokker refused to relent. 'Muthapa was firm on his compromise formula. So were the valiant villagers.'(40), says the narrator. Ottakannen Pokker ran from pillar to post for help, to no avail. 'Get Zainaba married to that fellow, man' was what he heard everywhere. Pokker was left with no option but to get Zainaba married to Muthapa. The villagers were so excited that they sponsored a display of fire-works. Soon, Muthapa's tea-shop graduated into a proper hotel, serving 'puttu' and boiled gram. Ottakannen Pokker however, was heart- broken. He had no peace. There was

something which 'tormented' him- 'How could Mandan Muthapa place his money unfailingly on the joker all the time?' Pokker says to himself, 'Where would Mandan Muthapa get brains from, he who was willing to part with precious money for learning to let out smoke through the nose?'(41) When Pokker persisted, Muthapa revealed the secret. Zainaba had made small holes in the corners of all the jokers in the pack with a safety pin!

Basheer's 'The Cardsharpener's Daughter' voices the struggle of Mandan Muthapa to lead a life of dignity and respect. Muthapa, disadvantaged by his height, his colour, his slightly cross-eyed eyes, the fact that he had no parents, his inability to find suitable employment, his poverty, the prefix 'mandan' to his name, his work – that of a pickpocket, and by the fact that he is a victim of the greed of the constables, is a supreme example of the condition of being marginalized. In the narrator's words, the story could be seen as a story of 'how Mandan Muthapa, the nitwit, vanquished his nimble-witted adversary.'(32) The narrator's self-confessed 'certain partiality' and 'moral support' towards Muthapa are evident in the story.(28) Muthapa's grit and determination to marry the woman he loves, make the masses switch their loyalties. Muthapa's struggle transforms itself into a symbolic struggle – a symbol of their own struggles against oppression, injustice, poverty and hunger. The constables, the 'beastly policemen', the cardsharpener, 'the hated establishment', the 'hoarders', the 'black-marketeers' and the 'bourgeois reactionaries' are the oppressors in the story. Mandan Muthapa, 'the universally acclaimed leader of the masses', along with the people, are the marginalized. 'The Cardsharpener's Daughter' is thus a story of the victory of the marginalized, oppressed majority of villagers – 'the masses' and the vanquishing of the hoarders, the black-marketeers, and the 'bourgeois reactionaries'.

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