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Basheer—The Sufi*

M.A. Rahman

What happened to my flower?
Why are you so anxious to know?
I must know if you have crushed it underfoot.
So what?
O, nothing——It was my throbbing heart.

(Vaikkom Muhammad Basheer—*The Great Shores of Solitude*)

Basheer's writings bled with the mystic love common to the Sufi, the Lunatic and the Poet. Vaikkom Muhammad Basheer, like the vast mysterious and many-faceted universe, unfolds the infinite unknown selves within him and revealed these facets of his soul in his works. His life and works endorsed the fact that the revolutionary, the common man, the lunatic and the Sufi were all packed into one person. He constantly emphasized in his stories that the creature beside him, be it a blade of grass, a grain of sand or a tiny ant——was also the rightful heir to the earth's bounties.

Basheer was born on 21 January 1908. He was studying in fifth forum in the Vaikkom English High School when Gandhiji came to take part in the Vaikkom Satyagraha. He touched Gandhiji's right hand. He came under his spell. Basheer was seventeen. The age when your world views are formed. The headmaster at school forbade him to take part in the Vaikkom Satyagraha which was against caste discrimination. Basheer defied the order and was dismissed from school. Basheer had imbibed the spirit of the various struggles across India against the British rule

* This article is the text of speech delivered at Thunchanparambu at the Basheer Centenary celebrations of the Sahitya Akademi.

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and upper class oppression even at that young age. In 1930, Basheer left for Kozhikode hoping to meet Syed Mohammed from his village, who he believed was with Mohammed Abdurahiman who was leading the Freedom Struggle in Malabar and running a newspaper called *Al-Ameen.* However Syed Mohammed was in Jail. Basheer went to the Al-Ameen lodge where Abdurahiman Sahib and E. Moidu Moulavi were residing. He joined the Indian National Congress, took part in the Salt Satyagraha with Moidu Moulavi and Mohammed Abdul Rahiman Sahib, was imprisoned with them, spent time in Kozhikode and Kannur prisons and was terribly tortured.

Basheer wrote in his autobiography:

> I had learned the Quran by the age of eight. The texts in Muslim houses were in Arab-Malayalam (It is Malayalam written in Arabic script) which had a mixture of words in many languages like Hindustani, Kannada, Tamil, Tulu and Marathi. My uncle used to have recitals of the heroic songs relating to the history of Islamic wars in Uhad and Badr at home. There would be a crowd and the recital would turn frenzied. When I was studying in the Vaikkom English High School, a Musaliyar (Priest) used to come home to teach me the Khitab, a kind of higher-level Islamic Studies.

Perhaps, these ballads of the legendary heroes of the Islamic wars written in Arab - Malayalam had raised in him a revolutionary fervor. The Arabs who migrated to South India had never coveted power or waged wars to grab it. They not only inspired the native Mappila Muslims[1] to fight against the Portuguese and British, but were also a part of these struggles. Until the British arrived, Arabic was the language that brought people close together as far as the Magrib lands. In places, the Arabs had travelled to, they invented a novel way of representing the local language in Arabic script. It was alternative literacy. They created Arabic - Tamil, Arabic - Kannada, and Arabic - Telugu, which were instrumental in producing a great literary tradition in South India. (It is now pushed to the fringes.) Sufi spirituality underlies the whole of this literature. [Since Arabs arrived in North India they created a new language and script called Urdu (Hindustani). The great heritage of Hindustani music and Mughal art have their roots in Sufi spiritualism.] The Sufis developed a dialect Arab - Malayalam and literature to go with it. This Arab-Malayalam literature glorified the Islamic wars of Arabia. The Mappilas began their

1. Muslims of North Kerala are known by the term, Mappilas.

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struggle against the upper-class oppression and the British and the Portuguese colonialists, inspired by these folk songs.

It was the Sayyeds from Hadramaunt in Yemen who arrived bringing Sufi tradition along with them to South India. The Sayyeds were the direct descendants of Prophet Mohammed. Their lineage can be traced back to Prophet Muhammad's daughter Fathima and Ali her husband. The Sufi tradition of these Sayyeds spread from Indonesia to Magrib Lands. The Sufi tradition of Kerala developed a poetic tradition of panegyrics in praise of many great heroes in the Islamic world. Khadi Mohammed, chief priest of Kozhikode composed an epic poem about Sheikh Mohiyuddeen Abdul Khader Geelani a great scholar and advocate of the Khadiriya Thareeqat of Sufism in Bagdad. The poem in Arab–Malayalam was composed in 1607 AD. It sings the praises of Sheik Mohiyuddeen's mystical and magical powers. It is written in the simplest of Arabic, Tamil and Malayalam without even a tinge of classical Sanskrit. It was during this period that Thunchathezhuthachan translated Ramayanam and Mahabharata from Sanskrit into a mixture of Sanskrit and Malayalam. The language of his work which had an overdose of Sanskrit did not appeal to the ordinary Muslim folk. The Sufis were aware of this fact which is why the language of Ode to Mohiyudheen (Mohiyudheen Mala) is simple and free of Sanskrit Scholarship. In this sense, Mohiyudheen Mala represents a Counter Poetic Theology. As Gayatri Spivak notes, in the Sufi songs of Baul singer Lalan Shah Fakir, the Advaita of the Hindu theology becomes the formless divinity of Islam. Just as Jayadeva's Krishna Bhakti was a reflection of the concepts of love in the Baul songs. Mohiyudheen Sheikh gains super human proportions in Mohiyudheen Mala stimulating the deification of Rama in Thunchathezhuthachan's Ramayana. Once in Kerala, young Muslim girls who did not know how to recite the Mohiyudheen Mala were not desirable brides. The elegiac notes of Amir Khusru 'Babul Ki Dua' (prayers from home) at the grave of Hazart Nizamuddin were often used as ceremonial songs when brides left for their husbands' home, taking leave of their parents.

The Sayyeds had ruled Delhi from 1414 to 1450 AD, that is, for 40 years. The Sayyeds, unlike other shrewd Delhi Sultan's neither knew the strategies of war nor administrative tactics. As for the Sayyeds who had travelled to South India, they had no inclination towards affairs of the state. Their interest was in Sufism and social reform. These Sufis voiced their protest against slavery and inequality in the society. During Portuguese invasion they composed songs about the heroic exploits of the warriors of Uhad and Badar (sites of Islamic wars in Arabia) and inspired patriotism in the Muslim community in Tamil Nadu. It is following

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this that the Mappilapattu tradition in Arabic - Malayalam emerged among Muslims in Kerala questioning slavery, caste discrimination and other inequalities. The first of any such songs discovered is the Mohiyudeen Mala. Instances of Basheer's awareness of this Counter Poetic Theology can be found in his auto-biography. Basheer's grandfather's name was Sheikh Moiyudeen Abdul Khadher.

Between 1836 and 1921 there have occurred 83 riots against British and the upper caste Landlords in Malappuram district in Kerala. These are generally known as Mappila riots. These riots were a part of the freedom struggle. The British realised that the Sayyeds belonging to the Sufi tradition were behind this. The renowned Sufis of Kerala Mambaram Sayyed Alavithingal, Sayyed Fasal Pookoya Thangal, Veliyankode Umer Khasi and the rest inspired rebellions against caste discrimination, upper class oppression and evoked anti-British sentiments through Arab - Malayalam Literature, "Thuffathul Mujahideen"—the work of Sheik Sainudheen Maqdoom, written in the middle of eighteenth century, exhorted the deliverance of Muslims in Malabar from Portuguese atrocities. In Khadi Mohammed's *Fatahul Mubeen* written in Arabic the Samoodiri (Local King of Kozhikode) resisting the British forces in Malabar was glorified. Mamburam Sayyed Alavi Thangal in his *Saibul Bathar* written in Arabic said every Indian should fight till the British leave India. Sayyed Pookoya Thangal was his son. The British Government charged him with the crime of instigating the Mappilas of Malabar against the British and tried to exile him. Collector H. V. Connolly (1840–1855) reported that Sayyed Pookoya Thangal was persuading the Mappila suicide squads to fight the landlords who were carrying out eviction of the lower class. In 1852, Sayyed Pookoya Thangal, boarded a ship to Arabia. This was tantamount to exile.

A century before the Vaikkom Sathyagraha in Basheer's birth place, the Sayyeds had begun resistance movements in Malabar. The upper class system in those days insisted on the lower class addressing the upper class respectfully. Defying this system Sayyed Pookoya Thangal (1824- 1901) advised the lower class to regain their self respect and address the upper class as they did them. This Sufi spirit had cast influence on Basheer's political unconscious though he was a twentieth century man. History records Veliyonkode Umer Khasi's defiant gesture against the British Collector refusing British taxation. It is the tradition of Bagdadi and Yemeni Sufis who remained loyal to the land of Kerala which dragged Basheer to the Vaikkom Sathyagraha Movement. The *Al-Ameen* newspaper published by Mohammad Abdu Rahiman Sahib had brought the messages of freedom and equality to the young Basheer. Basheer continued his struggle

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even after his release from prison. Basheer had gone on a hunger-strike in jail learning of Bhagat Singh's execution. Returning he abandoned Gandhism. Basheer adopted revolutionary tactics of Bhagat Singh and resorted to daggers, bomb and sword. He started a revolutionary magazine *Ujjeevanam* (Resurrection). But the police confiscated the paper. An arrest warrant was issued against Basheer. It is during this time Basheer left Kerala. He has written in his autobiography about his intention of journeying through his enslaved land. He scoured the length and breadth of this land, as far as the Khyber Pass for almost five years. It was while travelling across North India that Sufi philosophy was rekindled within him. It was not accidental that North India which nurtures Sufism, Hindustani Music and Urdu language became Basheer's natural environment. When he was eight, one day, walking on the seashore Basheer notices the waves erasing his foot prints. He asks his father: "Who is erasing my foot prints, father?" When his father dissuades him, he is firm in his inquisitiveness and says: 'I will ask, I want to know.' His quest for truth begins here and eventually he arrives at the paradise of Sufi mystics. Basheer spent time in holy places at Hyderabad, Afghanistan, Lahore, Karachi, Peshawar, Delhi, Kashi, Ajmer, Budhagaya and Kashmir.

The Khadiriya, Nakshbandh, Chishti and Zuhravardiya are four diverse tributaries of Sufism. Basheer had tasted of these four springs of wisdom and spiritualism. Basheer had written about his journey to Ippi Faqir's hilly abode beyond the East-West province and at Khwaja Muhiyudheen Chisti's resting place in Ajmer. He had been with the Buddha Sanyasis and Jain Sanyasis in their wanderings. Basheer has described the experience of being with the Sufi mystics, who always chanted 'Ya Ahad, Ya Ahad.'

There are more instances of the Sufi influence in riots across India other than the Mappila Rebellion in Kerala (1836-1921). In 1756, when the British East India Company imposed new economic policies in Bengal, the Madari Fakirs, joined hands with Hindu Sanyasis to engage in guerilla warfare against the British. This revolt lasted for forty years and campaigned against the levying of taxes during famine. The Madari Sufi brotherhood is the contribution of the Islamic mystic tradition to India. The Madari Sufi tradition was begun in Makhanpur near Kanpur in UP, by a Syrian Sufi Badiuddin Shah Madar who arrived in India in the fifteenth century. These Sufis were nomadic Fakirs who travelled the length and breadth of the country, performing magic tricks on the streets and it is not hard to imagine Basheer as a magician, juggler and plyer of small trades as he himself describes in his autobiography. Even as he physically exerted himself in jobs like loom fitter, hotel boy, newspaper boy and palmist,

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his soul harboured Sufi spiritualism. Sufi traditions of the Rishis in Kashmir, Baba Budhan in Karnataka, Imam Shahi and Sidhi Fakirs in Gujarat, Baul Singers in Eastern India and the Melangs and Meoyos in Central India were not alien to Basheer.

After five years of diasporic existence travelling across North India, when he returned to Kerala he found Sir C.P. Ramaswami Iyer, the Diwan Peshkar, governing with an iron hand and Basheer's revolt took the form of polemic literature. He wrote the "Night Mares of Pattom" and 'Dharmarajyam" (1938) These politically charged essays were banned. Basheer got these printed and sold them at local shops and households, going on foot. It is noteworthy that the Sufi texts in Arab-Malayalam were also printed and sold in this manner. It is during this period that we find Basheer the Sufi and Basheer the revolutionary, in conflict. In May 1940 , he wrote an article in the *Mathrubhumi Weekly* titled "Faridudheen Attar—An Awe-inspiring Sainthood". In 1942 he wrote a short story titled "Anal Haq" which borrowed extensively from the life of the Sufi mystic, Mansur Al Hallaj. Basheer presents the Sufi perspective of Mansoor-Al-Hallaj who traversed the bank of Euphrates and Tigris reiterating the belief 'I am the Truth' in the story "Anal Haq". Basheer's journey from these fiery political essays and informative Sufi articles to later creative output, can be found in this story.

During the years 1942-1943, Basheer was imprisoned for his political writings. When Basheer was released he had with him a copy of the story "Love Letter" (Premalekhanam) which he had written for the prisoners to read. It is a tale of love. The protagonists belong to different religious communities. Basheer was influenced by the concept of Sufi brotherhood in the choice of this secular theme.

A Sufi poet of North Kerala Naduthoppil Abdulla had composed a balladic song in Arab - Malayalam called 'The Song of Birds' (Pakshi Pattu). It was banned by the Muslim clergy charging it of anti-religious stance.

Basheer's "Love Letter" (Premalekhanam) too was banned by Diwan C.P. Ramaswami Iyer as it allegedly hurt the sentiments of the upper class Nairs.

Basheer had around this time written "Momentous Time" (Anargha Nimisham). Its first sentence refers to Sufi spirituality;

'Finally only you remain of the Truth.'

That is 'you' and 'me'. Every Malayali has this echoing in his heart. If this reminds one of the following lines, the resemblance is only in connection to Sufi mysticism:

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> How blissful were we when we spent time in the same temple. Though we were of two forms, our souls were not separate
>
> Jalaludhin Rumi

and

> I am the one who I love,
> the one who I love is me,
> we are the spirit in one body,
> When you see me,
> You see Him
> When you see Him
> You see both of us
>
> Mansoor Al-Hallaj

It is the same concept that we find in 'The Childhood Friend' (*Balyakala Sakhi*). Majeed who flouted all mathematical rules to declare the sum of 'one' and 'one' to be 'wee bit bigger one' is Basheer himself. This 'wee bit bigger one' is not different from Basheer's concept of 'Anal Haq', 'Aham Brahmasmi' and the spiritual truth that embraces all creations. Concept of Advaita of Indian mysticism here merges with Sufi concepts. When Basheer says, 'I am a tiny drop in the fathomless, boundless ocean', it reveals his understanding of the spirit of Sufism and Advaita Philosophy sans its ritualistic entanglements.

Basheer talks about his days in the mental asylum:

> Complete blank, pure sweet lunacy; how many mysterious visions, strange delusions of a mind gone awry.

Basheer held tenaciously onto this madness, savory only to the Sufis. Basheer in his novel *Me Granddad'ad an Elephant* (1951) warns against deifying the Sufi mystic Sheik Mohiyudheen Abdul Khader Geelani. He asks the Muslims to abandon Arab-Malayalam script which had served its purpose of educating Muslims for almost six decades. When all around the world a renaissance was in resurgence, Basheer believed that Arab - Malayalam also needed restructuring. Muslims were now literate enough to adopt Ezhuthachans' (Father of Malayalam language) standard Malayalam. It was in 1912 that a writer of the Muslim community began writing in regular Malayalam script. The first of these was the work by Sanualla Mukthi Thangal, *Katorakutaram*. However, it took forty more years to produce a creative, literary work depicting complete Muslim life, written in proper Malayalam script. It was Basheer's *Me Granddad'ad an Elephant* (1951). In

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this novel we find the heroine Kunjupathumma echoing the Pantheistic philosophy of the Sufis when she takes pity on the leech that bit her, voicing the sentiment that it might also have parents, wife and children or rescues the pregnant female bird, attacked by its angry consort. Basheer had imbibed the Sufi quest for truth, humanism, universal love and their philosophic wit. In Kunhayin Musaliyar's (A Sufi Poet in Arab - Malayalam) 'The Song of the Ship', human body is conceived as a ship and the sea is a metaphor for life. His song combines the mysterious with the humourous and like Mulla Nasurudheen's witticism, evokes laughter. Basheer also made us laugh like Mulla Nasurudheen. Man's awareness of philosophic laughter and the insignificance of life are the two faces of Sufism.

Basheer wrote:

> In the days of yore, before writing began, in the desert, men set up tents and placing a bowl in front would start relating tales. I am also such a story teller. I do not write in the polished structured language of learned men. I am just a story teller.

Basheer, rejecting the mainstream tradition of Grand Narratives, chose to write in a slightly more compressed manner of Little Narratives. These writings at once countering the mainstream poetics and proving an alternative to it, have now became extinct. Beyond the satirical and humorous in Basheer's writings, is magical realism. It reflects the Sufi narrative style once found in Basra and Bagdad. When the Arabs conquered Spain, they took along with them the magical realism of the Arabian Nights. Salman Rushdie has observed that the magical realism of Latin Amarican writers is of Arab - Spanish origin. In *Me Granddad'ad an Elephant* Basheer begins this narrative tradition. In all of his novels, comparatively small in size and profound in vision, Basheer creates the Sufi world of humour and mysticism.

In a life-time that spanned two world wars and Indian freedom struggle, Basheer 'insouled' the bewilderment, the distress and the anxieties of the Great Depression period. When Basheer was being treated for depression, it was the Sufi music that provided the therapy. Basheer wrote that music was both pain and an antidote for pain. 'This good earth is the abode of all creatures great and small' says Basheer in his story 'The Heirs of the Earth'. Basheer nursed a Mangosteen tree in his courtyard and often rested in its shade. He was aware that spirituality that showed concern for others was the one that united men. Once the communist leader K.C. George gave Basheer money for lunch. He gave it to a starving beggar and went hungry. Basheer's love for his fellowmen

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mirrors Hazarath Nizamuddin's gesture of wandering at night carrying bread loaves in search of starving souls. The hero of the novel, *In the Shadow of Death*, waters the dying plant with the milk he could have quenched his thirst with. A dying man in the story "The Sweet Mango Tree" pours half the glass of water on to a dying sapling. In his famous story 'The Man'(Oru Manushyan) the pick pocket who picks the unfortunate Basheer's pocket is generous enough to return the purse he has picked.

Basheer's Sufi philosophy rejects the superhuman. In 1982, Basheer modified his story "Anal Haq". He regrets Mansur-Al-Hallaj's claim of divinity as false. He abandons the concept of 'Aham Brahmasmi'. Basheer proclaims himself man. This is Basheer's rationale for scorning sanyas:

> When a person embraces sainthood the others have to struggle to feed him. I think this is unfair and the aim of creation is to make men strive. A man has to have a wife, children which are alien to sainthood. In a sense I live a saint's life. I do not covet much?

Basheer has here given a new image to sainthood. When he is asked: 'Are you a mystic?' Basheer answers: I am not a vegetable. I am a man blessed with feeling and reason'.

Even when he was in the throes of mysticism Basheer never lost his sense of the ordinary. Which is why Basheer maintains 'Life is an unending prayer'. When one removes a thorn from the path or waters a dying plant he is paying obeisance to the Almighty. Basheer stays a Sufi, echoing the words 'Time eternal is with the Creator'. In his late forties, seeking a bride for himself, Basheer rewrote the Sufi concept of love for fellow beings.

The spiritually rich images of 'the earth smiling in flowers and bleeding as water' are unique to Basheer in Indian Literature. The pilgrim Basheer who sought an answer to the question "Who erases my footprints?" ends his quest for truth in the realization that a man is too tiny to contain this vast awe-inspiring cosmos. "My unknown friend I can only offer you a question, a question etched with fire. I have tried to erase it. But I can't". Even when Basheer has failed in his quest for truth he remains the Sufi whose questions are kept eternally alive.

Translated from Malayalam by Zahira Rahman

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