UNIT 2 VAIKOM MUHAMMAD BASHEER:
BIRTHDAY
TRANSLATION: THE AUTHOR

Structure

2.0 Objectives
2.1 Introduction
2.2 Vaikom Muhammad Basheer: Life and Works
   2.2.1 Basheer as a Writer
   2.2.2 Major Novels
   2.2.3 Works by Vaikom Muhammad Basheer
2.3 Birthday
   2.3.1 Structure
   2.3.2 The Narrative
   2.3.3 Atmosphere
   2.3.4 Characterization
   2.3.5 Humour, Irony and Contrast
   2.3.6 Meaning
2.4 Let Us Sum Up
2.7 Glossary
2.5 Questions
2.6 Suggested Readings

2.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit is intended to introduce you to a writer considered by many as the greatest Malayalam fiction writer of the 20th century — Vaikom Muhammad Basheer. This is followed by a discussion on Birthday, the short story by Basheer prescribed for your study. When you finish reading this lesson, you would have taken a peek into the life of an idealist writer who was active in our freedom movement and who lived the life of a selfless Sufi, through an autobiographical story in the realist mode. Through this story, you would also be acquainted with the social life in an urban area in Kerala six decades ago. The story is strikingly modern in form and content; except a few details of that era, the story has a contemporary appeal. The aesthetic strength of Basheer’s narrative art becomes manifest to the student through this story.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Malayalam literature and Basheer are inseparable. A discussion on the life of Basheer will serve to encompass major issues of Malayalee fiction and Basheer’s domineering presence, the times he lived through and the works he created. The story Birthday was originally written in Malayalam, and later translated into English by the author himself. Those of you who can read and understand Malayalam can compare the translation with the original and gain
an understanding of the process of transferring the linguistic features of one language to another, and see how the creative space offered by one language can be recreated in another language.


*Birthday*, when subjected to detailed analysis, yields the following elements:

a. **Structure**: The story is made up of different happenings in the span of a single day. The author has made it into an hour-by-hour account.

b. **Atmosphere**: Where and how the story takes place, as described in the narrative using simple words and expressions, leaves us believing that it actually happened.

c. **Characterization**: The story is narrated in the first person singular. The narrator the main character himself and the other characters help in holding together the narrative.

d. **Humour, irony and contrast**: Employed sparingly in the narrative, in the most natural way, these elements etch the story in bold relief against the dark background of the realistic theme.

e. **Meaning**: The human predicament in which idealism and integrity come under constant suffering, is projected through this story.

### 2.2 VAIKOM MUHAMMAD BASHEER: LIFE AND WORKS

Vaikom Muhammad Basheer (1908-1994)

Vaikom Muhammad Basheer hailed from a community which did not produce prominent literary figures. Basheer’s was not a literary upbringing at all. He who wasn’t sure of the rudimentary grammatical elements like ‘subject’ and ‘predicate’ in Malayalam (according to a joke he directed at himself), revolutionized the narrative art in that language. He wrote in the simple spoken language of the ordinary people, or so it seemed. He rather created a
Basheer himself says that there is an uncertainty regarding his date of birth. He believes it to be January 20, 1908. He was the eldest of the six sons and daughters of Kaayi Abdur Rahiman Sahib and Kunjuthaachumma of Thalayolaparambu, near Vaikom town, situated on the north-eastern fringes of the famed Vembanad Backwater of Kerala. After early education in a local school, he attended the Vaikom English School. It was during one of those days that Gandhiji visited Vaikom in connection with the satyagraha that was going on there to establish the right of entry into the famed Vaikom Mahadevar Temple, for the lower caste people including the untouchables. Basheer who hero-worshipped nationalist leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad and others, was overjoyed. He even managed to ‘touch’ Gandhiji from among the jostling crowd, and exclaimed to his mother that evening, “Umma, I touched Gandhiji”. That was the year 1924.

It is this nationalist fervor that made Basheer run away to Calicut (now Kozhikode) — a town really far away for a IX Standard student — to get in contact with Congress workers and active freedom struggle. He had thus plunged headlong into the nationalist movement and had to discontinue his studies. In 1930, he went to Calicut again to participate in the Salt Satyagraha, in the company of the legendary Muhammad Abdurahman and others. He was eventually arrested, mercilessly beaten up in the police lock-up in Calicut and sent to the Cannanore (now Kannur) Central Jail. The torture he suffered at the hands of the police made him mull over the choice of extremism. Thus Basheer had at a very young age woken up to life’s harsh realities. Upon being released after a brief stint of imprisonment, he joined the extremists and began to attack the government through fiery pamphlets. He dumped the Gandhian ahimsa and became an ardent admirer of Bhagat Singh, Chandrasekhar Azad, Rajguru, Sukhdev and others. As he began to write revolutionary pieces in "Ujjevanam", the mouthpiece of the extremists, the police tried to arrest him. More than three years passed thus. Finally he did a vanishing act, dodging the police.

To escape imprisonment, he left Kerala and travelled all over India during the next seven years (1934-41). He moved from place to place and even went as far away as the Gulf countries. Basheer lived many roles during these peregrinations — that of an astrologer, a magician’s assistant, a physician’s apprentice, a tuition teacher, a tea vendor, a khalasi (deck hand) in a ship, a hotel waiter, a cook and several others. He lived a couple of years as the disciple of Hindu sadhus and sufis, leading an ascetic’s life.

Finally he returned home in 1942, when a sports goods factory owner he befriended on one of his journeys, appointed him an agent of his products in Kerala. This brief stint back home too ended, when he met with an accident and was laid up for a long time, losing the agency in the bargain. His acute financial condition led him to write for money.

He wrote stories for the paper Jayakesari. It was in this paper that his first story “Ente Thanikam” (My Thankam) was published between 1937 and 1941. In the midst of the sweetly sentimental Malayalam romantic fiction of those
days, this story stood out for its heroine — a dark, hunchbacked woman. The tenor of Basheer’s writing as a realist was set with this first story.

Basheer, who was deeply into the nationalist movement could not brook the tyranny of Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer, the Dewan of Travancore. Soon, the police began to shadow Basheer yet again. This could be the background of the present story, Birthday which was possibly written around 1942-43. Basheer started a weekly, Pournadam, in which he wrote — besides his protest pieces against the authorities — political and social satire as well. The government banned the weekly and an arrest warrant was issued against him. He went underground. The police resorted to intimidating Basheer’s parents to pressure him into surrendering. Ultimately, he surrendered to the police. He was first kept in the Kasba Police Station lock-up at Quilon (now Kollam), illegally, for a considerable period of time before he was shifted to the Central Prison at Trivandrum (now Thiruvananthapuram). His experiences in this police lock-up are narrated in stories like “Tiger” and “Itiyan Panikker”, which portray the inhuman treatment meted out to prisoners. However, his manner is objective as if it was happening to someone else, and has a deep understanding of human nature. Life in the Trivandrum Central Jail produced his novella, Mathilukal (Walls, 1965) later in life, which the renowned film-maker Adoor Gopalakrishnan made into an award-winning film. The long story with six chapters, Premalekhamam (Love Letter), which he wrote while in prison for the amusement of co-prisoners, looks like a love-story, but is much more than that and far ahead of its time. It is a critique of the communal divide — its hero Keshavan Nair, is an upper caste Hindu and Saramma, the heroine, a Christian, and the child to be born to them when they would get married eventually, would be called ‘Aakaashamithai’ (Heaven’s Sweet), a name Keshavan Nair coins, probably to imply that such a combination is too otherworldly for the existing pragmatic society — and a declaration of the republic of lovers in a mock-heroic vein. Even after more than six decades, that story is as postmodern as any story written in the 21st century.

After his release from jail before the completion of the full term (1943-45), he moved to Trichur, serving the reputed magazine Mangalodam, which was the mouthpiece of the eponymous publishing house which brought out many of Basheer’s books eventually. Here he had as his friend the greatest Malayalam romantic poet of all time, Changampuzha Krishnapillai.

The leading literary critic of the day, M. P. Paul, mentored Basheer, guiding his writing with editorial suggestions and accelerating his creative impetus. Baalyakaalasakhi (Childhood Friend). Basheer’s early masterpiece published in 1944, carried Paul’s uniquely appreciative Foreword. This work of less than 55 pages inaugurated the era of realist fiction in Malayalam. Baalyakaalasakhi is a good example of stark realism. This work launched him into unprecedented fame.

During the period 1947-48, Basheer lived in Madras and worked for the weekly Jayakeralam. He wrote prolifically for this journal. Drawing from his vast and chequered experiences during his wanderings over the years. Basheer wrote stories the likes of which were hitherto unseen in Malayalam literature. Themes varying from the metaphysical, transcendental and at times paranormal experiences, to the desperate lives of the penniless millions were dealt with in his stories. Life in city slums, the loss of individual dignity induced by the social and economic upheaval caused by the Second World War — all these can be seen in the short work Sheelangoil (Voices, 1947).
This work was as brilliant as any post-war fiction born in Europe or America, and was far ahead of its time in Malayalam at least by a decade, in its anti-war content and universal outlook — it was truly a harbinger of modernist writing. The honest treatment of topics like homosexuality and prostitution in this work attracted the charge of obscenity from conservative literary critics who were at best pond-frogs who shut themselves away from the experience of reality in the wide world outside.

Returning to Kerala, he started the Circle Book House in Ernakulam, which he renamed Basheer’s Book Stall. He maintained a column _Nerum Nanayum_ (Truth and Falsehood) in different journals, which discussed everything under the sun. This was later compiled into a book of the same title.

The bookstall was closed down when Basheer had to fight the bouts of insanity that visited him. For six years, from 1953 to 1958, he was treated in an Ayurvedic Mental Clinic in Trichur. He celebrates this experience in his Foreword to _Paattumma’s Goat_.

Once out of his illness, his friends convinced him of the need for getting married and settling down. In 1958 he married Fatima Bi, from Calicut. In 1962, the Basheers left Thalayolapparambu for Beyapore near Calicut, and began living in a house on two acres of land. For the next 32 years of his life, this “Vylalil House” was Basheer’s castle. He was celebrated as the “Sultan of Beyapore” and a fan following slowly gathered around him. He used to sit in the yard, under the shade of his beloved mangoos tree, listening to his favourite Hindustani music, western classics and pop music. This was the Sultan’s way of holding court. The best and the foremost in Kerala’s culture for three decades as well as the commonest of the commoners, (the present writer included), would visit and converse with him, seeking advice, inspiration and blessing. Leading fiction writers like M.T. Vasudevan Nair, N.P. Muhammad and others remained in the inner circle of his younger friends and confidantes.


After a prolonged illness, Basheer breathed his last on 5 July 1994.

### 2.2.1 Basheer as a Writer

Basheer is a writer who lived among innumerable friends from all walks of life. Early in his career, he began with writer-friends such as Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, Ponkunnam Varkey, P.C. Kuttikrishnan (Uroob), Changampuzha Krishnapillai, Joseph Mundassery, S.K. Pottekkat and several others. He wrote during the heyday of other greats like Lalithambika Antharjanam, P. Kesava Dev and the master storyteller Karoor Neelakanta Pillai, all of whom were realists. Progressive writing, which found its votaries in Malayalam along with other Indian literatures in the early 1930s, inspired Basheer too. But the ‘committed writer’ of the socialist-realist mode of the later decades was anathema to him. While the others idealized the
underprivileged and championed their cause. Basheer wrote about poverty and the travails of the underdog; in doing so, he was writing about himself, and from first-hand experience. The present story Birthday is one such. In his sole play Kathaaveeian (The Seed of a Story, 1945) and in his Preface to Vishappu (Hunger, 1954) and in countless other stories he wrote, the recurring theme is the acute penury he suffered. One can see a sufi in the making, in Basheer’s self-abnegation and resignation to his own plight.

Basheer epitomized the new Malayalam writer in the making. As against the traditionalist, who was a product of the feudal ethos in which life was an extended leisure, like that of a drone bee drawing on the labour of others and indulging in pleasures; as against the modernist, who wrote about the disillusionment induced by the breakdown of the social fabric; and the socialist realist, who dealt with an utopia where all were equal; 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. Basheer was fortunate enough to begin with no model to work on either by way of language and style or tradition — he could thus create a language and style of his own and rise to world-class. Almost all later major Malayalam fiction-writers who are remembered for their pan-Indian vision, like Kovilan, O.V. Vijayan, Kakkanadan, M. Mukundan, M.P. Narayana Pillai, Anand, Paul Zacharia, N.S. Madhavan and others, owe a great deal to Basheer as the earliest role model.

Basheer’s humour and satire, more often than not, directed at himself, was the most potent weapon the author used to shake up the individual ego, leading readers to introspection. Facing life’s tragedies clad in the armour of humour was his way. Many of the above-quoted writers too, followed this path.

Basheer was a strong advocate of women’s rights. In his novel Niyuppappakkoraamentaarnnu (Me Grandad ‘Ad An Elephant), we see the prototype of the modern-day feminist in the character of Ayisha, the sister of the idealist Nisar Ahmed. In fact, it was Ayisha who acted as the conscience-keeper of Nisar and indirectly directed his ‘reform’ activities. In almost all his later stories, Basheer would invariably come around to mention virtues of the ‘Kosraakkoll’ — the endearing term he coined for the woman who is loving, intelligent, independent and maintains integrity and dignity.

His unique sense of sibling-relationship with all of God’s creation gave rise to a rare concept of compassion. He would always invoke in all his stories, either in the beginning or in the end, ‘Allah the Most Compassionate’, and dwell on all creations — the honeybee, the cat, the crow, the cobra, the jackal and even amoeba and bacteria as his brothers and sisters. Stories like his “Bhoomiyude Avakasikal” (The Heirs of the Earth) are best samples of ecological fiction. His essay, “Nammude Bhoogolam Marichukondirikkukayanaanu” (Our Planet is Dying) in the collection Ormayude Arakal, reveals his concerns of ecodegradation.

Though a prolific writer, after 1962, his output began to taper off. None the less, he kept bringing out occasional pieces and collections at greater intervals in between recurrences of insanity and steadily failing physical health. His most important works, however, still remain Baaliyakoodasakki (“Childhood Friend”), Niyuppappakkoraamentaarnnu (Me Grandad ‘Ad An Elephant) and Paattummaayude Aathi (“Paattumma’s Goat”). All three have been translated by Ronald E. Asher with Aachamma Coilparambil Chandersekaran and
brought out under the title "Me Grandad 'Ad An Elephant": Three Stories of Muslim Life in South India" by Edinburgh University Press in 1980 under the UNESCO’s Indian Series. The blurb reads:

“There are not so many living writers with something new to say that we can ignore any on grounds of language. Vaikom Muhammad Basheer writers in Malayalam, a language of South India, but what he writes transcends linguistic barriers. This first English translation of three of his stories introduces a writer of great originality, charm, and fun to the English-speaking world”.

Asher, a Scotsman, besides being a linguist of international renown, is an enthusiastic translator from the South Indian Languages. He is something of a crusader in his service to Tamil and Malayalam language and literature, and his tenacity and perseverance brought some of the best Malayalam works of fiction, notably of Basheer and Thakazhi, into national and international attention.

2.2.2 Major Novels

Given below are brief introductions to the three novels. All quotes are from Asher’s translation.

i. Childhood Friend: This is a very slim volume of less than 55 pages published in 1944. Even now this book remains one of the best-loved novels in Malayalam. Basheer began writing it in English during his wanderings. That fragment in English was the basis for the Malayalam book. Basheer has said that if the completed manuscript were to be published as it was, it would run into more than 500 pages! This is a very revealing statement. We subsequently learn that this manuscript was subjected to constant revision and chiselling for over five years and is reduced to more than one-sixth of its original length. This is the secret of Basheer’s art. Basheer himself has revealed that more than ninety-five percent of it is autobiographical. And this is his first major work. A lesser mortal would have certainly hurried it through publication, especially after getting cent percent endorsement from the greatest of the literary critics of the times — M. P. Paul. But Basheer would not do that. He waited patiently till he was satisfied with the work. And this work rightly got the highest critical acclaim. M. P. Paul wrote: “Childhood Friend is a page torn out from life. Blood oozes from its edges. Some feel acute phobia and revulsion when seeing warm blood. They may even faint. Such people should read this book cautiously...”. Paul’s swipe was at the academic critics of those times who clung to age-old canons and suppressed any genuine creative voice. Basheer had to put up with such critics throughout his life — critics who would not base their criticism on the work, but on the religion, caste or community of the writer.

Childhood Friend is uncommonly beautiful and pure. It is not stained by carnal love or any material consideration of its protagonists. Its beauty consists in its incandescent expressiveness. The hero’s love for the heroine is unwavering throughout — both when she is a pretty
young girl and when she has lost all her charm and has turned into a skeleton-like apparition. Majid and Suhra are capable of only love. Poverty, the real villain of the piece, strikes down both the hero and the heroine. Reflects Majid: “Poverty is a dreadful disease. It destroys the body, the mind and the soul” (31). The state of Majid’s mind after he gets to know about Suhra’s death, through his mother’s letter, is described below:

For a while Majid was stunned.
It was as if all had become silent.
The world was full of emptiness.
No! Nothing had happened to the world. The hubbub in the town was still there.
The sun was shining. The wind was blowing. It was just that Majid was soaked in perspiration that had come out through all the pores of his skin. There was no help left. Had life then lost its meaning?
Majid began once again to wash the dishes and stack them carefully. Where would his parents and his sisters go?
Suhra!

(49)

Realism of the rarest kind is witnessed here. This pure flame blazed forth, at a time when all sorts of twisting and turning plots, placing heroes and villains in out-of-the-world situations seriously compromised the art of realist fiction in Malayalam. Or committed literature failed to look at humankind as a whole. What this little book established in Malayalam literature is not surpassed till date. Childhood Friend established Basheer firmly as a great writer.

ii. ‘Me Grandad ‘Ad an Elephant!’ is a work based more on imagination than historical facts. This is the work Basheer employed to put in reformist content for the uplift of the Muslim community. This novel contains basic information even for the lay reader about true Islam and the Islam professed by narrow-minded, ignorant adherents; what Islam really means and what negative potential it has in the hands of bigoted practitioners. Basheer says that the Grandad’s elephant stands for the past glory and the present gloom of the Muslim community. Vanity, ignorance, and intolerance are on Basheer’s hit-list in this work. As a refreshing change from the poignant tragedy of Childhood Friend, this novel is a hilarious comedy with a strong lyrical content. No one can help feeling the fondest love for the heroine, Kunjupattuma. Though the characters of Nisar Ahmed and Ayisha occasionally turn into mouthpieces for reform propaganda, this can be overlooked against their counterparts, Vattanadima and Kunjutaachumma, who are the real autobiographical characters inhabiting Basheer’s novel. This one single work is perhaps the most successful novel in Malayalam, having sold over one hundred thousand copies.

iii. Pattumma’s Goat: This particular Basheer novel is unlike all others in many respects. First, this is the only one of his works that has not been revised at all after the first draft was over. It is entirely autobiographical, as far as the characters are concerned. Fiction enters the scene only in the action. Then it has got the seemingly dubious distinction of getting written in a mental asylum. Basheer wrote this rare masterpiece while under the ministrations of the Ayurvedic physician specialising in mental diseases, Sri P. C. Govindan Nair, in
his Vallappuzha Nursing Home, near Trichur, recuperating from a bout of madness. Articulating all these facts and especially what he felt as his sanity, was ebbing away, he has left a rare record for posterity in his "Introduction" to *Pattumma's Goat*:

I completed the story *Pattumma's Goat* on 27th April 1954. I thought I would copy it out and publish it with an introduction. Days passed by as I kept it off till tomorrow.

Five years!

Yes...at that time my mind...like a tiny island that is starting to sink into a bottomless ocean ...I don't know whether that makes any sense or not. Anyway the mind gets drowned in darkness filled with frightful dreams. I myself am the mind. When I look up there is only a small patch of light ... Oh God! Where am I? What is true? What is false? Light!...Light....I want only light. But, ... darkness filled with terrible dreams ... is approaching from all the eight directions, roaring and booming.

Will I drown in this forever?

Don't lose your reason; find out the cause. Everything has a cause. Courage...courage to try to find out. Superstition is comfortable. If you take refuge in that...! This is nothing like that. All the beliefs you now have — from childhood...from days gone by ... from before history began — analyse them all, and accept only what is good. Evil is a sickness. If you treat it, you can cure it. There is no sickness that you cannot cure. If you think there is one, it is through ignorance; never make ignorance a permanent abode.

What happened? Hopeless heartache. Talking incoherently. That's how I came under the treatment of P.C. Govindan Nair....

***

It was during this period of treatment that I wrote the story....

(124-131)

R. E. Asher considers Basheer a "literary figure who stands apart from his contemporaries". He also feels that the three novels presented in the book "are very different, having in common little more than their Kerala Muslim setting". Citing statements of Basheer in a volume of reminiscences, Asher further clarifies that Basheer has made a conscious attempt in the course of his literary career to produce an Islamic literature in Malayalam. Whatever Asher means by Islamic literature, and the way Basheer is supposed to have consciously gone about creating one, are open to discussion. We can safely assume that Asher only meant well by raising this somewhat ambiguous issue, because earlier in the Introduction he characterizes Kerala Muslims as unique, and remarks, citing a 16th century historian, that they had peacefully settled in Kerala as early as during the lifetime of Prophet Muhammad, by virtue of the conversion of Cheraman Perumal, a good five hundred years before the first
Islamic conquests took place in northern India! He also highlights Basheer’s efforts at reforming the Muslims through enlightening them. Now Asher makes a very interesting statement, which indirectly points to one of the possible motives in translating Basheer. He says that Basheer’s writing being Islamic literature does not mean that it “will hold no attraction for non-Muslims. It is part of the appeal of his work that what is to most of us a rather exotic background helps rather than hinders our appreciation of the universality of the emotions he depicts”. It is a fair enough statement, albeit quite revealing. The “most of us” Asher mentions is the target audience, ( westerners, to be precise) and the “exotic appeal of Muslim life in South India” has been, among many other considerations, one of the most compelling, that led Asher to choose the three novels of Basheer for translation into English as a single volume, in the Unesco Indian series. Achamma Coilparamil Chandersekar, about whom biographical details are missing in the volume referred to, is the co-translator. It has to be surmised that her role would have been mostly to advise Asher specially on culture-specific points, as no mention is seen made about her role in the translation process.

As in the case of Thakazhy’s Chemmeen, recently acquired insights into post-colonial translation provide us new vantage points from which we can now have glimpses into some hitherto unnoticed aspects of the present translation of Basheer’s works. However, all said and done, one has to concede that this translation of Basheer’s works stands out as possibly the most original, undiluted and balanced of all translations of modern Malayalam fiction into English in the twentieth century. And this is the most faithful translation the present writer has come across so far. The translators do not suffer from an anxiety to explain Basheer to the West and paraphrase his works in the guise of translation, unlike Dumergue did with O. Chandu Menon’s Indulekha or more conspicuously, B. K. Menon did with C. V. Raman Pillai’s Martiaandavarma. Neither did they attempt at selective editing of the originals, pruning them to make them “presentable” to the West, like Narayana Menon did with Chemmeen. In short, Asher and his co-translator have consciously resisted the temptation to appropriate the works for western readers.

To end this section about the author, it may be safely reiterated that Vaikom Muhammad Basheer is synonymous with the heights of perfection that Malayalam literature has achieved in the twentieth century. At a time when literature was confined to certain sections of society and academic circles, he took it out to the open world and adjudicated with words in his own right. The realism he experimented with was not the Socialist Realism of the early Thakazhi or Kesava Dev. Neither was he under the sway of the Progressives. His realism was tempered by his own personal experiences, acquired over long years of travel among the masses of India and its neighbouring countries, doing all kinds of jobs that enabled him to mix with people of different strata of society. He believed that while recording everything realistically, the good points had to be given emphasis and the reader should be imbued with an affirmation of life. Hope and despair, ecstasy and disillusionment, privation and plenty, comforts and hardships he experienced at first hand, like the paradox of the extreme heat and cold of the climatic conditions prevalent in the northern regions of our country. He was educated at the University of the World; his teacher and mentor was none other than the Creator of the Universe. Basheer would never acknowledge any influence of world writers in his creative writing. Says Asher:
It is a common pursuit in certain critical circles to seek western influence in Asian prose fiction, as if a novel or short story written by anyone other than a European or an American must necessarily be derivative. It is true, admittedly, that some of Kerala’s most original writers acknowledge their debt to Zola, Maupassant, Chekov, and others. Basheer, however, is conscious of no such influence and it will be a fruitless task to try and find one. In fact, there is in all respects no neat way of pigeon-holing his writings. (pix)

As Asher rightly pointed out, categorizing his works is difficult. Even placing it in literary history as belonging to particular movements is tricky. For example, his story Premalekhanam (“The Love Letter”) published in 1943, which is already referred to, defies time. It can easily be classified as postmodern by any definition. If a person who has not heard of Basheer and his works reads it now, he/she would certainly take him for the latest of the avant garde of the present. Except for the internal evidence like references to outdated coins like “annas”, it is impossible to date this story. Genre-wise too, Basheer’s works defy definition. The question whether it is autobiography, fiction, novel, novelette, novella or short story, travelogue or none of these, that Basheer wrote, has been debated threadbare by the academic circles in Malayalam. Although some very short stories can be termed as “short-story”, most of the longer stories resist classification. However, the above three stories are termed ‘novels’ for conveniences sake. For the rest, in the table provided below of Basheer’s works, long works have been merely marked as ‘long story’.

As we have already seen, he created his own inimitable language and style. What he wanted to communicate, he did in a very intimate, conversational language that appeared deceptively simple. But to arrive at that way of expression, Basheer would chisel and prune his works repeatedly over a long period. To cut out or replace a word that he wrote would snap the spell; such is the magic he weaves with words. No one before or after could accomplish what Basheer did with language.

No wonder then, many celebrated Malayalam fiction writers, like M. T. Vasudevan Nair and Paul Zacharia, would acknowledge their indebtedness to the inspiration Basheer generated, in pursuing their craft.

2.2.3 Works by Vaikom Muhammad Basheer

In Malayalam

1. Premalekhanam (Love Letter)- Long Story 1943
2. Balyakaadalasakhi (Childhood Friend)-Novel 1944
3. Kathaabeetram (The Seed of a Story)-Play 1945
4. Janmadinam (Birthday)-Collection of Stories 1945
5. Ornakurippu (Memoirs)-Collection of Stories 1946
6. Anarghanimisham (The Precious Moment)-Collection of Stories 1946
7. Shabdangal (Voices) Long Story 1947
8. Viddhikaiude Swargam (Fools’ Paradise) Collection of Stories 1948
2.3 BIRTHDAY

2.3.1 Structure

So, here is the story. Can you figure out what this story is about? Who is the narrator of this story? The story is in the form of diary entries by the hour, in
the span of a single day, about the happenings in the life of the author on a birthday of his. He sits down around midnight and records the events of the day right from the moment he gets up in the morning. The narrator interrupts the flow of narration on the second page, using brackets, to inform the reader that he is writing his diary at the end of the day, around midnight, implying that the story encompasses all the happenings of the day. What would be the advantage of adopting this diary form in writing the story? The story begins with an introductory section and goes on into the diary form, in flashbacks. Basheer's style is mostly the autobiographic mode — as if writing about himself. Most of the stories would contain a very high percentage of autobiographical elements, going by Basheer's own admission, which render a distinction between fact and fiction almost impossible. Written in a seemingly simple style using everyday, conversational language, the story goes straight to the heart of the reader without encountering even the semblance of a barrier put up by language.

2.3.2 The Narrative

Almost all of Basheer's stories are written in the first personal singular, autobiographical mode, making the author the speaking subject. This is a device that brings in total immediacy to the narrative. The reader is invited, to share the inner workings of the intellectual and emotional world of the author. Or is it? There, of course, is a difference. Like the difference between a live individual and that individual’s portrait or photograph. The outer features of the body get imprinted on a photograph, or are copied by a master portrait painter. But that is all. The real person who lives from moment to moment is nowhere near the portrait or photograph. So too, a story modelled on the inner workings of a person’s psyche need not be the true picture of the person's personality, or how that person lives every moment. What can be accurate to a certain degree is the portrayal of experiences of the past. There too, all need not be said. A lot of self-editing goes into it, before it is put down on paper. In other words, only those details that make up the virtual reality of a story will be culled from the person’s memory of his own actions and thoughts, to be used in the making of the story. Therefore, the first person singular narrator and the author of the story as an individual person, are two different entities. However, the controlled tone of the narrative of this story is reflective of the austere, disciplined life of the author induced by penury. Starkness is the hallmark of the story.

2.3.3 Atmosphere

The atmosphere that pervades the story is that of the penury that the author is undergoing, in a very trying time of his life — when he is under surveillance for alleged treason. The callousness with which a shopkeeper — a phoney writer who uses Basheer as his ghost-writer — doesn't even invite the author to share a cup of tea; the innate goodness of a child-labourer who empties his month’s savings, two annas, in front of the author so that he may eat something; an idealist youth — a disciple of the author — who devours a major share of that pitiful loan; the casualness with which an affluent young friend reneges on his promise to treat the penniless author by serving him lunch on his birthday, forgetting that he had invited him to his house and leaving station without informing him; and returning on an empty-stomach late in the evening, the author confronting the celebrations of the merry young
rich: these are the salient features that conjure up the atmosphere of the story. Darkening it further are the unscrupulous and rapacious landlord constantly after Basheer’s life for rent arrears, the hotel-keeper who refuses to give him food for non-clearance of past dues, the undercover agent shadowing Basheer and the haughty Deputy Police Commissioner’s interrogation of him. The theme of the author’s all-consuming hunger fills the story like evening mist. Apart from the boy’s magnanimity and the youth’s idealistic zeal, the silver lining consists also in the author’s success in restraining himself from indulging in lust, resisting a refugee woman’s inviting gestures and, on another occasion, in dreaming of man’s liberation from the chains that tie him down.

2.3.4 Characterization

The main character in the story is the narrator/protagonist. The delineation of the inner workings of his mind, the thought processes and reflections, make up the story. The narrator is a much suffered, widely travelled young man who does not seek to achieve anything apart from the chance to write from the core of his soul. His stoic suffering and uncompromising idealism appear to inspire the younger generation, though the powers that be and vested interests are not at all mindful of his existence. The pathetic plight the author has been plunged into, without even being able to eat a full meal on his birthday, the oppression from all around — by the state, by the benumbing materialism that surrounds him, by the insensitivity of harmless, ordinary individuals that affects him adversely — the tragedy of being alive in a society which appropriates excellence without paying for it, the drudgery of living from moment to moment on the one hand and the corrosive self-denial on the other — all this serve to polish the author’s character to a rare sheen. He is a patriotic Indian who has friends in all corners of the country; the mere memory of them is enough to ward off the difficulties he faces in real life, in the present. Thinking positively, giving emphasis to goodness in life even in the face of evil, being optimistic even in the most adverse situations — all this sets the character of the protagonist apart.

The young student Matthew is portrayed as a flamboyant, rich scion of a typical Christian family, who has been privileged to have his own suite of rooms in the city to enable him to attend college. He is a good-natured boy, but like most of his class, cannot even imagine the sufferings of the poor and the needy. He is generous in his own way, and the author depends on his magnanimity for an occasional loan.

The characters of the landlord and the hotel-keeper have been dwelt on in the ‘atmosphere’ section. There is not much to add to these stereotypes.

Mr. P., the former editor and phony writer turned shopkeeper, is an interesting character. He ridicules the author for his advocacy of revolution; he pretends to be hurt that the author doesn’t give him copies of his new books and cunningly angles for the author’s continued support of his literary efforts; yet he isn’t ready even to offer him a cup of tea.

Gangadhar, the political leader, is an idealistic young man, though equally penniless. It is the optimism of the likes of him, and the readiness to fight the evils of society that inspire the author to live on. The author shares with him half of the amount he took as loan from the servant boy, in appreciation of the young leader’s human qualities.
2.3.5 Humour, Irony and Contrast

Basheer brings poignancy to the story by the use of these elements.

The first instance in which humour appears is when Basheer indulges in typical self-mocking: “I’m the only person whom the landlord does not want. The reason is that I do not pay rent regularly. There are two other parties who do not like me; the hotel-keeper and the Government. I do owe some money to the hotel-keeper, but I owe the Government nothing. Still, the Government cannot bear my sight. I have spoken of my residence, food and country; now I have to speak about my clothes, shoes and my lamp…” Elaborating on his outward appearance further ahead in the story, Basheer describes how he has borrowed his dresses, shoes, and other personal effects from friends and keeps up the appearance of being a ‘gentleman’, while in actual fact he is a pauper. He is cultured, good-looking and carries the bearing of a ‘somebody’, and others address him ‘sir’. Two boys hawking some domestic ware are scandalized when the author is compelled to reveal to them that he has no money. A young woman, a refugee from some other state, who comes to the author’s room and tries to entice him into dalliance presumably for monetary considerations, also gets the shock of her life when she is bluntly told of the real poverty around him.

The sequence with P, the editor turned shopkeeper, is laced with subtle irony. An eloquent statement of the real nature of many of the so-called intellectuals of the day is made possible through the person of P.

The paradox of having to share with Gangadhar, the idealistic youth leader, half of the loan of two annas the author took from the lowly servant boy to eat a square meal, is driven home to the reader. How truly selfless public servants and volunteers of the nationalist movement were surviving pre-independent India is revealingly portrayed through a few deft strokes.

Birthday is not a story that carries the hilarious humour of the later Basheer; it is a grim, razor’s edge kind of story which is redeemed by stray strokes of humour.

2.3.6 Meaning

What is this story about? This is about an individual who cannot compromise with society and the state in diluting human qualities and ideals. This story takes place probably around 1942-43. The narrator who is a freedom fighter, a revolutionary and a creative artist of very high achievements, finds it difficult to eat a square meal even on his birthday. Not only that; on that particular day, he is preyed upon by the landlord and the hotel-keeper for defaulting payments. He is let down by a friend who has promised him lunch. He is not even offered tea by his acquaintance who goes on drinking tea in front of him. He is harassed by the C.I.D. and the Deputy Police Commissioner. Yet his incurable optimism buoys up the author. He is inspired by the innate goodness of the servant boy who loans him two annas, and the innocent idealism and principled zeal of the youth leader Gangadhar. The narrator looks at the picture of a man standing erect against the backdrop of a city filled with skyscrapers in the horizon; though he is bound down to the earth by chains, but he is looking up in hope, even in an apparently hopeless condition. The
caption of the picture runs: "Although bound to the earth by chains, he looks beyond time and space to the splendid progress to come". This seems to be the message of the story.

This story is an example of stark realism, and its tone is set as such from the very opening, as the protagonist unravels the details of a day's happenings in the confessional mode. The turn at the end of the story is wrought by the contrast of the highly idealist hero going to sleep on an empty stomach on his birthday, when the mediocre, middle-class people who are going about minding their petty selfish lives, gather together making merry, smoking cigarettes. The poignancy the reader feels at the end, stings like cigarette smoke in the eye. The accomplishment of the narrator is brought home to the reader, who would certainly be heaving a deep sigh of sympathy.

2.4 LET US SUM UP

This story is typical of the early Basheer, the idealist who was at odds with a society full of vested interests and selfishness. The suffering of deprivation and hunger that the protagonist undergoes is symbolic of the travails a pure soul who is not prepared to compromise with status quo must face in a world dominated by crass pragmatism and deceit. Vicissitudes of life do not harden him; they only tend to make him more aware of the human condition. We see the image of a yogi or fakir given to self-abnegation in the persona of the author.

The delineation of the character of the main protagonist is marvellously accomplished using sparse touches. The image of an upright individual who is undaunted by suffering and who prevails against all odds, yet experiences everything through a high level of sensitivity, without turning his face away from life, is vividly portrayed by the author in this story.

2.6 GLOSSARY

Makaram: a month of the Malayalam Era, from mid-January to mid-February.

Anna: a coin, now obsolete, the equivalent of 1/16th of a rupee.

Mundu: a long cloth wrapped around the lower torso by men and women alike, of all communities in Kerala, until a few decades ago; even now prevalent mostly among the older population.

Umma: the kinship term 'Mother' used by the Muslim community; used as term of address too.

C.I.D.: Crime Investigation Department of the police; the secret police.
Dosai: a particularly South Indian eatable made with leavened rice flour.

Pappad: a light, crunchy item taken usually along with a main meal, and occasionally as a snack.

Bidi: local version of cigarette, made of dried tobacco shavings rolled in a specially cut leaf.

2.5 QUESTIONS

1. Basheer comes through as an advocate of optimism in the face of adversities all around, in this story. Elaborate

2. Use of subtle irony and contrast enliven an otherwise grim narrative. Substantiate with illustrations from the story.

3. Trace the character of the protagonist.

4. What are the adversities the protagonist has to undergo in the span of a single day, on his birthday?

5. Bring out the silver lining in the story.

6. Birthday is typical of the stark realism the early Basheer practiced. Substantiate.

2.7 SUGGESTED READINGS


