



Vaikom Muhammad Basheer: The zen master under the mangosteen tree

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Abstract

This study probes into the relevance of the teachings of Zen Buddhism in Vaikom Muhammad Basheer's Writings. It travels through the tenets of Zen Buddhism that discusses nature, music, humour, love and how its reflections are found in the Basheerian world. *Inheritors of the Earth*, *Me Grandad 'ad an Elephant* and *Premalekhanam* are the chief texts dealt in this paper. A reader of Basheer could easily trace a Zen Buddhist in his characters and in his works. Basheer was a man of love and compassion. He was very much interested in the problems affecting his fellow beings. His love and kindness were not limited to human beings. Like Zen Buddhists, Basheer also rejected polarization. The conflicts and contradictions in his stories are the fountain heads of his humour. Zen stories are usually in the question answer format. Basheer too, in his stories asks so many questions and attempts to find answers. Like a true Zen Buddhist, Basheer pursued the essence of life along the means of humour, music and love.

Keywords: vaikom muhammed basheer, Indian literature, zen buddhism, nature, humour, music, love, tea ceremony

Introduction

Vaikom Muhammed Basheer is often considered as one of the makers of Modern Indian Literature. The celebrated Basheerian style is famous for humour, simplicity and reality. His short stories are simple, yet powerful in its contents. The name "Basheer" means "Harbinger" in Arabic. He was a real harbinger of the modern world. He introduced the style of using colloquial language in fiction. His works embarked the evolution of social realism in literature. Most of his works were autobiographical and based on true incidents that happened in his life. With a tint of humour he dealt with social problems and the paraphernalia of mankind.

Apart from all these titles Basheer is a great philosopher; a philosopher of life. His works throw light on various subjects including love of Nature and the Love of Mankind. It would rather allow him to be called as a Zen Buddhist. A visitor could locate Basheer seated on an arm chair under the mangosteen tree with closed eyes, in a meditative mood, lost in the song from the Gramophone. A flask full of black tea (Sulaimani) was also there. People from all walks of life could enter there. He used to welcome them all. He considered everybody alike. A person who was totally depressed or desolated could attain happiness from there. This image could be compared to the Tea Ceremony of Zen Buddhists. In the Tea ceremony, visitors could enter into a calm and serene place which is called as the spirit of eternal loneliness (viviktha dharma). The Tea ceremony symbolizes simplicity, naturalness, refinement and freedom. The Tea room is set in one of the Zen Temples attached to Daitokuji which is the headquarters of the Tea ceremony. The atmosphere is thrilling because of the fragrance from natural flowers and the incense burners and the soft music produced by a stream nearby. Four or five visitors could come at a time and they are invited to sip a cup of tea in order to overcome the worldly foes that may be worrying them. This whole ceremony is taking place under the

guidance of a veteran Zen Buddhist. Basheer was not at all interested in serious, profound discussions. He loved casual talks dealing with the problems of man.

A reader of Basheer could easily trace a Zen Buddhist in his character and in his works. Basheer was a man of love and compassion. He was very much interested in the problems affecting his fellow beings. His love and kindness were not limited to human beings. He considered each speck of this world as valuable and addressed them as the inheritors of Earth. He did not hate or hide anything. His life was an open book. He wrote from his life experiences. He never wanted to classify human beings in black and white terms. Like Zen Buddhists, Basheer also reject polarization. There is no difference between the en-soi and the pour-soi. Western people believed in conflicts. But Eastern thinkers and writers rejected the notion of conflicts in life. The writer and the man in Basheer was not ready to classify people as good or bad. His kind heart did not allow him to differentiate a thief and a priest. Once there was a thief who addressed him as Usthad! The burglar used to visit Basheer for his blessings. In return Basheer would present him a one rupee coin and bless him 'Happy Burglary'. Only a Zen Buddhist could give reminder to the world that Burglar too was a human being. To Basheer even a sex worker or a killer was an embodiment of the good and bad qualities of human beings. He used to visualize a silver lining of virtue in every cloud of malice.

In his famous work "*The Inheritors of the Earth*" (*Bhoomiyude Avakashikal*), Basheer reiterates the concept of heterogeneity in this world. The universe is a Noah's Arc for all creatures in this world. Human beings are not very much special. Earth is a retreat for ants, snakes, lizards, termites, birds, bats, worms just like man. This philosophy goes hand in hand with the tenets of Zen Buddhism. The world is not Man made. Instead man is a part of the Nature. The problems of Men are the problems of Nature. All things Man-made must

be considered Nature-made and not created by Man. Man has no right to infringe his ways upon Nature. Man-created things are artificial, polished and short living. But Nature is rude, innocent, childish, real and long lasting. The word 'environment' is termed as 'kyogai' in Zen Buddhism. It comes from the Sanskrit word 'gocara' or 'vishaya' which means realm or field where any action may take place. Zen masters are totally identified with Nature. Basheer's main characters have the same approach to Nature and fellow beings. In his much discussed work '*me grandad 'ad an elephant' (Ntuppuppakkoranendarnnu)*, the heroine Kunjupathumma was not ready to kill the leach which drank her blood:

She was angry and revolted. She wanted to swear at it. But she couldn't. The leach's parents would not be able to bear its death. It was, after all, a creature of Allah's. Kunjupathumma was also a creature of Allah's. Killing the leach would be a sin. (Me Grandad 'ad an Elephant)

Basheer's characters usually have the habit of conversing with trees, birds and animals. They are interested in small, beautiful things of Nature. In *Walls*, the hero is seen talking to a squirrel in the jail compound. Basheer is always surprised by the unmatched grace and beauty of nature. The vastness of the desert and the pool of moonlight are never ending visions for him. There are beautiful discussions in *Walls* which adds the wonder and awe:

I remembered that beautiful evening. A tiny hamlet. After that, miles and miles of undulating desert, rising swirls of sand, the departing day spread out on the vast expanse of the horizon. I think I must have walked almost a mile. All around me, like a silky carpet, the desert. I was all alone, at the centre of the Universe. In the sky, a clear full moon. I thought I could just reach out and touch it. (Walls)

Basheer is seen as a Zen Buddhist, who recognizes the endlessness of the universe and solitude as a micro element in it—a place in which he has to coexist with animals, trees, rocks and birds as equals. In his imaginary world small creatures in the world, like human beings appear as characters.

Basheer was a man of simplicity. He wished to dress light. He loved to be seen in his Mundu. He never wanted to be a show piece to his visitors and well-wishers. He always weighed life as something compared to the texture of his favourite drink called 'sulaimani'. Though it is black in colour, it is sweet and tasty. He would like to be called as a story teller than a writer. Most of his works were written in the spoken form. He never used ornamental words. Instead he coined some beautiful expressions getting inspired from common man's life. Basheer was not ready to talk about kings or vast empires. He was fond of talking about prisoners (Walls), soldiers (Voices), mahouts (Me Grandad 'ad an Elephant) etc.

Like Zen Masters, he loved laughter. Basheer is one of the most victorious humorists in Indian literature. Throughout his stories he placed humour in right proportions. *Premalekhanam (The Love Letter)* is a good example of genuine humour. Saramma, the heroine delivers the universal comment: Humour is the fragrance of life. Love is wasted without Humour. Subjects of humour ranging from vanity, arrogance,

foolishness, ignorance and absurdities enrich his characters and works. Nothing is very special to Basheer: the state, love, family ties; Life itself is a big joke to him. He was against the so called 'civilisation' of the society. He found a burglar as an intellectual and a pick pocket as an artist. According to him Laughter and Tragedy are the two sides of the same coin.

The conflicts and contradictions in his stories are the fountain heads of his humour. Basheer created some funny words to enhance the effect of humour like lodukkose, kushaandan, hunthappi busatto etc. Drama and Irony plays a vital role in his humorous stories. Here is Basheer's portrayal of a Village Man:

Muzhayam Nanu is the chief intellectual of the place. He is seldom seen in public. He is a distinguished researcher, a news analyst, a political thinker, a legal expert. In short a man of wisdom, a true visionary! His bald head is crammed with brains. The ball of flesh you see on his temple contains the most specialized part of his brain which is used to process the most complicated information that is received.

Basheer's humour evolves from the understanding of the futility and absurdity of life. There is no Zen Buddhism without humour. There is no Basheer without humour either.

Conclusion

Zen stories are usually in the question answer format. Basheer too, in his stories asks so many questions and attempts to find answers. His was the saga of wanderer, perhaps, carrying with him the package of his sorrowful solitude, avoiding meaningless human relationships. Most of his central characters dissolve themselves in sacrifice and suffering for the virtue of others. Basheer was a writer who only wanted the well beings of others. In his stories, he frequently uses the words '*mangalam*' (best wishes) and '*shubham*' (a happy ending) to emphasize his attitude towards universal brotherhood. Like a true Zen Buddhist, Basheer pursued the essence of life along the means of humour, music and love.

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