

Construction Of Women Characters In V.M. Basheer's Selected Novels – A Feminist Perspective

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Abstract:

The dissensions for gender equality have been persisting since generations, advocating and publicizing western feminism and its theories, Indian feminist writers endeavoured their best to propose some modifications in the mindset of the people. V.M. Basheer was one of the prominent Malayalam novelists who pioneered writings with a focus on women issues. Among the feminist writers in Kerala it was Basheer who depicted women characters in his fiction on equal footing with men. His women characters are highly divergent in nature owing to varied unexplored themes that he portrayed in his novels. Before Basheer's writing, feminist ideas had crept in India through the contemplations of some feminist activists like Muddupalani through his poem in Telugu Radhika Santhwanam, Tarabai Shinde through her essay—Sthri-Purush Tulana and through Tagore's novel – Damini. Basheer's women characters in contrast to that of his contemporaries like Thakazhi, Lalithambika Antharjanam, O. Vijayan, Mukundan etc. were portrayed as extremely independent and outspoken. This was considered unusual for any stratum of the society at that moment in history. This paper makes an attempt to hypothesise that Basheer's idea of feminism parallels with the views of one of the eminent English feminist Mary Wollstonecraft who was the pioneer to demand equal rights for women in a patriarchal society. According to Wollstonecraft women should not be considered weaker or inferior to men. She further insisted that women must be treated as equal to men since they play a pivotal role in the society like upbringing of children. She believes that gender roles are not natural but social. Aforementioned ideas have been reflected in Basheer's selected novels. This paper presents a thematic and theoretical analysis of women's characters in the selected novels of Basheer.

Key words: Feminism, patriarchy, conservatism, realism, progressivism

INTRODUCTION:

The women who were subservient to marital status and bonded with patriarchal system since centuries, started awakening globally during the progress of feminist activities. There after it was their tremendous change in the political, cultural, educational and economical field especially in the western region. So many propositions have been derived out by feminists of the time and administered it smoothly for getting the right stand for women in the society. To a great extent, it was successful in some particular areas of western region. Still majority of womenfolk experiences suppression from patriarchal system worldwide.

In India, almost each and every family experiences the same issue aforementioned. Only very few percentage of them are out of this court. Since decades,

Indian feminists try their level best to make some differences towards achieving gender equivalence as well as making the patriarchal efforts null. Many educationists put forth their endeavour to lay hindrance or curbing violence towards women rendering awareness in the public employing their literature work. Famous writers from different states coined women oriented stories and novels for bringing up sophistication in woman-status. Kerala also show cased relevant works of literature from eminent writers like Lalithambika Antharjanam, Kamala Das, Thakazhy, S.Mukundan, S.K.Pottekattu etc. V.M.Basheer was one of the great novelists among them. He wrote many short stories and novels of different themes. He gave coloured definition to the humanity in his each and every stories and novels. He was so observant of the lay people who are in the downtrodden stage. My focal point of research starts from here. In his selected novels like, *'_Childhood Friend'*, *'_Pathumma's Goat'*, *'_Walls'*, *'_Love Letter'*, *'_My Grandad Ad' An Elephant'*, etc. we can view the woman- status in a particular fashion that all of them are so valour, vibrant, dynamic and most importantly, they are not inferior to their men. Moreover, they experience freedom irrespective of different religious groups they belong to. These are the elements match with the prepositions of famous feminist critic, Mary Wallstone Craft. Apart from this, V.M. Basheer's women characters undergo a character conversion like transition from conventionalism / conservatism to progressivism for their survival. Actually these transition elements give motivation in life for jumping into progress particularly for the weaker sections of our society still.

REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN INDIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE:

Incidentally, a brief account of representation of women in the Indian context is quite necessary to comprehend women's predicament in Indian society. Indian feminists are generally concerned with the intersection of gender with caste or class, sexuality and nationality. While analyzing the representation of women in society or literature, Maya Pandit in *—Towards Indian Feminist Literary Criticism* opines that theories of women's liberation as well as movements against oppression have become the part of women's cultural and political movements in India. Feminists like Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha commented that the new bourgeoisie inscribed its identity on the body and souls of women and *'_the proper woman'* was born. This *'_new'* woman was subjected to a new patriarchy and was explicitly distinguished from the patriarchy of indigenous culture. The new woman was a reversal not only of the western woman, but also different from the common women or lower class women who were considered as coarse, vulgar, loud and quarrelsome. Such representations stressing the cultural superiority of the *'_new woman'* were commonly found in the literature of the period. She could explore the world outside. But her femininity was clearly marked in her dress, eating habits, social demeanor and religiosity. This dominant middle class structure made popular the *Sati- Savitri* construct through literature and arts of the period and inculcated in women spiritual qualities of self-sacrifice, benevolence, devotion, religiosity etc. This spirituality did not impede the woman from moving out of the physical confines of homes; she could go under the conditions that would not threaten her femininity. Only the women of upper middle class were the recipients of the fruits of social reforms of the colonial government and the early reformers.

MATRIARCHAL DOMINANCY IN MUSLIM COMMUNITIES OF KERALA:

It is reported that the Nair and Muslim communities of Kerala had a matriarchal system of society. It is common knowledge that the matriarchal system managed

to curb the hardships of life to a great extent. Consequently, members of these communities experienced the maximum comforts in each and every domain of life. In these communities, women got much priority in their homes. Since Basheer belonged to Muslim religion, he had such kinds of experiences which are sufficiently evidenced in his fiction. The matriarchal system in Kerala was inspirational for the feminist movement to some extent, soon after the literary renaissance in Kerala. Literary renaissance brought a great deal of changes in these communities which later led to the depiction of a particular kind of characterization which was significantly seen in the novels of this period. The present focus of study is on Vaikom Muhammed Basheer's women oriented novels.

It is well documented that people from the so called lower rungs of the society experienced extreme social injustice like practice of untouchability by the so called privileged class which went even to the extent of avoiding eye-contact with them; proscription of comfortable dressing for people from the lower stratum; deprivation of the right of roofing their houses etc. The Malayalam literary renaissance period lasts from 1850-1956. There is a long list of events which resulted in shocking consequences against the social injustice like formation of Kerala's lower constituency (1889), publication of Malayalam's first novel- Indulekha (1889), submission of a long application named Malayalee Memorial (1891), Dr. Palpu's famous application (1895) and Rajarajavarma's poetry named Malayalavilasam which is considered as the first imaginative poetry of Malayalam literature.

The rise of the famous Modern Triumvirate consisting of Kumaran Asan, Ullor S Parameswara Iyer and Vallathol Narayana Menon mark the rise of the Malayalam literary renaissance. 'Kumaran Asan' was active in promoting his downtrodden Hindu-Ezhava community. Ullor wrote in the classical tradition, on the basis of which he appealed for universal love, while Vallathol responded to the human significance of social progress. Modern fiction started with the work of P. Kesavadev(1904-1983), Vaikom Muhammad Basheer(1908-1994), Ponkunnam Varkey(1908-2004), S. K. Pottekkatt(1913-1982),

Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai(1914-1999), Uroob(1915-1979), Lalithambika Antharjanam(1909-1987), K. Saraswathi Amma(1919-1974), V.K.N(1932-2004), O.V. Vijayan(1930-2005), M.Mukundan, Kamala surayya(Madhavikutty, Kamala Das) etc.

Modern Malayalam fiction writers were novel in their depiction of women characters in their writings. One such example is Basheer's portrayal of women in his fiction.

FICTION JUST BEFORE BASHEER'S TIME:

The first novel conceived and published in Malayalam was Appu Nedungadi's —Kundalathal(1887).It was also the first novel to be written by a Keralite and the first novel published in the Malabar region. It had a historical narrative centered on Kundalatha, the daughter of Kalinga King. The second Malayalam novel was Indulekha(1889) which has taken an English novel as its model. Indulekha was a strong critique of the existing social situation of the time. It was an attack against the Namboodiri community which was steeped in conservatism. The author has attacked the feudal lordship

and the Namboodiri-Nair marriage pact called sambandam which was prevalent during those times. In 1891, C.V.Raman pillai published his novel Marthanda Varma. It was followed by his other works, namely, Dharma Raja(1913) and Rama Raja Bahadur(1920). C.V. in his novels portrays a time when Kerala was ruled over by the princess and the Nairs. Marthanda Varma has in it both history and romance. The first Malayalam novel that dealt with the socially backward classes was Saraswathy Vijayam by Kunjambu in 1892. Novels on Christian life were written by Kochuthomman(1892) and Kocheppan Tharakan. Later Ponjikkara Rafi wrote Papikal in 1949. Kochu Thresia(1964) by Joseph Mattom also belongs to this group. All the novels mentioned above focused on either their historical aspects or social and political predicaments along with the elements of romanticism.

The late forties was the time of —progressive literature‡ in Kerala. Vaikom Muhammad Basheer with his unique style and sense of humor portrayed the Muslim Community in his novels. When we examine Basheer’s women characters, we can find a specific novelty in all his works. Besides, one would also find varieties of themes in his short stories and novels.

BASHEER AS A NOVELIST

Basheer was the first major writer from the Muslim community of Kerala to highlight the life of Muslim women in his fiction. His stories are replete with the appeal of everlasting freshness of life in its real form. He establishes with the readers a rare kind of intimacy which is considered as one of the secrets of his success. Basheer reveals his own personal experience in his writing. Many of his stories have an autobiographical touch. Basheer’s contribution to Malayalam literature lies in his use of the imagery of religious lore, eluding phrases and expressions peculiar to each and every community in his writings. This way he has left behind a memorable picture and record of the life style of the Muslim people during his time. His novels like Balyakalasakhi, Mathilukal, Nteppoopporanendarnnu, Pathummayude Aadu, Premalekhanam etc. add colour to his persona as a writer narrator. It is believed that a glimpse of the Muslim society and its concomitant patriarchal structure is needed as the background to understand Basheer’s unique way of portraying women characters in his fiction.

BASHEER’S FICTION IN ITS TOTALITY:

His stories are all based on the struggles and difficulties faced by the lay people in the contemporary society. He selected each theme for his stories from the emotional intensity of lay people. He chose the topic of his stories irrespective of any class, creed, sex, religion etc. His rustic language comfortably intruded into people’s mind. He was a keen observer of human nature. He believed in man’s simplicity. He never created any character instead he was living in itself to make it alive. Due to the same reason, he became successful in his writing and reached the supreme in reader’s mind. He had given equal importance to both male and female characters. It was unable to bear for him the atrocities which were happening among his folks. Most of his stories were written based on his own life experiences. When we scrutinize his life history, we can see that he has travelled all over India, has done so many different jobs, mingled with lot of people irrespective of

their caste, color, community, religion, gender etc. He had an occult feeling about the reality of life. Throughout his life time, he was following the religious mysticism. At the time of freedom fighting, he also participated in the effort along with other freedom fighters. These above mentioned specific reasons changed his mind to create novel characters for his fiction from his own life experiences.

Basheer's women characters experienced the maximum agony and he revealed it in such a way that even common people shed their tears on reading it. He gave the utmost freedom and courage to his women characters so that they were ready to sacrifice their lives for the beloved ones. Renaissance change actually boosted the developments of feminism in Kerala. Feminine power got strengthened in Kerala during post Independence. It was a boon for the contemporary writers for creating a novelty in their women characters.

AN OVERVIEW OF BASHEER'S NOVELS:

Basheer's stories never lose its freshness of appeal. He was the first major writer to emerge from the large Muslim community in Kerala and thus he made a signal contribution to the evolution of Malayalam writing into the literature of entire Malayalam – speaking people. One of the secrets of Basheer's success is the rare kind of intimacy he establishes with the reader. This kind of rapport arises from the fact that the writer creates the impression that he is revealing his own personal experience. Some kind of personal involvement on the part of the author is suggested in most of his stories. In fact many of his stories have an autobiographical element in them and his stories are the richer for the unusual variety of experience he has actually gone through. Basheer's introduction into Malayalam literature of the Muslim background, imagery of Muslim religious lore, telling phrases and expressions peculiar to the community, is of great sociological significance. It adds special color to three of his novels like-Balyakalaskhi, Nteppoopakoraanendarnnu and Pathummayude Aadu. It should be emphasized that the abiding appeal of Basheer's writing comes from his deep humanity which transcends all partisan considerations and that the Muslim element is employed to give it a local habitation and a name.

FEMINIST CONCERNS IN BASHEER'S NOVELS:

Later on, Majid is sent to a school and Suhra and Majid are separated for some time. In the meanwhile Suhra loses her father despite Majid's and his mother's wishes that she also be taken into their family, Majid's father sends Majid to a good school and thus Majid and Suhra, there is a gap in the friendship. Later gets married and goes to her husband's house but comes back soon complaining about her husband. In the novel we get to know that Majid advises

Suhra to go back to her husband's house. Incidentally, she narrates the ordeal of how her husband was already married and had two children. Moreover, she says that he was a cruel husband and would beat her severely. Majid was moved by Suhra's agony and decides to get married to her. We also see that Suhra too does not hesitate to get married to him. This explicitly

shows how courageous Suhra is to take such a decision in life in a society that never accepted a woman who went for a second marriage. Yet another character that we see who is pro-woman is Majid's mother who approves their marriage immediately. However, she asks him to wait till the completion of all other family responsibilities. For Majid's mother to take such a decision being a Muslim by birth is not that easy. Basheer, through this episode highlights how liberated his women characters are in the novel at that time.

Similarly, Basheer in his another novel *'Pathumma's Goat'*, celebrates the authority a Muslim woman holds in her maternal home in Kerala. It is interesting to note here that Pathumma, a married woman in a matriarchal society enjoys more privilege in her maternal home. During her visits to her maternal home, one sees that she goes on a rampage and exhibiting her power and authority she takes control of the affairs at her ancestral home. Basheer makes an attempt to show how progressive his women characters are. In a society where a woman is considered to be an outsider in her own maternal house, we see a contradictory representation of a woman who enjoys equal rights and privilege even in their maternal homes. At the outset it appears that the portrayal of Pathumma to be in a negative light as somebody who sponges on her maternal family earnings. However, if one goes deeper it becomes clear that owing to her family conditions (of her husband being barely employed with meagre income) she is being prudent to ensure that her family needs are being taken care of without stooping to begging. She seems to be a responsible, intelligent woman who knows to make things favourable to her family in order to sustain. This becomes further evident in her decision of making her sisters-in-law to take care of her pregnant goat. She ingeniously plans for cutting off on expenditure by making her maternal family take care of her goat.

On the other hand, we see the protagonist's mother who is portrayed as a submissive woman, as the story progresses, we see that she is transformed into a liberated woman as well. This can be evidenced by the fact that she questioned her daughter Pathumma's control in her family. The researcher sees this as unusual because the mother never had any voice in the beginning of the story. Later, she gains control of the situation and demonstrates that she too can voice her concerns.

In yet another novel, *'My Grand Dad had an Elephant'* one can see how women characters evolve in the story from conservatism to progressivism and eventually were able to break the shackles of conventional boundaries. People always believed that old practices like owning an elephant was a symbol of aristocracy. The character in this novel was no different. Kunjuthachumma too always believed that the Elephant that her grandfather owned gave them status in the society. It was a symbol of pride as it exhibited their aristocratic status. So much so that she went on a spree of making people believe that they had owned an elephant. In reality, they did not own any. People in the society, in order to maintain their supremacy and aristocratic status would go to any extent of weaving make-believe stories like owning an elephant. Kunjuthachumma too was trapped in a mirage of holding supremacy through narrations of what they possessed. This mirage is dispelled as the story evolves. We see that she comes to term with the reality and accepts that there is no point in telling make-believe stories to retain one's superiority in the society. At the outset this would seem as a plot that highlights transition from falsehood to reality. However, as a woman we see that there is

transition from conservatism to realism. That is to say, this story shows how a woman could forego her dreams and accept the reality. We also witness that she realizes that her conservative mindset made her only take re-course to hypocrisy to suppress the truth. She learns that such beliefs do not add any value to one's status.

This novel also highlights the role of education in women's life-education which brought changes in one's lifestyle and outlook. Education brought with it a sense of hygiene and sophistication in the lives of the women who were deprived of the same earlier. This can be explained through the transformation that happens in the life of the character Kunjupathumma. We can see that Kunjupathumma in the beginning of the novel had no sense of hygiene and sophistication. She is seen as careless and callous as regards maintaining hygiene. She never paid attention to cleanliness and grooming. Grooming oneself was seen as an act of condemnation. For it was believed that it attracted male gaze. Furthermore, it has to be noted here that she was an illiterate. This was also a result of the belief that the society had about women. Women were not allowed to get educated as it brought evil with it. So was the case with Kunjupathumma. She too was deprived of education and its benefits like grooming regularly, sense of hygiene etc. However, as the story advances, we see that she comes in contact with Aysha and Nizzar who expose her secretly to literacy. Basheer shows how important it is for women to get educated. We see a lot of transformation in Kunjupathumma who is exposed to modern and liberated ideas of the progressive society. Furthermore, she pays attention to grooming in contrast to the conventional practices. Thus we can say that Basheer celebrates the liberation that happens to women when exposed to education. Furthermore, Basheer highlights the power, progressive and educated women have. This is evidenced in the portrayal of Aysha, who is an educated girl with modern and progressive ideas. A progressive woman spreads progressivism. That is to say, she was instrumental in bringing about the changes in Kunjupathumma.

CONCLUSION:

One can conclude that Basheer's women characters show resemblance to the feminist ideas of the first western feminist critic, Mary Wollstonecraft. In her book, *'A vindication of the rights of women'* (1792), she rejected the established view of women who are naturally weaker or inferior to men. She proposed that women must be treated as equal to men because they play a crucial role in the society like bringing up children. Wollstone denied the views of male thinkers like *'Rousseau'* a Greek philosopher who had argued that women do not need education. She was one of the first thinkers to define that gender roles are not natural but social. Basheer's women characters in his selected novels are in no way inferior to men. Women characters have their own entity and distinct personality. They also represent a transitional shift from conservatism to progressivism. Women characters embrace the transition from conventionalism to realism and from conservatism to progressivism. From the beginning towards the end of the novels, women characters exhibit womanly potentiality. And the significance of getting educated gets highlighted in the works of Basheer. Women's practical sense and creativity have been focused in his works.

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