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Vaikom Muhammad Basheer and Indian Literature

K. Satchidanandan

I

Vaikom Muhammad Basheer (1908-1994) belongs firmly to what I like to call the democratic tradition in Indian literature, a living tradition that can be traced back to the Indian tribal lore including the Vedas and the folktales and fables collected in Somdeva's *Panchatantra* and *Kathasaritsagar*, Gunadhya's *Brihatkatha*, Kshemendra's *Brihatkathamajari*, the *Vasudeva Hindi* and the *Jatakas*. This tradition was further enriched by the epics, especially *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* that combined several legends from the oral tradition and are found in hundreds of oral, performed and written versions across the nation that interpret the tales from different perspectives of class, race and gender and with different implications testifying to the richness and diversity of Indian popular imagination and continue to produce new textual versions, including dalit, feminist and other radical interpretations and adaptations even today. Sanskrit literature too, while confined mostly to courts, produced a parallel stream of democratic literature that had poets like Yogeswara and playwrights like Soodraka whose works are woven around the day-to-day lives of common folk. It also gave rise to opposing concepts of poetry and poetics, including theories of reading like *dhvani* and *anumana* that privileged the reader. The Sangam literature of Tamil and the Buddhist and Jain literatures found in Pali, Prakrit and Sanskrit also dealt with the suffering of common people, their domestic and public lives and often upheld egalitarian values and democratic messages. The Tamil literature of the period also produced as new eco-poetics based on various terrains

or *tinais* and the moods and situations associated with them. The Bhakti and Sufi literatures gave a firm footing to this democratic tradition by interrogating power in its political and economic manifestations and the hierarchies based on caste, creed, language and priesthood, and the many superstitions and customs that had kept the people enslaved in various ways. This tradition, essentially of craftsmen, women and religious and ethnic minorities, refused to privilege Brahmin ideology, imperial hegemony and Sanskrit language, strengthened people's tongues, established new genres of writing, music and dance and interpreted religious discourse from egalitarian and democratic points of view, thus often subverting the status-quoist hermeneutics that had sustained upper class and upper caste monopolies in society. The multilingual and subaltern tradition of Indian literature was recreated and reinforced by these movements that initiated a humanist dialogue that cut across the man-made boundaries of region, caste and religion. The anti-colonial and reform-oriented literature of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century that gave rise to new prose genres like the novel and the short story and created new forms of poetry and drama had drawn its nourishment from the values of the Bhakti-Sufi movements as is clear from a reading of its greatest poets like Tagore, Nazrul Islam, Subramania Bharati or Kumaran Asan.

Fiction in India, born out of our colonial encounter, had its roots in our own narrative tradition and has been since its origins, to follow the Homi Bhabha paradigm, an attempt to narrate the Indian nation in all its plural complexity. The novels, and to a lesser extent the short stories, written before and after Independence reveal to us the various ways in which the Indian nation was imagined and re-imagined from diverse locations in the society and from various positions in history. Together they can be said to constitute an unofficial history of the subcontinent that documents the people's perceptions of the struggles and the successes, the dilemmas and the failures of the nation, at times at the level of the community and at times of the family and most often at both these at the same time. It was often done at the micro-level of the local and the regional or from the points of view of the religious and ethnic minorities or of women, thus bringing in different concepts of the nation and various ways of conjuring it into being. This had already begun with the early novelists like Rajanikanta Bordoloi, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, K S Venkataramani, Govardhanram Tripathi, C V Raman Pillai, O Chandu Menon, Hari Narayan Apte, Fakir Mohan Senapati, Bhai Vir Singh, Vedanayagam Pillai, Vishvanatha Satyanarayana, Ratannath Sarshar and Mirza Muhammad Hadi 'Ruswa', who, through their regional or historical novels,

had begun to trace the roots of our nationhood. The next generation took this exploration further. We find greater maturity and realism in novelists like Bibhuti Bhushan Bandopadhyay, Tarashankar Banerjee, Manik Banerjee, Gopinath Mohanty, Syed Abdul Malik, Birendrakumar Bhattacharya, Jhaverchand Meghani, Premchand, Phanishwar Nath Renu, Jainendrakumar, Yashpal, L S Ramamirtham, D Jayakantan, Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, Sane Guruji, Shivarama Karanth, Gurdial Singh, K A Abbas, Krishen Chander, Ismat Chughtai, R S Bedi, Qurratul-ain-Hyder and others. They do not exactly belong to the same generation in chronological terms nor did they employ the same narrative strategies and techniques; but they did share a common social spirit and moral commitment. This is where Basheer too properly belonged in spirit.

We may recall that unlike in Europe where fiction was made possible by the autonomous sensibility of an individuated consciousness that came into being in the 18th and 19th centuries, such a state of individuation had not been achieved in India when the novel and the short story were made available as a ready-made form. So the Indian fiction writers were able to put into productive use the still living native story-telling traditions as well as the epic narrative modes. But our paradigmatic early novels like Bankim Chandra's *Anandamath*, Govardhanram Tripathi's *Saraswatichandra* or O Chandu Menon's *Indulekha* were constituted to serve the emerging middle-class nationalistic ideology. This led to many exclusions and distortions that came to be interrogated by writers like Premchand and others whose social realist works criticize the mainstream nationalism with its pronounced upper class-upper caste bias. Their attempt to construct an alternative national consciousness was also prompted by a predatory element in nationalist ideology that had begun to manifest itself in Germany and Italy in the form of Nazi and Fascist practices of exclusion, othering, distorted interpretation of history, racial chauvinism, atavistic regression, cult of death, suppression of minorities, fear of difference and of genuine equality, sectarian manipulation of myths and archetypes, a negative and insular definition of the nation and planned genocide. The Hindu Mahasabha and the Rashtreeya Swayamsevak Sangh had also begun to exhibit these tendencies that would grow to fatal proportions in independent India. Ambedkar's impact was one factor that made Premchand seek alternate locations for narrating the nation, though now we know that there were dalit narratives in the nineteenth century like *Saraswateevijayam* by Pothery Kunhambu in Malayalam that looked at society and history from a totally different point of view. The other fiction writers I had named earlier also tried to look at the gaps and silences in the status-quoist definition of the nation.

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The need to renegotiate the nation was obvious to the generation to which Basheer belonged. They knew by instinct and experience – rather than by theoretical and conceptual understanding—that people have their different and specific ways of belonging to the nation through religion, culture, language, etc and only a many-layered identity can produce inclusive world-views that can sustain a pluralistic society. The partition of India, so movingly narrated in Yashpal's *Jhotta Sach*, Qurratul-ain-Hyder's *Aag ka Dariya*, Rahi Masoom Reza's *Aadha Gaon*, Jyotirmoyee Devi's *Epar Ganga*, Opar Ganga, Sunil Gangopadhyay's *Arjun*, Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, Bhisham Sahni's *Tamas*, Krishna Baldev Vaid's *Guzara Hua Zamana*, Abdullah Hussain's *Udap Naslein*, Khadija Dastoor's *Angan*, Intizar Husain's *Basti*, Bapsi Sidwa's *Ice-Candy Man*, Mukul Kesavan's *Looking Through Glass* or the shorter narratives of Manto-like his famous 'Toba Tek Singh' – or many works by Qudrat Ullah Shahab, Krishen Chander, KA Abbas, Ramlal, RS Bedi, Syed Mohammed Ashraf, Mohan Rakesh and Bimal Mitra, proved their worst fears true. No doubt novelists like Satinath Bhaduri (*Dhonrai Charit Manas*), Mahaswetadevi (*Douloti, Hazar Chaurasi ki Ma, Sthanadayini*) Thakazhi (*Thottiyude Makan, Kayar*), Anand (*Aalkkootam, Marubhoomikal Undavunnathu*) and OV Vijayan (*Dharmapuram*) have truthfully recorded the disillusionment that followed independence, not to speak of the Dalit novels and autobiographies of Laxman Gaikwad (*Uchalya*), Laxman Mane (*Upara*), Sharan Kumar Limbale (*Akkar Mashii*), Joseph Macwan (*Angaliyat*), Dalpat Chauhan (*Malak*), Harish Manglam (*Chaowky, Tirad*), Mohan Parmar (*Priyatama*), Devanoor Mahadeva (*Kusuma Bale*), Siddalingaiah (*Ooru Keri*), Bama (*Karikku, Sangati*) and others. Basheer looked at life with detachment and while representing the life of the Muslim minority in Kerala and speaking from the outskirts of mainstream historiography also succeeded in communicating the universal values of compassion, forgiving, tolerance and love, a feat that Manto had established with the same éclat and élan. Basheer often calls himself 'the humble historian' (*vineetha charitakaram*) and this figure of the historian is implicit in his early stories that deal with the issues of freedom and the nation as well as in his later narratives of domesticity, though here it often assumes the dimensions of parody and mock history. He also went beyond the rigidities of 'social realism'. One can very well trace the beginnings of Modernism in Malayalam literature to Basheer and also see elements of what has come to be called the 'post-Modern' in his narrative strategies, especially the meta-narrative mode and the parodic approach to history that one may find in a Samuel Beckett, Robbe-Grillet or Salman Rushdie.

Vaikom Muhammad Basheer was one of those rare artists who love the world with all its imperfections rather than one of those who go on trying to change it since they can love only a perfect world. It was this understanding of evil as an organic part of creation and the identification with the outcastes, even those the world considers clowns, idiots, cheats and villains whom his magic wand converted into lovable human beings, that helped Basheer redraw the map of Malayalam fiction many decades ago. He once said, "I have been suckled by women of all castes" and "I have made love to women of every caste." This experience told him that the human body is alike whatever the caste or religious marks it wore. Here he was one with Sree Narayana Guru, that great teacher of Kerala society, who had declared that there is only one caste, one religion and one God and all human beings are born in the same way. Kumaran Asan, the great poet and Guru's disciple also had asked rather frankly, in a narrative context, "Is the body of the *chandal* woman sterile to Brahmin's seed?" Basheer used to say he was never sure about the Malayalam alphabet; this apparent inadequacy compelled him to invent an idiom that is closest to the everyday life of the Malayalees that revolutionised the art of story-telling in the language. He could make his fictional world possible only by radically altering the status-quoist vocabulary. Ordinary words picked up from the streets and the inner courtyards of Malabar homes gained a new vibrancy and artistic aura when Basheer employed them in his fresh narrative contexts. He used to say, "I am the story; what I write is language," "I am an artist" or more philosophically, "I am the flower, I am also the garden". His seemingly artless manner had behind it an unarticulated yet profound theory about the use of language in contemporary fiction that taught different lessons to future writers. While the detached humour in O.V. Vijayan, V.K.N, M.P. Narayana Pillai and Paul Zacharia belong to Basheer's lineage, the stylistic simplicity and lyrical quality of Madhavikkutty (Kamala Das), M.T. Vasudevan Nair and M. Mukundan – writers very different from Basheer – can also be traced to the same unique narrative heritage.

Of the many stories Basheer told, his own, as told in his autobiography, *Ormayude Arakal* (The Chambers of Memory) is perhaps the most exciting. Trained in Arabic at home by a *musaliyar*, he had learnt his Quran by eight. Then he studied Malayalam and English, and read his first story books from a friend, one Potti, that might have first stirred in him the desire to tell stories. The names of Mahatma Gandhi and other leaders of the freedom struggle excited the young boy. Basheer

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has given an account of his literally touching Gandhiji during the Mahatma's visit to his land for the historical Vaikom Satyagraha in March, 1924 demanding, for the so-called 'lower castes', the right of entry into the temple. The call of freedom took Basheer to Malabar, the centre of the nationalist activities in Kerala. He joined the *Al-Amin* newspaper run by the patriot, Muhammad Abdu Rahman. Basheer participated in the salt satyagraha on the Calicut beach that landed him in jail. Now he began to feel Gandhi's peaceful ways would not earn freedom for India; he was fascinated by Bhagat Singh and his comrades and moved over to *Ujjevanam* (Rejuvenation), that had now turned from a Congress journal into the mouthpiece of the armed struggle against the colonisers. Basheer had to go underground to evade arrest. That was the beginning of seven years of wanderings in a variety of disguises: a Hindu mendicant, a palmist, a magician's assistant, an astrologer, a private tutor, a tea shop owner. He also went to meet V.Shantaram in Pune in an outlandish outfit hoping to join the film industry. Shantaram asked him to learn Marathi and come back. Before he could learn Marathi, a certain Gajanan, impressed by his language skills, employed him as a tutor; but asked to teach Mathematics, Basheer had no choice but to leave for Bombay where he became a physician's assistant in Kamatipura, the haunt of prostitutes, eunuchs and thieves. Next he ran a night school in Bhindi bazaar teaching basic English. It was then the sea called him and he found himself sailing as a *khalasi* on *SSRizvani* carrying Haj pilgrims to Jeddah via the Red Sea. On the way back he landed in what are now parts of Pakistan. He served in a hotel in Karachi and then as proof reader's copy holder in the *Civil and Military Gazette*. Basheer had also a pilgrim in him; he visited several holy places of Hindus, Muslims and Christians during his wanderings that made him truly secular: He lived among Hindu sanyasins and Sufis while in North India to discover, in his own words, "*abam brahmasmih?*" and "*anal haq*" pointed to the same Truth.

Ajmer, Peshawar, Kashmir, Kolkata: the vagrant's travels ended at Ernakulam in Kerala where he became an agent of sports goods for a firm in Sialkot. The family had gone bankrupt by now as his father's timber business had declined. An accident saw Basheer deprived of his job too; on recovery he began writing stories for a paper called *Jayakesari*. His first story *Ente Thankam* (My Thankam/darling) was typical: it had a dark-complexioned hunchback as its heroine. He also wrote patriotic essays in *Rajyabhimani* (The Patriot) besides indignant articles and satirical narratives against the Dewan of Travancore. Still unsatisfied, he launched a weekly, *Pauranadam* (The Citizens' Voice), to vent his ire against the system. Again the police was after his blood; he went underground along with

K.C. George, a Communist leader. By now he had befriended some major writers of the period, Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, S.K. Pottekkat, Uroob, Joseph Mundassery and Changampuzha Krishna Pillai among them. Finally he surrendered to the police on the suggestion of a friendly police officer. The experiences in the lock up at Kollam gave him plenty to write about. His *Premalekhanam* (Love-letter), a love story in the lighter vein, was a response to the requests of his fellow prisoners, bored to death reading the Ramayana and the Bible umpteen times. It deals with the love of Kesavan nair and Saramma. The smart young woman pretends to reject the man's advances though she is yearning to escape the torment at home at the hands of her father and step-mother. She is sad that all the young men who seek her hand demand heavy dowry. They discuss all the difficulties their marriage will engender: even naming the child will be a problem as he will have no religion. But Kesavan Nair has a solution, they will not give him either Christian or Hindu names, he will be called 'Akasamittai', the Sweet from the Sky. Finally, when the lover invites her to go with him to the new place where he has found a better job, she sounds elusive in her answer; but she leaves a letter of farewell at home and waits for him at the railway station and they flee the place together. Kesavan Nair is thrilled to learn that she had kept the first love-letter he had given her like a treasure though at that time she had thrown it to the floor. *Mathilukal* (The Walls), an intense narrative of love and desire was another product of this jail life.

After a stint in Madras with the *Jayakeralam* Weekly, he came back to Ernakulam to run the 'Circle Book House' later renamed 'Basheer's Book Stall' and to write a popular column for the cartoon magazine, *Narmada*. He had established his fame as a novelist already with *Bahyakalasakhi* (The Childhood Friend), a poignant story of childhood love that had won praise from critics like M.P. Paul. Then followed a break of six years caused by 'acute insanity' to use Basheer's own phrase. *Pathummayude Adu* (Pathumma's Goat) was written in 1959 while he was still under treatment for his nervous break-down. He now found an understanding partner in Fatima Bi, 'Fabi' to him, shifted to Beypore where he lived, earning the affectionate nick-name 'Beypore Sultan' until his demise at the age of 86 in 1994. He wrote little in the last three decades of his life; he would sit sipping 'sulaimani' under the shade of his pet mangostein tree, listen to ghazals and keep talking to the 'pilgrims' who found this frail 'icon' easier to handle than the restless full man in his creative frenzy and wrote endlessly about their trip to meet him.

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M. N. Vijayan, a major Malayalam critic, has pointed out that in Basheer there seems to be no rift between the man and the writer. He often said that he became a writer only because he lacked the training required to be a cook, a magician, a coconut-palm climber, a pick-pocket or a journalist. Basheer's fictional world is almost indistinguishable from the factual world in which he lived: an autobiographical subtext is always inherent in his fictional discourse. The author himself has traced *Anuragathinte Dinangal* (The Days of Intimacy) to the diary he had kept of a Hindu girl's love for him frustrated by the objection from her parents and Basheer's refusal to hurt them, *Balyakalasakhi* to a real childhood friendship, *Pathummayude Adu* to people and incidents at home and around, and *Mathilukal* to an experience in the prison. His works are autobiographical not merely because they recount real episodes from his life, but are the honest records of the turmoil of his mind ever beset with conflicts that he refused to yield to. Outwardly most of his stories deal with the lives of Kerala Muslims, but it will be a grave mistake to reduce Basheer's fiction to its ethnic content. At the deeper level, they are tales of men and women everywhere, trapped in the ironic irrationality of the human condition. That is why even the English translations of Basheer's stories done by various translators from Ronald Asher to V. Abdulla, while retaining little of their dialectal poetry, still manage to capture their ultimate human appeal. Asher, the Edinburgh scholar and the first translator of Basheer's novels, himself has spoken about the structural and stylistic challenges posed to the translators by Basheer's minimalist narratives—which the author used to revise and polish even after publishing them—with their quaint humour, expressive use of the spoken language, understatement and suggestiveness. He also used a lot of Arab words that have been naturalised in Malayalam like *haj*, *halal*, *halqat*, *thauba*, *quaiamat*, *iblis*, etc that Asher decided to retain as they were. He also had problems with onomatopoeic words that Basheer created, like *nhulu-nhulu*, *jagajaga*, *peppappe*, *huttini halitta lithappo*, etc., not to speak of the innumerable names of trees and birds and beasts that went into Basheer's landscape.

Basheer was a contemporary of well-known fiction writers in Malayalam like Karur Nilakanta Pillai (1858-1975), Kesava Dev (1904-83), Ponkunnam Varki (1908-2007), Lalitambika Antaranam (1909-87), Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai (1912-1999), S.K. Pottakkat (1913-82) and P.C. Kuttikrishnan 'Uroob' (1915-79). He shares with these writers a certain social conjuncture and consciousness; he also received the impact of the Progressive Literary Movement or 'Jeevatsahityam' that had begun in

Malayalam in the 1930s. Dev, Varki and Thakazhi imaginatively recorded their vicarious experience of the sordidness, penury caused; but to Basheer poverty was a real and personal experience; yet he wrote about it with considerable detachment and objectivity, without any self-pity. Like SK Pottekkat, Basheer too was widely travelled; but while Pottekkat wrote interesting travelogues, Basheer found in travels opportunities for his stories. Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai was perhaps a better surveyor of social reality and a more analytical student of the history of communities; but Basheer far excels him as a stylist who insisted on the propriety of each word and chiselled his sentences to perfection—a quality one notices in some later writers like O.V. Vijayan, Zachria and N.S. Madhavan and in some stories by their younger contemporaries like V.R. Sudheesh, Subhash Chandran, Sitara and Santosh Echikkanam. Basheer's language is not 'literary' if 'literary' means deliberately sophisticated and packed with Sanskrit words; it is not 'philosophical' if 'philosophical' means filled with strained thoughts and ideas and references, as exemplified by some writers celebrated as 'philosophical'; but it is precisely by being 'non-literary' – easy, natural and deceptively simple – that Basheer distinguishes himself from ordinary writers who strain after effects even while saying the most trivial things. It is by appearing 'non-philosophical' that Basheer achieves a visionary quality that is inaccessible to those who pack their fiction with borrowed or inane ideas. Basheer's optimism comes from a robust acceptance of tragedy, and not from the avoidance of confrontation with the embarrassing contradictions of existence. He was avant-garde in the true sense for, what he challenged was not just certain literary conventions, but the institution of 'Literature' itself. He showed us how card-sharpers, prostitutes, pickpockets, homosexuals, holy men, all create languages that tell the world what they see, feel and undergo; so it is not the special privilege of the writer to articulate experience or to create languages to express them.

Basheer's novels, *Balyakalasakhi* (Childhood Friend, 1944), *Ntuppuppakoranendaarnnu* (My Granddad Had an Elephant, 1951) and *Pathummayude Adu* (Pathumma's Goat, 1959) have been especially noted for their colourful and authentic delineation of Muslim life in Kerala, especially in Malabar. 'The Childhood Friend' deals with the passionate and tragic love affair between Majeed and Suhra. There is no villain in the love story; if there is one, it is the poverty of Suhra's father, a small arecanut merchant. Basheer says of poverty: "Poverty is a fatal disease. It ruins the body, heart and soul". Majeed's rich father would not permit his son to marry Suhra. Later he also turns poor by a twist of fortune. But then Majeed had to find the means to marry off his sisters. Majeed

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sets off to find a job, he loses one leg in the process; still he works as a hotel boy driven by the dream of going back and marrying Suhra. Meanwhile, Suhra gets married to a butcher as his second wife; her husband ill treats her and when Majeed comes home on leave he finds her pale, ugly, lean with tuberculosis, with sunken cheeks. That would have turned anyone else away from her; but Majeed still loves her with the same intensity. But he is shattered later when he receives a letter from his mother that informs him of Suhra's death. What makes the novel different is the deep spirituality of the love affair that went beyond the fascination of the flesh, a love that Kumaran Asan, the great Malayalam poet, would describe as being not bound to the body. M.P. Paul, the eminent Malayalam critic called the novel a 'bleeding page torn from the book of life'. He praised the work for its 'minute knowledge of the human heart, its high imagination and its wide experience of the world.'

Me Granddad'ad an Elephant (1951) is the story of a family steeped in superstition, one that still boasted of its ancient glory though now it had fallen on bad days. The main character in the novel is Nissar Ahmed, a self-made professor, an enlightened human being who loves Kunjupathumma. Kunjuthachumma, Kunjupathumma's mother is the chief woman character; she is full of vanity, covers herself in gold, sits idly chewing betel leaves and boasting about the 'real' elephant her father had that had killed four kaffirs. She had no education and blindly followed what the local priests told her. On losing a case, the family loses all its wealth; still she remains proud of the past. But Kunjupathumma, her daughter is free of vanity, gets some education and finally gets married to Nizar. The mother, at the end of the novel, realises her folly and admits that the elephant her grand father had was not a real one, but only a black insect that in Malayalam is called *kurzhiyana* (The elephant living in a burrough). The novel portrays the conflict between the old and the new worlds and indirectly asks the Muslim brothers and sisters to wake up to the call of the new world, give up superstitions and absorb only the best and the positive in their religion. One sentence spoken by Nizar to Pathumma sums it all up: "Open the windows; let light and breeze come in". And the girl who opens the window is surprised by the light; she says: '*Velichathinu enthoru velicham!*' (O, what light to the light!), a typical Basheer statement. (Another such statement can be found in *Balyakalasakhi*. When Majeed is asked how much is one plus one, he answers, 'a very big One' and justifies his answer pointing to the two streams in the village that make one big river.) Even though the novel deals with Muslim community, Basheer's message cuts across religions and sects; it is a call for introspection, an exhortation for a human renaissance,

but done so subtly and artistically so that the work never sounds like a didactic tract.

While all of Basheer's works have an autobiographical ring as we have already said, 'Pathumma's Goat' (1959) is purely autobiographical. It deals with Basheer's life after his wanderings when he had settled down at Thalayolapparambu, near Vaikom. He was looking for silence and peace; but what he found was noise and tumult. Relatives, cats, rats, crows, hens, hawks—it turns into a veritable mad house. And all of them have demands on Basheer; the worst are the relatives who want money; even the goat feeds on Basheer's books, clothes and matches when it does not get enough bananas to eat. Basheer looks helplessly at the goat devouring his novel *Balyakalaskhi* (The Childhood Friend) and wonders whether it would dare eat the explosive story, *Sabdangal* (Voices) that had created a furore in Malayalam literature! But the goat swallows the story in two minutes and then moves on to eat his blanket. He requests the goat whom he addresses as *ajasundari*, the bovine beauty, to spare the costly bed sheet and promises to get her all the remaining copies of his books. Still he loves that goat and is in agony when it is about to give birth; his affection for the lamb is boundless. The novel was written while Basheer was languishing in a mental hospital in Trichur after his bouts of insanity; against his usual practice, he did not shorten or edit its draft. The novel, made up of the most ordinary things of life and narrated with detached humour is not just a report of events that happen in his home, but a great and honest human document of our tragi-comic times with its lovelessness, unease and exploitation. Basheer gets out of the conventional paradigm of good and evil in this novel. He travels to the elemental in man, equates all the female characters calling them just '*pennungal*' (womenfolk) pointing to some primordial feminine essence, speaks of their special intelligence, expresses desire through the metaphor of eating. He even asks the question: "Whose food am I?" The author stands somewhere between the sacrificial beast and the clown and seems at times to identify himself with the goat. The novel is open-ended, reminding us of the discussion in Italo Calvino's metanovel, *If on a Winter's Night, a Traveller* where a man asks: 'Do we require a beginning and an end to all stories?' In fact the novel deals with the continuity of life and its permanent angst. The questions he asks here get new philosophical dimensions in *Mantrikappoocha* (The Magic Cat, 1968) that he wrote after almost a decade. Here he is building a house. The novel has a dialogue between Basheer and a roaming ascetic, which is like Basheer's own inner dialogue. If 'Pathumma's Goat' ends in questions, 'The Magic Cat' ends in the prayer: *Om Shanti, shanti, Loka samasta sukhino bhavantu. Mangalam.*

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Both the novels belong more to an oral than a written tradition. This assertion of orature over literature is a regular posture in Basheer's fictional world.

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P. Udayakumar in his study on Basheer's stories, 'The Ethics of Witnessing' points out how the site of his stories is remembrance, 'a breeze that blows across time from its almost invisible, other bank. He quotes the beginning of Basheer's famous story *Mathilukal* (Walls): "Have you ever heard of a lovestory called 'The Walls'? I don't think I have narrated it before. I thought I would call it 'Feminine Fragrance' or 'The Scent of a Woman' or something like that. Now I am going to tell you that story. Listen carefully. It is very old. Sometimes we say 'time'. It is from the other bank of that great 'time'... Remember that I am on this side now, on this bank of time. A lonely heart. A sad song reaching its grand stores. This story is that." Life has been lived out, but bits remain in memory as stories, and these stories need to be told in the present, in terms of a performance. The Basheer text, the critic says, is always the locus of a remembrance and a performance. "In Basheer the text has an indicative, a symptomatic status where it reaches out to an actantial dimension which cannot be contained or understood in terms of a semiology of texts", hence, Udayakumar prefers to call Basheer's works 'literary acts' rather than 'texts'. In Basheer's early writings, he observes, narrators inhabit and speak from the outskirts of the mainstream historiography and offer corrections to the apparent patterns of intelligibility in the realm of the historical if not actually contradict them. But along with this historian there is also his shadow-counterpart, the autobiographer, so evident in tales like *Mathilukal* (The Walls). Basheer himself says: "Anyone can write the kind of stories I have written without much difficulty. In each person's life there are lots of things one can write about. One merely needs to remember them and write". The autobiographical subject in Basheer pops up even in his apparently historical narratives like the series where he uses an imaginary topos he calls *sthalam* (place) like *Muccheettukalikkarakante Makal*, (The Card-sharper's Daughter), *Sthalathe Pradhana Diyyan* (The Chief Godman of the Place) and *Ettukali Mammoonju* (Mammoonju, the Spider). The narrator's gaze always colours the scene, and there is a first-person ever lurking even beneath his third-person narratives. He is a witness who also testifies to the truth of the witnessed event: so he is no passive observer, but one who has passed through

an ethical moment of self-recognition. The testimonial voice appears in many of Basheer's works: Kunjupathumma in *Ntuppuppak.koranendrannu* (*Me Granddad'ad an Elephant*) says: "I cannot bear false testimony." In *Sabdangal* (Voices) the soldier who has been discharged is a testimonial voice addressing a writer who records that testimony to produce the narrative we read. In his childhood stories Basheer, his brother Abdul Khader and the neighbour Nathu Damu play out games of contradictory testimonies, contesting versions of truth and falsehood linked to rewards and punishments. Handcuffs, scars on the body, all become markers of testimony. Basheer uses the isolated detail of the partial object in his early texts to overturn the apparent consolations of macro-historical narratives while in the *sthalam* stories the real gets de-realised through a procedure of comic aggrandizement that turns it into the mock-real, thus, transforming the historical into the diminutive and the comic. These stories parody historical narration to demonstrate the inadequacy of the polity as a site of foundational meanings. In *Mathilukal* (Walls) the scent of the woman that travels across the walls is the physical, the instinctive, the creaturely asserting itself over the political represented by the jail. Basheer builds a bridge between the human and the pre-human through the application of the olfactory sense; desire, now finds a discourse beyond the language of individuation and interiority.

Mathilukal (Walls) is easily one of Basheer's finest stories of prison life though he has others in that background. It is also the basis of a rare film by Adoor Gopalakrishnan. Here is a man, Basheer himself, taken prisoner; he has been there so many times that now he is just a number. The story at one level can be read as a criticism of our prison system with its corruption and discrimination among the prisoners. But the central theme is Desire. One day our prisoner hears the laughter of a woman from behind the huge wall. Her scent fills him with desire. It was from the women's ward. Another day he hears her whistling. They strike up a conversation. Gradually they get acquainted with each other. Her name is Narayani. They give descriptions of themselves so that they could visualise each other. She starts throwing twigs in the air to let him know she is there beyond the wall. He prepares a rose garden on his side of the wall. They also exchange gifts, throwing them over the wall. Once a prisoner had made a hole in the wall, but the warders had found it out and closed it. The two now decide to meet in the hospital, the following Thursday. They give each other their marks of identification: she had a black mole on her right cheek and he was a little bald and would carry a red rose in his hand. But that Wednesday, Basheer gets the release order. His first reaction is, "But who wants freedom?" As he goes out

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he sees a dry twig rising in the air. He can only pray for Narayani. The story is replete with the contrast between spaces inside and outside, the fragmented space within the walls and the expanse beyond, symbolising freedom; but by a reversal of logic, the prison becomes the free space illuminated by the woman's fragrance, the flower flung into the air, the tempting laughter and the snatches of conversation choking with passion. At the end of the story, the protagonist finds it difficult to move into the 'ordinary' space of freedom. The oppressive determination of the polis in jail, as Udayakumar says, is suddenly lifted and a new dimension of creatureliness becomes visible when he inhales the voluptuous smell of a woman and hears her alluring laughter. Thus, Basheer restores to desire a discourse that goes beyond the language of individuation and interiority, to the very threshold of the species. This dimension can also be seen in other stories of love like *Anuragathinte Dinangal* (The Days of Romance) where the temporal and spatial dimensions dissolve and reach back to a primal space and a primal, eternal, time: "Long ago, as if eons ago, in an age perfumed with love, there took place an old little love story which I am going to tell".

Sabdangal, a novella that Basheer, as well as, the critic A. Balakrishna Pillai prefer to call a long story, published in 1947 is a short masterpiece. The narrator is Basheer himself who says that he has no philosophy, only some experiences to narrate. The protagonist is a 29-year-old soldier, a victim of gonorrhoea. He is a solitary and alienated soul, in search of his unknown parents. He represents Man abandoned alone in the infinity of space. He wants to love everyone, but is thrown into the battle field where the rule is to kill: "And I killed, so that a few vile, despicable creatures could rule over the country. I am referring to the leaders the world over. Not one of them was on the battlefield, nor their kith and kin. People armed with lethal weapons destroyed one another. A people's war indeed! Which people, may I ask you?" He feels all rulers are murderers and all estates are soaked in human blood. He does not believe in any particular religion and he does not know what religion he was born into as he was an orphan picked up from the streets by a poojari, a temple priest. To the soldier's question, 'Does God exist?' the author's reply is: 'Yes, if you want Him to exist'. That is his reply at 34. The soldier recalls the horrors of the battlefield including his killing a half-dead, bleeding friend in pain, on his request. He also speaks frankly about the prostitutes who are the sweet-hearts of the soldiers. The dialogue throws up a host of questions, about honesty in relationships, religious beliefs, morality, the future of mankind, the past. The soldier speaks also about his initiation into homosexuality by a eunuch that gave him the dreaded disease. There

are frank descriptions of fornication too in the story and plenty of taboo words which gave a shock to the prudish readers of that time. The soldier attempts suicide and fails. The whole story, told in fragments and voices, is structurally modern and deeply moving, making us think about the absurd in existence. Like many Basheer stories, this too ends in a crisis without a resolution.

Basheer had been deeply influenced by Sufi thinking that appears directly in some of his stories like '*Anal Huq*'. He recreates the legend of Manzoor-al-Hallaj, the Sufi saint hunted down by the Muslim orthodoxy for having claimed that he is the Truth—a statement Basheer compares to the Upanishadic '*Aham Brahmasmi*'. The story is told with great passion and a loathing of the priestly hierarchy. Basheer upholds Al Hallaj's exploration of the self and justifies his statement since it might have only meant that all creatures of God contain the spark of divinity and truth. (Eventhough in a footnote written in 1982 to this story of 1946, Basheer thinks it is presumptuous on the part of a man who is only one of God's creations, to claim that he is Truth/God. The circumstance of this note is not known; it seems to have been written under some pressure since Basheer ends the note with the words, '*Anal Huq*'.) Al Hallaj is tried for a transgression of the *shariat*, but remains calm and totally fearless. The ulemas want his blood, but the Sultan Muktabirbilla refuses to sign the fatwa. Hazrat Junayid also first refuses to authenticate it, but he is put under great pressure until he reluctantly signs it, casting off his ascetic's robe and donning the lawmaker's. He declares, "In accordance with the social law, Manzoor is liable to receive a death penalty. But if it is on the basis of truth, only God can decide," Still Manzoor goes on repeating '*Anal Huq*'. Blows rain on him, stones whizz through the air looking for the sinner, his limbs are chopped off and also his tongue, before which he prays to God for the happiness of his tormentors. The irate mob, according to the legend, burns the hacked body and casts the ashes into the Euphrates. "And then, still, silent, nature witnessed the waters of the peaceful river suddenly turn bloody and violent. The waters swelled and surged like a furious ocean. Thundering, they roared, '*Anal Huq*'" The short story, that is more of a poem than a story, *Anarghanimisham* (The Invaluable Moment), written in the same year as '*Anal Huq*', is also deeply philosophical. The author confronts the ultimate loneliness here. He speaks of the rumbling notes of sadness behind his laughter. "I am that invaluable moment caught between two planes of existence: the past standing on the threshold of the present, and today which is going to merge completely into yesterday... with the countless yugas... the chaturyugas... the eternal, the infinite... the never-ending yesterday. I bid

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farewell. It is all over. No, it is not going to be over. From the next moment onwards I will be part of all those countless yesterdays cast into oblivion.”

Poovan Pazham (The *Poovan* banana), another of his well-known stories is also a story of love. Abdul Khader saheb, the rowdy of the town, footballer and trade union leader, falls in love with Jameela Bevi, the cynosure of the town, to marry whom, VIPs are in queue. He does not know the niceties of romance; he just stops her on the way one day, asks her name and introduces himself as the leader of the trade union in her father's beedi factory and tells her that he can have the factory closed down; then he declares his love for her. She likes him, but would not admit it and laughs at him asking, 'What other news in the town?' But Abdul Khader only grows more passionate: 'I love every inch of you, love your clothes, even the road you walk'. She asks whether he makes that declamation before all the girls in the town, to which Khader replies she is the only woman in his life. The love affair raises a storm in the town. Jameela's father is up in arms against it; but finally they do get married. The 'lady' tries hard to tame him and turn him away from the bad company of 'beggars, poets, workers', etc. He too acts a gentleman for some time and even cooks for her as she does not seem to know cooking. One day Jameela asks him to bring her two *poovan* bananas. Khader is happy that she had not asked for a car or a gold chain or a dakota airplane or an ice cube from the Everest or two bristles from the freshly-littered lioness. But once he sets out for the bananas, he finds that they are not available this side of the river. He crosses over; it is raining cats and dogs, the river is in spate and *poovan* bananas are not available on the other shore either. He then buys some oranges; but by the time the rain stops, it is too late to cross over; no boat is available; he grows anxious as Jameela is alone at home and decides to swim across the flooded river in the dark, holding the oranges in his turban. He somehow reaches home; but Jameela does not appreciate the oranges nor believe the tale of his adventure. But now Khader decides to reappear in his rowdy incarnation and not only makes her eat the oranges but to agree that they are bananas. He also makes her agree he could keep his old company and she would cook for him. The story ends when both grow old and have nine children. The town has changed beyond recognition, but Khader still taunts her reminding her of that fatal day. He asks her, what had he brought for her from across the river; she answers, '*Poovan* bananas'. And how did they look? 'Round like oranges!'

Basheer's sense of irony works also in the story *Vidikalude Swargam* (The Fools' Paradise) where the hero is attracted to a woman who one day invites him to her house. He finds the situation deplorable; she has two pale kids and old and ailing parents. Her terrible plight kills his desire; he gives her whatever money he had and comes back disillusioned. In the story, *Nairasyam* (Despair), a person who grows from a beggar to a leader dies with one despair: his beloved had refused water to him when he was thirsty and told him her house was no orphanage'. She was later ready to offer him anything; but that memory haunts him. The listener in the story asks the narrator at the end, 'Any moral?'. He simply says, 'No, it was just a memory.' In *Kallanottu* (The Fake Notes), a mother sells her daughter only to get some fake currency notes and she ends up being raped and killed near the army camp. Gopinathan in *Second-hand* marries a woman who had been in love with a poet and had a child with him. He thinks she hates him, but finds out in the end that she simply adores him. In *Oru Jayilpulliyude Chitram* (The Portrait of a Prisoner), one of Basheer's several prison stories, Mariamma is in love with a political prisoner and exchanges letters with him. The story exposes the corruption in our jails. The prisoner advises her not to love him as he does not hope to come out at all, and he no more looks like his photo she had seen at his home. In *Polesukarante Makal* (The Daughter of a Policeman), Bhargavi, the daughter of a policeman falls in love with Jagdeesh, a prisoner her father is after. The writer being interviewed in *Yuddham Avasanikkannamenkil* (If Wars Should End) tells the interviewer that there will be no wars when leaders, lawyers, judges, policemen, teachers, journalists and soldiers will all be afflicted with scabies so that they will have time only to scratch.

This irony is evident also in the question-answer column he had done for the cartoon weekly, *Narmada* for some time. It was called *Nerum Nunayum* (Truth and Falsehood). One questioner asks him whether communists can be called chameleons. Basheer replies, he has to ask the chameleons to find out if they agree. Asked what changes he finds in his town, Emakulam, to which he has returned from Chennai after years, he says he finds the town now boasts of a mental hospital. He explains the reason too. All the porters, carters, cooks and hotel managers in the town—who all freely helped him when he came, had turned editors of weeklies. They had helped him as they all wanted his stories. The subscribers of these weeklies go mad after reading them regularly for three months. That explains the presence of the crowded mental hospital there. Another question is whether Joseph Mundassery, the critic-turned education minister of Kerala, is a Muslim. Basheer replies that he is; his

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original name was Yusuf Mumtas Ali and he was a follower of Mohammed Ali Jinnah. He had been forcibly converted to Christianity by the Roman Catholics led by Fr. Vadakkan (a priest, who had played a role in Kerala politics at one time). Later Joseph Mundassery was sent to China by the communist leaders, K. Damodaran and A K G; then he became an admirer of China, wrote a book glorifying China's progress and became Munda-tse-Tung.

Basheer is also the narrator of the supernatural which in his world is associated with moonlight. *Poonilavil* (In the Light of the Full-Moon) tells the story of a traveller visiting the ruins of an old city. The horses drawing the cart stop on the way as if they had seen something scarily odd and on the way to the bazaar at night he meets a beautiful woman in white from whom he drinks water. On the way back she invites him to her house: he finds the sky is the roof of the house and when he hugs her he sees to his horror that it was a skeleton turning to dust. In *Nilavu Kanumpol* (While Seeing the Moonlight), the protagonist who is an editor and a member of a terrorist outfit fighting the British meets his friends on the seashore who leave him by two in the morning. When he sits alone, he sees a beautiful woman bathing in the nude in the sea. He turns to go back; but his bicycle would not move. Finally he carries it on his shoulder; some sand falls on his body and he finds a whole group of women bathing, ululating in the sea. In *Neelavelicham* (The Blue Light) on which the film *Bhargaveenilayam* was later based, the hero rents a house that is said to be haunted by the ghost of a woman, jilted in love, who had jumped into the well and killed herself. The writer develops an intimacy with her even while not seeing her, he even plays music records for her. One day while coming back from a friend borrowing some kerosene for the lamp that had gone dim, he finds a blue light filling the room. Basheer has a knack of narrating such tales in a most natural way, but subtly arousing fear in the reader.

Basheer, though often called a humanist was not anthropocentric in his vision. The story, *Bhoomiyude Avakasikal* (The Rightful Inheritors of the Earth) is a testament of his ecological vision. When his wife complains that squirrels and crows are feasting on the ripe jackfruit on the tree in their new compound while bats and birds are eating up the guavas, the sapotas and the graft mangoes, he tells her: "But that's the beauty of it. God almighty, who holds the universe together without a single prop, has created a variety of things for His creatures-fruit, edible roots, grass, grain, flowers, water, air, warmth and light. Don't you think we should remind ourselves always that birds, beasts and insects too are entitled to the produce of the earth?" He asks God's forgiveness for exterminating

the rats through treachery; but he does not agree with his wife when she suggests they buy a gun to shoot down the bats that destroy the tender coconuts as also the foxes and polecats. He says: "Not me. I shall not be a party to it. The gun is a symbol of cruelty. It is the child of sin. Man should have never invented it." The story ends with the statement: "Remember the ancient right that God bequeathed at the auspicious moment of creation—all living beings are the rightful inheritors of the earth."

5

Basheer's humour springs from his grasp of the paradoxes of existence. He combines a cartoonist's eye with a philosopher's vision in portraying his characters, as in *Ntuppappaakkoranendarnnu* (Me Granddad'ad an Elephant), *Sthalathe Pradhana Divyan* (The Most Important Holy Man of the Place), *Mucheettukalikkarante Makal* (The Card-Sharpener's Daughter), *Aanavariyum Ponkurisum* (Anavari and Ponkurisu—nicknames for Raman Nair and Thoma), *Viswavyahyatamaya Mookku* (The World-renowned Nose) and other stories. Look at the way he portrays his characters: "I shall begin with Ottakkannan Pokker. As the sobriquet prefixed to the name indicates, he had only one eye. It had been damaged beyond repair in one of the heroic adventures of his salad days. It was true that certain intellectuals in the locality surreptitiously referred to him as "that one-eyed monkey." But never mind that. When this story begins, he was forty-nine years old. His complexion could be described as fair. The real colour of his teeth was a well-concealed secret. The visible colour was a dull red, owing to the fact, that Pokker was a voracious betel-chewer." (The Card-sharper's Daughter) Pokker was a card-sharper who cheated at cards while his friend Mandan Muthapa was a pick-pocket. Basheer treats him as an artist: "Contrary to popular opinion, there is nothing demeaning about a pickpocket's work. It has made amazing strides in many countries of the world. There are even colleges to train aspiring pickpockets. That apart, it is a profession that requires unwavering concentration, infinite patience, an eye for detail and unshaken faith in the adage, 'silence is golden'.... As for capital, long nimble fingers and a shawl are the only tools required. Like all committed artists, a pickpocket has to have a finger on the pulse of the people. Not for him the solitary existence of the ivory tower. In other words, a pickpocket is essentially a social being, sharing the joys and sorrows of people." Pokker's daughter Zainaba falls in love with Muthapa much to the chagrin of Pokker. The village

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is divided over the issue. On Zainaba's request Muthapa stops pickpocketing and starts a tea-stall with the money he makes from card-sharpening, helped secretly by Zainaba. The wedding finally takes place as Pokker could not go against his daughter's wishes, as of his other friends though he is not happy about it. The tea-stall soon grows into a proper hotel. Pokker is amazed to know it was Zainaba who had revealed the secret of his card-sharpening to Muthapa.

Another portrait: "Ettukali Mammoonju was called so because he looked like a spider, an *ettukali*. Short-statured, with a small head, the one endowment he could boast of was his moustache. He let it hang a foot-long on either side. There was a general complaint that he would let his appendage rub against the women he passed by. People said he was impotent, a secret that the women of the neighbourhood too knew. How they knew about this, nobody could tell." (Ettukali Mammoonju) Mammoonju wanted to participate in the experiences and adventures of the notorious rogues, Anavari Raman Nair (Raman Nair, the Elephant-Grabber) and Ponkurisu Thoma (The Thoma of the Golden Cross) and was unhappy that he was never considered important enough to be accepted in the distinguished company. So one day, Mammoonju told them a secret: that he was responsible for the pregnancy of Thachi, the servant maid of Undakkannan Andru, (Andru, the Round-eyed) the notorious miser. This earns Mammoonju a lot of respect and even gifts from friends. But it is soon proved that it was only a tumour that had to be surgically removed; yet Mammoonju does not withdraw his claim; now he says Andru got Thachi aborted. Finally Andru, already married to Khadijumma to avoid paying a servant, takes Thachi also for another wife. Even then Mammoonju tells his people: "That round-eyed bastard destroyed my son first; now he has married my wedded wife, Thachi!"

And here is Mookken, the illiterate cook who grew famous overnight as his nose began to grow like the elephant's trunk: "Mookken's nose started growing all of a sudden—it extended past his mouth and down his chin in no time. Within a month, its tip was level with his navel... Perhaps there was nothing unusual about it. The occurrence of such noses has been recorded in history." (The World-renowned Nose). He lost his job due to this abnormality, but soon found fortune as visitors thronged to see his nose: He became a millionaire; acted in films, six poets wrote encomiums on him, nine biographies were published, he began to comment on international events, his two secretaries fell in love with him; the government conferred a title on him, political parties vied with each other to get him as a member, there was propaganda that his nose was made of rubber which was disproved, he became an MP and was conferred an honorary doctorate.

Basheer has contributed several usages to Malayalam: meaningless expressions like 'huttina halitta luthappee' (something like 'humpty-dumpty'), or 'Kukruma dharma' (in the context meaning some evil doing), *romamatangal* ('hair-religions', pointing to the importance hair has in various religions and rituals), 'cock-pecked' (as the antonym of 'hen-pecked'), 'he-cow' (for ox), 'selfichi' (feminine for the Self) and *Sinkidimungan* (a hefty person), not to speak of the compound adjectives he uses for women, God and the universe.

Basheer was one with the 'progressive' writers in empathising with the hapless and in upholding hope in man and the possibility of change, but he went beyond them while looking at the human condition in its many hues and dimensions, including the spiritual that remains an unstated undercurrent in his narratives of life. He belonged to a generation fed on rigid ideologies and arid experiences, but he picked up his tales from the throbbing warmth of life's poetry. During about half a century of his creative career, he published only thirty books from *Balyakalaskhi* (1944) to *Sinkidimungan* (1991) but every one of these 2,200 pages was world class literature. He created his own language within language, (having abandoned English in which he had attempted his first novel) polished, edited and re-edited each line he wrote until it shone like crystal: clear, sparkling, many-faced. Basheer was a modernist who perhaps never knew he was one. He broke new grounds quite casually and unselfconsciously, just by recounting his varied experiences of the world in his own crisp and inimitable style. He shunned the big canvas; what mattered to him was the sheer depth and intensity of the narrated event. He hated none; thieves, gamblers, homosexuals, pimps, prostitutes: every one had a seat in Basheer's heaven. The fallen, he knew, were the victims of unkind circumstances. They are also the chosen in his world illuminated by the beams of a sacred love from the other side of material life.

Critics have compared Kafka's 'Hunger Artist' with Basheer's *Janmadinam* (The Birth day) as also Jimenez's 'Platero and I' with Basheer's *Pathummayude Adu* (Pathumma's Goat) in an attempt to prove he is both modern and universal. But Basheer's modernism and his trans-national humanism came from his intense rootedness in the soil of his land and community and the hells and heavens he came across in his gipsy-like wanderings. Basheer, while having ardent admirers like M.T. Vasudevan Nair, M.N. Vijayan and M. A. Rahman who has done a beautiful documentary on him, was not without detractors either: they stamped his *Sabdangal* (Voices) and *Pavappettavarude Vesya* (The Prostitute of the Dispossessed) obscene; they objected to his *Ntuppuppakkoranendarnnu* being made a text book; one even went to the extent of publishing a book to prove the whole

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Basheeriana trite and insignificant. Basheer met all of them with his Sufi detachment and refused to immortalise them by not taking up the gauntlets.

Basheer has a story based on an experience he once had in a frontier province. He had his lunch in a restaurant and found his wallet missing while preparing to pay. The shop owner had him stripped and would have gone further had a man not suddenly emerged offering to pay the bill for Basheer. The man showed Basheer several wallets and asked him to pick up his—he was a pick-pocket. Here is the source of Basheer's unflinching faith in man's basic goodness. While a prisoner, Basheer used to cultivate roses on the jail courtyard. This dispassionate activity of generating fragrance for the unfortunate trapped in their dark destinies is symbolic of his whole *oeuvre*, his great human—he would say divine—mission.

