

The Carnavalesque in Vaikom Muhammed Basheer's Pathumma's Goat

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Abstract

Vaikom Muhammed Basheer is one of the best-known and most interesting of Malayalam novelists. To think of Basheer the novelist is to think of a man who loved life in all its variety and who did so with a phenomenal sense of fun and humour which he practiced not only in his actual life but in his novels as well. One of the most striking aspects of his novels is their great potential to delight the readers and to make them laugh. This potential derives predominantly from his use of the carnivalesque mode to tell his story. Pathumma's Goat (1959), one of his most famous novels, is inordinately hilarious. The Bakhtinian concept of the carnivalesque, it may be said, can throw considerable light on Basheer's narrative mode in the novel. This article is an attempt to read Pathumma's Goat from the perspective of the Bakhtinian concept of the carnivalesque.

Keywords- Carnavalesque- Bakhtin-
Cultural Studies, Malayalam Literature,
Grotesque

“Worldly life is fun.” This is an observation we come across in “*Ente Charamakkurippu*” (*My Obituary*) by Vaikom Muhammed Basheer. The statement, of course, seems simplistic, but it is important and no student of Basheer can afford to overlook it. For, it is pivotal to an understanding of Basheer's conception of life, a conception which comes very close to the Rabelaisian sense of the world masterfully encapsulated in Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque. Basheer was a man of vast experience. He had travelled extensively within India. His occupation ranged from that of a fortune teller, loom fitter, cook, sports-goods agent, accountant, watchman, hotel manager to living as an ascetic with hindu saints and sufi mystics in their hermitages even in the distant foothills of the Himalayas.

Basheer's novels are slices of life and reality transmuted humorously, and intelligently, into superb literary artifacts. His style of writing, as is well-known, is startlingly unconventional; he does not differentiate between literary language and the language spoken by the common people. Interestingly enough, many of his novels can be read from the perspective of Bakhtinian's concept of the carnivalesque. Humour and

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laughter, the twin central components of the carnivalesque are abundantly present and in them. Through his style and thematic concerns, he makes evident that his world view is essentially carnivalesque. Basheer was a man with a prodigious sense of humour, and he practised it not only in his actual life but in his works as well. In his use of the colloquial Malayalam idiom, in his astonishingly innovative coinages and expressions, in the numerous delightful characters, incidents, and episodes he presents, and in his very mode of presentation, we cannot fail to detect his legendary sense of fun and humour and his immense capacity to generate laughter.

Pathummayude Aadu (Pathumma's Goat, 1959) is of special note in this context. It may justly be called a carnivalesque novel, abounding, as it does, in scenes, episodes, and characters designed to produce laughter. It allows the subversive and mocking voices to run parallel to the official, the stern and the serious.

Animals and children have always been used as fit raw material for the production of carnivalesque laughter. It is, therefore, worthwhile to note that some of the grotesque scenes in the novel, *Pathummayude Aadu* are centered on animals and children. The goat is central to the novel; it enjoys full freedom, and shows up everywhere in the household just as the 'ratheeb' ram in *Sthalathe Pradhana Divyan* moves about in the locality. The scene in which it eats the narrator's books is one of the most celebrated scenes of carnivalesque grotesquerie in all of Basheer's fiction. Standing on the narrator's bed, the goat eats

two of his books *Baalyakalasakhi* and *Shabdangal*. When no more books are available for consumption, it begins to eat the narrator's blanket, too. At this point, the narrator who has been silently watching the comedy hastily intervenes and drives it away, confessing that he doesn't have a copy of it whereas he has copies of the books.

It may not be out of place to state here that the scene has found representation in an attractive piece of sculpture set up at the Mananjira junction in the historic city of Kozhikode. The sculpture, with the figure of a goat, its well-balanced body, and an open book before it, is a glowing tribute to the profound carnivalesque fun and laughter Basheer has produced through the antics of the goat in the novel.

The scene, in which the goat is imaged as eating jamba fruits, is no less humorous. The goat tries to eat the jamba fruits hanging from the branches; it holds its body in such a fashion as to make us laugh. Eating and swallowing are closely linked to the grotesque body, because scenes depicting voracious eating show the gaping mouth, the protruding tongue, and the rounding lips assuming positions different from the normal.

The scene in which the goat tups at and eats the trousers of Abi, son of the narrator's brother, Haneefa, is one of the high points of the carnivalesque in the novel. The goat almost finishes eating the front part of Abi's trousers, as he continues to cling to it in an embrace, with both his arms fearlessly and affectionately thrown around

its neck. There are the other children, too, with their gimmicks. Pathukkutty pulls at the goat's tail, Zaid Mohammed takes hold of its horns, and Laila chides it, grasping its belly. A scene of mirth, it fuses the goat and the kids into one fine, funny image of ecological significance. The comedy being enacted, while contributing to the general carnivalesque ambience of the narrator's household and pointing up the native proclivity of animals and children to odd and grotesque ways of behavior, also indicates the possibility of a kindly and empathetic rapport between man and beast. Perhaps, it is this rapport that we discern in animal shows on carnival grounds and circus rings. It may be useful to recall in this context that the procession of protest in *Aanvaariyum Ponkrishum* is led by the elephants endearingly called Parukkutty and Kochuneelandan.

Elements of the carnivalesquely comical can be discerned even in the episode of the theft of milk with which the novel closes. The two Anummas and Aishamma milk Pathumma's goat, stealthily. To this end, they use the kids Zubaida and Rasheed as lambs. Zubaida and Rasheed become lambs; they suck the breasts of the goat. In a sense, the uniting of human and animal traits for the production of the grotesque which Bakhtin speaks of in his theory is what we see here. The whole episode is grotesque, it brings together animals and children to create a grotesque effect. A similar commingling of animals and children can also be seen in the scene in which the narrator is put in charge of the two kids, Rasheed and Zubaida, by his

mother when the women go out to bathe. As soon as the narrator takes over their custody, the two kids begin to cry. In order to pacify them, he fetches a lamb and sandwiches it between them. Then, the kids urinate, and the lamb, too, urinates and defecates. It is into this grotesquer hurly-burly that Abu comes with his unwavering sense of hygiene and cleanliness. Irritated, he rolls his eyes, shouts, puts out and bites his tongue. The children are silenced. He beats and drives away Pathumma's goats; he beats the cats and he drives the chickens away racing after them. In the meanwhile, the narrator cleans the human and animal excretions. Basheer's use of excretion in this scene to add to its grotesque ambience is congruous with the Bakhtinian idea that excretions are potentially grotesque.

Basheer's carnivalesque scenes embody serious political and socio-cultural reflections. This is true of even seemingly so simplistic a scene as the one in which the narrator, who is the elder brother, gets over his fear of his younger brother, Abu. The younger brother, resorting to the strategy of intimidation, has been making his elder brother carry his books also to school. One day, the elder brother refuses to obey when he is, as usual, ordered to bear the books. Mustering courage, he punches the younger brother hard. Abu, the bully is shocked and terrified; his tyranny over his elder brother immediately ends. He even agrees to carry his elder brother's books to school.

This scene from his school days, which the narrator recalls, is simple and delightful. But when we examine it closely, we find that it is a sort of parable about how,

through the creation of fear, human beings are forced into servitude and slavery, and how through fearless revolt and reaction the forces of domination and colonization could be overpowered. The elder brother, it is to be noted, regains his legitimate rights, freedom, and status when he fearlessly reacts. His rightful space is restored to him; he is no longer dispossessed of it.

We can also see in the novel Basheer's preoccupation with the grotesque body. The postman Kuttan Pillai is imaged as a carnivalesque figure. He has a grotesque body. He has a swelling as big as a mango on one of his cheeks. We encounter the grotesque body in the figure of the pregnant goat, too. The grotesque body, according to Bakhtin, is a body in the act of becoming; it builds and creates another body, a new second body.

Stealing abounds in the novel. Abdul Khader, the narrator's brother steals his mother's money; he also consistently steals ghee and sugar; Anumma, and the other women and also the narrator's mother repeatedly milk Pathumma's goat, stealthily, without Pathumma's knowledge. Basheer's *Pathummayude Aadu*, it may be said without any reservation, is a carnivalesque novel of the first order. Its world is marked by a number of those elements Bakhtin associates with the carnivalesque.

Basheer's use of the Malayalam language, particularly the colloquial Malayalam used by Muslims of Kerala, is a perennial source of delight in his literary oeuvre. This is true of *Pathumma's Goat*, too. The colloquialism of the characters in

the novel enhances the carnivalesque cast of the novel.

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