

THE INHERITORS OF THE EARTH

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Abstract

Vaikkom Muhammad Basheer is a legendary writer of fiction, an eternal marvel of Malayalam literature. He came under the influence of the National Movement and took part in the Salt Satyagraha, for which he was arrested and tortured by the police. It is the richness and variety of his experiences that later became the raw material for his creative endeavours. The novelty of his subjects, the unique style of narration, unconventional use of language, and sharp sense of humour blend gracefully, adding to the beauty of his works. His works include *Balyakalaskhi* (1944), *Ntuppuppakkoraanendaarnnu* (1951), *Sthalathe Pradhaana Divyan* (1953), *Aanavaariyum Ponkurishum* (1953), *Paathummayude Aadu* (1959), *Mathilukal* (1989), *Maanthrikappoocha* (1968) and *Aanappooda* (1975). He is a recipient of the Padma Shri, the Sahitya Akademi Fellowship, and the Vallathol Award.

The book *Vaikkom Muhammad Basheer: Abuvinte Ormakal* (*Vaikkom Muhammad Basheer: Memoirs of Abu*) enshrines the memories relating to Basheer, retold by his younger brother Abubakker, and compiled by Kiliroor Radhakrishnan. The anecdotes transport us to the warm, lively and nostalgic age of Basheer, with all the incidents and personalities that made it marvellous and memorable. All are invariably replete with well-meaning and humorous exchanges among Basheer and his dear ones, typical of the great writer.

The present work is an attempt at translating the chapter *Bhoomiyude Avakashikal* (*The Inheritors of the Earth*) from *Memoirs of Abu*. It is a brilliant account of Basheer's love of nature and compassion for all creatures, even the vicious ones. Abu describes how Basheer dissuades him from burning a hive of wasps found in his yard. Even after he is stung, even as the pain is unbearably intense, he does not consent to kill the wasps.

I don't remember the year and date. These are all incidents which took place long, long ago. Why should we know the date and time, after all? Memories never die. And that is the most important thing. There is a road in front of our ancestral house. There was a small two-roomed house on the other side of the road. It was in this house that Basheer used to live and write in those days. Basheer had planted a lot of flowering plants in the front yard of the house. He used

to manure them, water them; sometimes he was even seen talking to them. Mother would bring him breakfast, lunch and supper, in due course. The children at our home would also accompany her. They would run around the yard and play hide-and-seek among the plants. Some would pluck flowers. Brother does not like any of these things. He would shout at mother. “Mother, haven’t I told you not to bring these children here? Don’t you see them ruining all those plants?”

Then, mother would give him a smile, and deliver a speech with her hand on hip. “You feel so because you don’t have children. Why not marry? Aren’t you, a bachelor and glutton, wandering here and there like a beggar? How long can you live like this? I am aged. Who will look after you if I die? Aren’t you getting old too? You are bald already. When are you going to marry? After teeth grow in your nose¹? I have found a girl for you ... a lovely lass. Please do go and meet her. If you like her, we shall hold the marriage soon.

Basheer hates to hear the very word ‘marriage’. His plan was to spend the rest of his life like this, as a bachelor and glutton. Therefore, he would shout whenever mother talks about marriage. “Oh, won’t you give me any peace? Abu, pack my bed and suitcase. I had better go somewhere else.”

He prepares to move out, murmuring. Mother would not utter anything more for some days. However, now, his reply was in the positive. “I have to go to a certain place urgently. I will go and see the girl you mentioned, as soon as I get back. Alright?”

Mother was excited. But, there was a problem when she was excited – she asked for money. She said to him, “Alright. Come back soon. You must go and meet the girl as soon as you return. By the way, do you have any money with you? Please give me some if you have.”

Basheer got up, took twenty five rupees from the box and gave it to her. He said, “You always have only this single thought. Don’t ask me anything else. I don’t have any more money.”

Mother smiled slyly and tucked the money in her clothes at the waist, took the vessels and left. I was standing in the yard, looking on. Brother walked towards the plants carrying a chair, presumably to read or write. It was then that I saw a wasp humming around. I found that the hive was on the *kudachethi* (ixora) plant, by the side of the yard. The hive was pretty large, but no one had noticed it, since it was hanging amidst large umbrella-shaped bunches of red flowers blooming all around it. Children used to run about it while playing. It was by sheer luck that they were not stung.

I said to brother, “Don’t sit in the yard. You saw that? A hive of wasps. We must burn it tonight and kill them all.” He looked at the plant, and did see the hive. But what he said was, “Abu, you need not burn them to death. They were also created by Allah. Don’t they have the right to live on this earth, too? They won’t harm us unless we harm them.”

I was annoyed to hear his gospel. “Damn! What a creature to love! The sting of a wasp is more terrible than any fatal disease. I will burn the hive this very night.”

“Don’t, Abu. Don’t commit that sin. I tell you, we have no right to kill Allah’s creatures. Go and mind your own business.” I left the place. Let him suffer whatever is in store for him. After that, for some reason, I did not go to his place for a couple of days. One day, I went to him when someone told me he wanted to see me.

He was not found in the usual spot in the verandah. I went in, only to find a stranger standing there. Even as I was wondering who it could be, I heard a voice. “Abu, it has happened exactly as you said. The wasps have stung me. My face is all swollen. I can’t stand the pain.”

It was then that I realized that it was my brother himself who had metamorphosed beyond recognition, his eyes and face inflamed. I felt sorry, annoyed and amused at the same time.

“Never mind. After all, it is a creature of Allah that has stung you. Just suffer the pain for the sake of Allah.”

“You.... This is no time for jokes”, mother said. She came in with turmeric and some other medicines ground into a paste. When it was smeared all over his swollen face, he looked like a clown. I felt sorry for him. “Abu, burn that hive down this very night,” mother told me. But still, brother did not agree to it. “Don’t kill them. Just pluck off the hive slowly without disturbing them and throw it somewhere far away.”

“Damn it! So do you want me to be like you too? To get stung and be in a sort of *Kathakali costume*? That night, when brother was asleep, I lit a flare made of dry coconut leaves, and burnt the hive to ashes. The next day, he saw it, but did not ask me anything about it. Sure, he wouldn’t have liked it.... After all, he is the author of *The Inheritors of the Earth*².

Notes

¹*when teeth grow in one’s nose* is an expression in Malayalam which means ‘when one is too old for something’.

²Basheer himself has written a short story of the same title.

Works Cited

Radhakrishnan, Kiliroor. *Vaikkom Muhammad Basheer: Abuvinte Ormakal*.
Thrissur: Green Books, 2012.