

## Vaikom Muhammed Basheer : Freedom Fighting into Fiction

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The fiftieth anniversary of the attainment of political independence by India and other countries of South Asia led to discussions of the impact of the historic moment of 1947 on various aspects of life, culture and society in South Asia, including the world of letters. Among the possible approaches to the question of the impact of this defining moment on South Asian literature are, firstly, to ask whether the generation of writers whose activity preceded this dividing line aimed to address a different audience from, and approached the task of writing in a different manner from the generation whose activity followed this event; and, secondly, to enquire whether an individual writer whose career does not belong entirely to either period underwent a change in his attitude to his art after the defining moment. It is the second of these that forms the theme of the present essay.<sup>1</sup>

A number of creative writers in pre-independence India, poets perhaps more than novelists,<sup>2</sup> gave support in their writing to the fight for freedom and self-rule. It was but a small proportion of these, however, who were committed activists. One major literary figure who did involve himself in the struggle in a significant way was Vaikom Muhammed Basheer, whose life (1908-1994) spans most of the twentieth century. Basheer's literary career covers the decade preceding Indian independence and the greater part of half a century after this landmark in world history, though indifferent health led to much reduced creativity in the 80s and 90s. Political activity during the first of these periods led to a number of periods in gaol. When confined to his cell he would, whenever he could find a way of obtaining paper and pencil, devote much of his time to writing, and it was perhaps this possibility above all that made imprisonment bearable for him.<sup>3</sup>

Basheer's total output in a long life is not large. Thirty-two titles were published between 1943 and 1992 (with a further one<sup>4</sup> from papers left behind on his death), but many of these were very slim books and it was possible to publish a collected edition in 1992 within the scope of only two, albeit

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is based on a paper presented at a seminar on 'The refashioning of identity in Post-Colonial South Asian literatures', held at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, on 24 October 1997. I am grateful to V. Abdulla, Stuart Blackburn, Michael Hutt (the organiser of the seminar) and M. Jamaludeen Kunju for comments on an earlier version.

<sup>2</sup> Tamil, of course, provided an instance among poets in C. Subrahmanya Bharati.

<sup>3</sup> Among the items written in prison that were later published were the novel *Love story* and the short stories 'Tiger', 'The policeman's daughter' and 'Bully Panicker', all mentioned below.

<sup>4</sup> *Yā ilāhi* ('Oh, God!'), Kottayam, DC Books, 1997. This is a miscellaneous collection of writings — stories, essays, letters, and a poem — which were not revised for publication by Basheer before his death.

substantial, volumes.<sup>5</sup> The reason for this has been explained both by critics writing about his work and by Basheer himself. Almost everything he wrote was subjected to painstaking revision, with several rewritings. There are two major exceptions to this among his novels. One is *Pattumma's goat*,<sup>6</sup> and even this he kept for five years before deciding that it did not after all require any revision:

I completed the story 'Pattumma's Goat' on 27th April 1954. I thought I would copy it out and publish it with an introduction. Days passed by as I kept putting it off till tomorrow.

Five years!

Up to now I have not copied out the story. Almost all that I have published before this, I have written and rewritten more than once. This is coming out without being copied, without any corrections, just as I wrote it. I read it through and did not feel it should be corrected or copied.<sup>7</sup>

The other is *Romantic interlude*,<sup>8</sup> which was released, again from among unpublished papers in the author's house and again unrevised, but somewhat reluctantly under pressure from friends who had started a publishing house.<sup>9</sup>

Almost all of Basheer's writing can be seen as falling under the heading of prose fiction — short stories and novels (with the average length of one of the latter being no more than a hundred pages). He also published a one-act play, *The seed of a story*,<sup>10</sup> a set of rather rambling reminiscences in *The chambers of memory*,<sup>11</sup> and a mixture of essays and autobiographical pieces in *Fact and fiction*.<sup>12</sup> As is the case with much of modern Indian literature, the date of first publication is sometimes uncertain, since many of the short stories, and some of the novels in serialised form, first came out in weekly or monthly journals and the history of these first appearances is not well documented. Occasionally a book will give some indication, but rarely with any precision.<sup>13</sup> It is therefore not always easy to be sure whether a work was first printed before or after the date of Indian independence. We have it from Basheer that his career as a writer effectively began when he was in his late twenties. Writing in 1954, he said:

<sup>5</sup> Vaikkam Muhammad Bašir, *Sampūrṇa kṛtikaḷ* (in two volumes), Kottayam, D C Books, 1992. Unless otherwise stated, references to Basheer's writings will be to this edition.

<sup>6</sup> *Pāttummāyūṭe āṭu* 1959. Collected edition 1992, Vol. 1, pp. 931–999.

<sup>7</sup> *Pāttummāyūṭe āṭu*, Kottayam, Sahitya Pravarthaka Co-operative Society Ltd., 1959, Preface, p. 11. Preliminary matter in works published singly is not reproduced in the collected edition.

<sup>8</sup> *Anurāgattinṛe dināñṇaḷ* 1983. Collected edition 1992, Vol. 2, pp. 1791–1946.

<sup>9</sup> See Translator's introduction in Vaikom Muhammad Basheer, *Poovan banana and other stories*, translated from the Malayalam by V. Abdulla, Madras, Disha Books (Orient Longman Ltd), 1994, p. 12.

<sup>10</sup> *Kathābijam* 1945. Collected edition 1992, Vol. 1, pp. 178–228.

<sup>11</sup> *Ōrmmayūṭe arakaḷ* 1973. Collected edition 1992, Vol. 2, pp. 1449–1591.

<sup>12</sup> *Nērūm nuṇayum* 1969. Collected edition 1992, Vol. 2, pp. 1265–1448.

<sup>13</sup> The reverse title-page of *Ōrmakkurippu* (Trichur, The Mangalodayam (Private) Ltd., 1946), for example, noted that the six stories it contains were first published in journals in '1937, '38, '39, '40, '41, '43'.

It is some considerable time since I started writing. When did I begin? I think it would be in about 1937. From then on I have been living in Ernakulam. Writing was my job, and I wrote a lot. I got it published in newspapers and journals. Nobody paid me for it.

This book contains the stories that I got published between 1937 and 1941. They came out in *Navajivan*, a weekly that was published in Trivandrum in those days.<sup>14</sup>

His first book, the short novel *Love letter*,<sup>15</sup> was published in 1943, and five more books appeared up to the eve of Independence Day.

Basheer's fiction is very varied and full of contrasts. On more than one occasion he declared that one of his aims was to create a Muslim literature in Malayalam, but even a superficial reading of his stories reveals a deeper concern with an examination of universals of human behaviour. If a large proportion of his narratives is set among the Kerala Muslim community, this is probably to be ascribed principally to two factors. Firstly, novelists commonly feel more comfortable with a setting with which they are really familiar. Secondly, he wished to redress the balance from what he had learnt from his reading while studying at the English school at Vaikom:

From the Malayalam novels that I read ... a true fact emerged. You should remember that this happened twenty or thirty years ago. At that time Malayalam literature was the province of upper caste Hindus and members of princely families. What was the true fact that I observed in Malayalam novels of the time? — The Muslim community was an assemblage of thieves, murderers and generally vile people! All the low characters in novels were Muslims!<sup>16</sup>

As he grew older, Basheer was to come to recognise that this was not a true picture as far as the mainline history of prose fiction in Malayalam was concerned. For instance, one of the two great pioneers of this genre and the first to introduce Muslim characters into his stories, the historical novelist C. V. Raman Pillai (1858–1922), portrayed them no less sympathetically than he did members of other groups. The boyhood misconception may nevertheless have influenced Basheer's thinking on the direction his writing should take, and it was perhaps for this reason that he never felt a need to correct or modify the statement of his recollection of one aspect of his time at school.

There are among Basheer's output realistic stories and tales of the supernatural. While many of the stories present situations to which the average reader can easily relate, the darker, seamier side of human existence sometimes finds a place, as in the novel *Voices*.<sup>17</sup> There are sad situations and gay ones — and commonly both in the same narrative. There are purely narrative pieces and others which have the quality of poems in prose. In all, a superficially

<sup>14</sup> Preface to *Viśappu*, Trichur, Current Books, 1954, p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> *Prēmālēkhanam* 1943. Collected edition 1992, Vol. 1, pp. 85–120. *Prēmālēkhanam* was written in 1942, during one of Basheer's spells of incarceration — in Trivandrum Central Jail. Though in no way seditious, it was banned and copies were seized in 1944.

<sup>16</sup> *Ōrmmayūṭe arakaḷ*, Kottayam, Sahitya Pravarthaka Co-operative Society Ltd., 1973, p. 203.

<sup>17</sup> *Śabdaiññāḷ* 1947. Collected edition 1992, Vol. 1, pp. 415–462.

simple style (as Basheer frequently said: 'What I have put down in writing is the way I talk in conversation'<sup>18</sup>) conceals a great subtlety of expression.

One contrast is between works which are primarily autobiographical as far as events and characters are concerned, and those which are the product of the author's imagination. This is not to say that a novel or a story will always fall clearly into one category or another; the percentage of factual truth varies from one story to the next. Thus the author estimates the autobiographical content of *Childhood friend*<sup>19</sup> at ninety-five per cent, while *Pattumma's goat* is 'one hundred per cent true'<sup>20</sup> (something that was confirmed in conversation by the chief character after her brother's death), and the range is undoubtedly wider than this recorded response to a question relating to two of his most renowned works. The narrator's use of the first person is no guide as to which category on balance a story belongs: first person is used by the author in *Pattumma's goat*, but Majid, the hero of *Childhood friend* is referred to in the third person. On the other hand, a first person pronoun may be used in a story which is entirely fictitious. Whatever the case, a book published as fiction is intended to be read as such, as contrasted with one published as 'reminiscences'. Nevertheless, when real events are distilled by his art into a sort of higher truth, it is not possible to ignore their origins in fact. His stories of freedom fighters, himself and others, are all the more compelling through being based on the hard experience of participating in the movement. The impossibility of drawing a distinct line between fact and fiction is acknowledged in a number of places by Basheer. Introducing the 'story' of one of the instances where he found himself in trouble with the law in the princely state of Travancore under the dewanship of Sir C. P. Ramaswami Iyer, he notes: 'When I say story, it is not actually a story. It is history. But the events took place a quarter of a century ago. There may be a few errors of memory.'<sup>21</sup>

If there is a strong autobiographical element in Basheer's fiction, it is the consequence of his special ability to turn ordinary, everyday events into engaging stories. This is not to say that he lived a dull life that bore nothing of intrinsic interest, for it was in parts an adventurous life and one full of vicissitudes. He had no regular profession apart from that of writer. For at least the first half of his life, however, this was far from providing him with the means to live. Not only that, for the earliest of his stories that were accepted for publication in journals (written when he was approaching thirty) he was, as already indicated, paid absolutely nothing. When his first book was published, he was already thirty-five.

Basheer was born as the eldest child of his devout Muslim parents in the village of Thalayolaparambu in northern Travancore. The first of his forenames

<sup>18</sup> *Pattummāyūṭe āṭu* 1959. Collected edition 1992, Vol. 1, p. 987.

<sup>19</sup> *Bālyakālasakhi* 1944. Collected edition 1992, Vol. 1, pp. 111-177.

<sup>20</sup> *Ōrmmayūṭe arakaḷ*, Kottayam, Sahitya Pravarthaka Co-operative Society Ltd., 1973, p. 204.

<sup>21</sup> *Kammyūṇiṣṭṭṭ den* 'Communist den', included in *Oru bhagavadgīṭayum kure mulakalum* ('A Bhagavadgīta and some breasts'), Kottayam, Sahitya Pravarthaka Co-operative Society Ltd., 1967. Collected edition 1992, Vol. 1, p. 1061.

was taken not from his native place, however, but from the nearby town of Vaikom, which had the status of taluk headquarters. His father was a timber contractor, but the business did not flourish sufficiently for his large family, all of whom make an appearance in *Pattumma's goat*, to live in anything approaching luxury. After beginning his education at the local Malayalam school, he was sent to the English school in Vaikom, five miles distant. While at school he fell under the spell of Gandhi, whom he saw — and even managed to touch — at the Vaikom satyagraha,<sup>22</sup> and he determined to join the fight for an independent India, leaving school to do so while he was in the fifth form. The aim of the satyagraha, which lasted for some months before the authorities gave in, was to achieve the opening of the roads in the close vicinity of the temple to all, specifically 'the untouchables and unapproachables', as a prelude to the removal of this particular aspect of discrimination throughout Travancore. During his tour, which encompassed the whole of Travancore as far as Cape Comorin, however, Gandhi spoke on other topics as well as the need for the removal of untouchability, and these included the need for Hindu-Muslim unity. Part of Basheer's purpose in joining Congress was to help ensure that there was some Muslim representation in the pan-Indian movement; in the story 'Mother', discussed below, he writes: 'Many who belonged to my religion had not joined the freedom struggle. I had to redress that imbalance.' This factor can be related to his aim of creating a Muslim literature in Malayalam, and also to the time and effort he devoted after independence had been achieved to campaigning for high levels of education among members of his own community, so that they should not lag behind Hindus and Christians in Kerala in achieving universal literacy.

Some years after Gandhi's Travancore visit, Basheer went north by way of Calicut to take part in the salt satyagraha that had been planned to be centred on the seashore at Dandi in south Gujarat. This protest against the salt laws through the illicit manufacture of salt lasted for about two months and had been preceded by Gandhi's 240-mile walk from Sabarmati Ashram near Ahmedabad (12 March to 5 April 1930).<sup>23</sup> For his part in the satyagraha Basheer was arrested and served a period in prison. Freed from jail he organised a 'terrorist' movement and edited a revolutionary journal, *Ujjivanam* ('uprising'). A warrant was issued for his arrest and he left Kerala, returning only seven years later, when he was arrested again and condemned to a spell of rigorous imprisonment.

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<sup>22</sup> 1924–25. Gandhi arrived in Vaikom on 9 March 1925. See D. G. Tendulkar, *Mahatma: Life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Volume two: 1920–1929*, Bombay, Vithalbai K. Jhaveri & D. G. Tendulkar, 1951, pp. 236–240. Gandhi's thoughts on the purpose and conduct of the Vaikom satyagraha (in letters, telegrams, and interviews with the press) can be found in vols. XXIII (March 1922 – May 1924), XXIV (May – August 1924), XXV (August 1924 – January 1925) and XXVI (January – April 1925) of *The collected works of Mahatma Gandhi*, New Delhi, Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1966 and 1967. The text of Gandhi's speech at a public meeting in Vaikom on 10 March 1925 is given in vol. XXVI, pp. 264–269.

<sup>23</sup> This satyagraha constitutes the major topic in vol. XLIII of *The collected works of Mahatma Gandhi (March–June 1930)*, New Delhi, 1971.

Once India achieved control of its destiny, Basheer showed no further interest in politics. Nor does he appear to have carried any resentment for the harsh treatment he had suffered before his country became free. In later life, indeed, he was to express some surprise that he entertained an Englishman in his home for the first time in the 1960s.<sup>24</sup>

During his absence from Kerala he travelled over many parts of India, taking whatever work seemed likely to keep him from starvation. His jobs, as he tells us in *Basheer the man*,<sup>25</sup> a film about his life, work and personality, included those of loom fitter, fortune teller, cook, paper seller, fruit seller, sports goods agent, accountant, watchman, cowman, and hotel manager; and for some time he also lived as sanyasi, Sufi, and Buddhist monk. When his second major period of imprisonment was over, he remained in Kerala, where he made a living as a literary man, running a bookshop for some time as well as writing. When well into his forties he surprised many of his acquaintances by marrying and settling down to a life of quiet domesticity in Beypore, on the southern edge of Calicut.

All these periods and aspects of his life have provided material for short stories and novels.<sup>26</sup> The richness of the material, however, only becomes apparent through his skilful handling of it. Here again, there is enormous variety — of narrative style, of presentation, of philosophical content, of social comment.

One story is unusual in its overt expression of his decision to use a part of his experience as a piece of fiction:

8th Makaram: Today is my birthday... I want to write my diary for the day from beginning to end. There is in it all the material for a rather unusual short story.<sup>27</sup>

The core of the material he uses is his attempt somehow to obtain a cup of tea on a day when, behind with the rent in the very poor lodgings in which he lives, he does not have a single anna to his name. The day is in that part of his life when he was under fairly constant surveillance by the police, and at intervals as he moves about the town he catches sight of a member of the CID trailing him. At one point he is taken along to the police station and interrogated for an hour before being released. This, however, is only incidental to his portrait of a day in the life of a man who is hard up. Other stories take much more from this aspect of his early life.

For the clearest and fullest expression in his work of what a political activist risked and from time to time suffered, one turns to 'Mother'.<sup>28</sup> This,

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<sup>24</sup> Basheer 1989, p. 238.

<sup>25</sup> *Baṣīr enna manuṣyaṅ*, 1988, directed by M. A. Rahman. The screenplay of this film was published as *Baṣīr da mān (sinimākkatha)*, Kottayam, D C Books, 1997.

<sup>26</sup> Basheer's novels and short stories relating directly to his involvement in the independence movement were, at the time of the fiftieth anniversary of Indian independence, published together in a single volume (see Basheer 1998).

<sup>27</sup> Collected edition 1992, Vol. 1, pp. 231–232. 'Birthday' is the title story of *Janmadinam*, Trichur, The Mangalodayam (Private) Ltd., 1944.

published in book form with other pieces nine years later under the title *Jottings from memory*,<sup>29</sup> could just as easily have been considered a fragment of an autobiography as a short story, but for the fact that other pieces in the collection more clearly fall into the category of prose fiction. It begins:

The mother writes to the son eking out his living amid the miseries of a distant city. She writes with pain in her heart.

'Son, I just want to see you.'

From the generalised nature of this and succeeding opening paragraphs, it could appear that the author has in mind the class of mothers who long for the sight of a son in faraway places. So he makes clear that he is also being specific: 'I am saying this about my mother. Whatever I intend saying hereafter is about my mother.' Yet almost immediately he says: 'I am going to talk about the freedom struggle. It has no direct relationship with my mother.' Gradually the apparent contradiction is resolved as one realises that the word *amma* refers not only to his own mother and the generality of mothers whose sons are far from home, but also to India, his motherland (and there is another piece in the same collection entitled 'Bhāratamātā' ('Mother India')). It is significant in this respect that throughout the story he uses the unmarked *amma* rather than the explicitly Muslim kinship term *umma*, except when he portrays himself as speaking directly to his own mother. In the narrative parts, when he wishes to refer specifically to 'my mother', he uses an equally nonrestricted term, *enre mātāvu*.

The core of the story is 'how I went from Vaikom to Calicut to take part in the salt satyagraha', but with great skill (despite his claim that 'I am jotting down what happened without any aim') he touches on all the essential incidents and elements in his career as a national activist, and in so doing tells the story of countless other young people involved in the same struggle. We read of the time when he was beaten by the headmaster of the Vaikom English High School for wearing khadi, and of the occasion of the Vaikom satyagraha when he went home to tell his mother proudly, 'Umma, I touched Gandhi.' This crucial event in the Gandhian programme of non-violent resistance was thus a major turning point in Basheer's own life. What had been youthful enthusiasm became a total commitment.

On his way to Calicut to join Congress, he was several times questioned by the police, but not detained. At the Congress office, he was faced with another problem:

They suspected me of being in the pay of the C.I.D.! Their doubts were strengthened by my diary. I had jotted things down in different languages — English, Malayalam, Tamil, Hindi and Arabic. I left it on a bench while I went to the toilet. When I returned I found that the Secretary had picked it up and was reading it. He could not have understood much of it. But it gave him reason to doubt me.

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<sup>28</sup> *Amma*, published in a periodical in 1937, first appeared within a book in Basheer 1946. Collected edition 1992, Vol. 1, pp. 301–312. Quotations are from the English translation by V. Abdulla in *Poovan banana and other stories*, Madras, Disha Books (Orient Longman Ltd), 1994, pp. 15–25.

<sup>29</sup> *Ōrmakkurippu*, Trichur, The Mangalodayam (Private) Ltd., 1946.

The following morning, when they were preparing to go to the beach, he and eleven companions were arrested. At the police station, they were taken in succession by a 'hefty policeman with long arms ... [and] ... bulging red eyes', identified only as 'Constable No. 270', and soundly beaten:

Two violent blows fell on my neck! Then he caught me by the shoulders and made me bend down. He began beating me. It sounded as if he were beating a copper pot. I counted up to seventeen, or perhaps it was twenty-seven. After this I stopped counting. Why keep count?

Nine months' rigorous imprisonment followed, in Cannanore Central Jail, where there were six hundred political prisoners. On release he was possessed by an urge 'to kill No. 270', but was persuaded by an older man that this was futile:

'Are you a satyagrahi? ... And if you want to kill, remember there is not a single policeman who deserves to live. The policeman is an indispensable part of the government. The poor people are mere instruments. What is the use of blaming them? Have patience. Go and see your father and mother.'

With this the conclusion of the story takes up the opening theme:

At home, when I entered the yard my mother asked, 'Who is it?' I stepped onto the veranda. Mother lit a lamp, and asked as if nothing had happened, 'Son, have you eaten anything?'

I said nothing. I was shaken, unable to breathe. The whole world was asleep! My mother alone was awake! Mother brought a vessel of water and asked me to wash my hands and feet. Then she placed a plate of rice before me.

She asked me nothing.

I was amazed. 'How did you know, Umma, that I was coming today?'

Mother replied, 'Oh ... I cook rice and wait every night.'

It was a simple statement. Every night I did not turn up, but mother had kept awake waiting for me.

The years have passed. Many things have happened.

But mothers still wait for their sons.

'Son, I just want to see you...'

Thus, in this moving reprise of the opening sentences, Basheer unites the three main threads in the theme of his story — the selfless love of his own mother, the universal nature of the way that mothers feel towards their sons, and the love that unites a man and his motherland.

Powerful feelings often underlie Basheer's writing, but he rarely intervenes in his telling of a story to express them directly. His own opinions, however deeply held, emerge only through a careful reading of the text. In his creative writing, as opposed to his essays or reminiscences (rather in the manner of Bernard Shaw in his plays as opposed to his prefaces), different views may be expressed by different characters, and the one who is perhaps acting as the author's mouthpiece is not unambiguously indicated. There are, however, exceptions in 'Mother'. Before narrating the story of what happened to him when he made the journey north from Vaikom to take part in the salt

satyagraha, 'the Dandi march which shook the whole country', he reminds the reader that he is writing the story in 1937, and that 'India is still not free.' He then poses a question that 'is [perhaps] being asked of all mothers in India by their sons and daughters', namely: 'Why did my mother bring me into this land of slavery and poverty and untold misery?' Then he develops the theme:

Why is India so poor? I cannot say with pride, 'I am an Indian.' I am but a slave. I detest the enslaved country that is India. But ... is not India also my mother? ...

... I cannot record here the feelings that fill my heart. Like the chains that bind my hand, I see before me police lockup rooms, prisons, gallows and in front of them policemen, soldiers, jailors!

The dominant emotion in Basheer's discontent at this time was his hatred of 'slavery' rather than his discontent with the 'poverty and untold misery' that he saw around him. His dreams were for a better life for his countrymen, but he went through spells of deep scepticism with regard to the chances of this being one of the sure consequences of freedom. Thus, in what is in many ways the darkest of his compositions, the novel *Voices* (1947), which, though published shortly before India became independent, can be seen as looking back on that event from the future and wondering what has been achieved for the betterment of the common man's lot, he put the following words into the mouth of one of the characters, a blind beggar:

'Long ago, I was sitting by a wayside shrine with neither money, nor food, nor company. It was the day our country achieved independence. I was twenty years old then. When I think of that day, —'

... 'That day I asked, 'Why should one live?' I asked this question of myself. There was no answer. Yesterday I reached the age of forty-five. Last night when all of you were asleep, I got up and asked, —'<sup>30</sup>

Clearly pessimism about the economic benefits of freedom in no way weakened Basheer's passionate desire for it. In later years he was to give expression sometimes to a feeling of regret at certain developments in independent India, as in the story 'Statue',<sup>31</sup> where he deplores the absence in certain sections of Indian society of the virtues preached and exemplified by Gandhi and Nehru. Yet his belief in the value of the struggle and sacrifices that made his country free never weakened.

A story belonging to the early 1940s, 'Portrait of a prisoner',<sup>32</sup> begins by touching on the mother/son theme that he had explored in 'Mother'. A shy young woman, Mariamma, who is studying in a convent, learns from his mother of the various spells of imprisonment undergone by a young man called Joseph, now serving his fourth term as convict number 1051. In one room of his home a portrait photograph of him hangs on the wall next to a picture of Jesus

<sup>30</sup> Collected edition 1992, Vol. 1, p. 456.

<sup>31</sup> *Pratima*. Included in the short-story collection *Cirikkunna marappāva* ('The laughing doll'), Trichur, Current Books, 1975. Collected edition 1992, Vol. 2, pp. 1715–1721.

<sup>32</sup> *Oru jailpulliyute citram*. Included in the collection *Janmadinam*, 1944. Collected edition 1992, Vol. 1, pp. 285–297.

Christ. The mother shows letters that Joseph has sent from jail, some of them giving statistics about the inmates. In one of the prisons, these were:

Number of convicts: 2114

Men: 1817

Women: 297

Political prisoners: 1742<sup>33</sup>

Men: 1344

Women: 398

Condemned to death by hanging: 16

Mariamamma finds the statistics and the information about prison life very disturbing. She feels an urge to write to Joseph, and eventually plucks up the courage to do so. So begins an exchange of correspondence that makes up the bulk of the story. Joseph's letters give snapshot of prison life: prisoners whose arms or legs have been broken, prisoners suffering from consumption, prisoners who have become mentally deranged; crowded latrines; the availability of all sorts of things — including 'arrack, toddy, ganja [cannabis], beedis, chewing materials, tea, sugar'. Such items come at a price; what costs an anna outside costs a rupee inside the jail.<sup>34</sup> Warders at all levels participate in the traffic, an involvement which Joseph excuses on the grounds that prison warders and policemen are very badly paid. As the letters pass to and fro between 'dear 1051' and 'dear unknown friend', a relationship begins to develop, until a letter from Joseph tells Mariamma that she must forget him, noting finally that the photograph in his home is not an accurate portrait of him, for it shows a young man with two eyes, while he has only one. Clearly the intention of the author in writing this story was to give the reader some idea of the price that those seeking freedom might find themselves paying. The very economy with which some of the aspects of this price are indicated must have made the story much more effective in achieving this aim than a polemical tract might have been.

A similar technique of understatement is to be seen in 'Handcuffs' (1943).<sup>35</sup> This relates to the prelude to Basheer's third or fourth period of imprisonment (Basheer not always being very precise in his stories with regard to such details). In a group of thirty-six prisoners, he finds himself handcuffed to the secretary of the Congress committee of the town where they were arrested. As the procession moves between police lockup and magistrate's court and back, the two exchange experiences. From the court, Basheer emerges with a sentence

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<sup>33</sup> These are to be taken as additional to the set of those convicted of various felonies, not as being included within it.

<sup>34</sup> An anna was one sixteenth part of a rupee.

<sup>35</sup> *Kaivilaṅṅa*. Included in *Ōrmmakkuriṭṭu* 1946. Collected edition 1992, Vol. 1, pp. 346–352. A note added in the latter (p. 346) states that this story was written while the author was confined in the Quilon Kasaba Police Station lockup after being arrested on a charge of treason — 'in 1941 or 1942 — I don't remember exactly.'

of two years' rigorous imprisonment plus a thousand-rupee fine, with a further six months in default. He reflects on the sentence:

For two years rigorous imprisonment and a thousand-rupee fine, what had I done? Had I killed some one? Had I hurt anyone?

Among Basheer's stories inspired by his participation in the independence movement that are not overtly autobiographical in the manner of 'Mother' and 'Handcuffs' is 'The policeman's daughter'.<sup>36</sup> This tells of one Jagadishan's escape from the police, his being helped by a young woman sympathetic to the nationalist cause who turned out to be the daughter of a policeman, and his subsequent capture followed by two years in the police lockup. On his release a question raised by his mother is that of his marriage and he eventually admits that the only person he would really care to marry is the policeman's daughter. The flow of the narrative is nowhere interrupted by overt expression of nationalism, but there is an undercurrent of restrained passion, as when the harsh treatment meted out to members of his family is described in the context of the police search for the 'traitor' with a five hundred rupee price on his head.

Some stories emerged only indirectly from Basheer's involvement as a freedom fighter. The story of a brutal policeman who routinely tortured suspects and who was killed by one of his victims is one such. In this account of how 'Bully Panicker'<sup>37</sup> met his end, there is no actual mention of the offences with which his victims were charged, but the story will tend to be read by Malayali readers as being related to the author's own experiences when in police hands, if only because of his account of Constable No. 270 in 'Mother'.

Into the story of a stray dog, 'Tiger',<sup>38</sup> that had taken up residence at a police station, Basheer weaves an account of the harshness for prisoners of life in a police lockup, compared with which life in jail was 'paradise'.

Neither air nor light entered any of the rooms. Pale beings with overgrown beards resembling human figures wrapped up in old rags lived in the damp darkness of those rooms. They had to bear the stench of human urine and excreta and the bites of innumerable bugs.

The stench emanating from the lockup rooms was enough to burn up all hope in the human heart. But the inmates were not affected by this at all. Their predominant thought was of food.<sup>39</sup>

Food, in spite of the fixed daily amount allowed by the government for each prisoner, was always in short supply for prisoners, though there was an abundance for Tiger. Even when given the leftovers from the inspector's meal, the dog fared better than a prisoner did. Requests for more food simply resulted in 'blows from policemen and kicks from the booted feet of the Inspector.' Bribery and corruption were part of the standard pattern in anything to do with

<sup>36</sup> *Pōlisukāranre makal*, published in a magazine in 1941 and included in *Örmakkurippu* 1946. Collected edition 1992, Vol. 1, pp. 334–345.

<sup>37</sup> *Iṭṭiyān paṇikkār*, included in *Pāvappettaṭṭavarūṭe vēśya* 1952. Collected edition 1992, Vol. 1, pp. 700–702.

<sup>38</sup> *Ṭaigar*, included in *Janmadinam* 1944. Collected edition 1992, Vol. 1, pp. 252–257.

<sup>39</sup> Quotations are from the English translation by V. Abdulla in *Poovan banana and other stories*, Madras, Disha Books (Orient Longman Ltd), 1994, pp. 67–72.

the police. The general atmosphere of hopelessness among prisoners was made worse by the knowledge that

Everyone knew that there was no prospect of an acquittal in cases where the charge had been brought by the police.

We learn that Tiger (and therefore, by implication, the police) 'did not make any distinction between the prisoners', whether murderer, thief or political agitator. 'To the dog the forty-five prisoners looked alike.'

In these various ways do experiences as a freedom fighter penetrate Basheer's prose fiction: he gives what are at one level factual accounts of what happened to him; he writes stories which truthfully portray the nature and effects of political activism whilst not necessarily having a strict basis in actual events participated in or observed; he occasionally digresses with explicit expression of the feelings that drove him. Though it is not always possible to be certain when those of his works first published in book form in the late 1940s and early 1950s were actually written, we can say that after 1947 there was a change in this respect. Basheer, like so many of those deeply involved in the movement to have an India that was free, did not fight battles that were already won. If one takes as the dividing line the moment when, in Jawaharlal Nehru's words, India awoke 'to life and freedom', it is evident that Basheer's later novels and stories do not attempt to dwell on the iniquities of past oppression, though the facts of what happened are not ignored.

Occasionally some current incident will remind him of the old imperial days, as evidenced by his comment, in the introduction to *Pattumma's goat*, on the opposition that his 'Me grandad 'ad an elephant!',<sup>40</sup> regarded by many as his masterpiece, had to face — opposition which appeared to him, as it does to anyone reading the work today, incomprehensible:

... everybody opposed it — the Catholic Congress, Praja Socialist Party, Congress, Muslim League. If what I saw in the papers is true, they all told plenty of lies about it. I am an old Congressman, a dutiful soldier who has taken a lot of beatings and punchings and gone to jail several times. When I hear talk of Congress, I think of Mahatma Gandhi, Indian Independence and the like. Congress, which is supposed to represent non-violence and truth, need not have stooped so low.<sup>41</sup>

Echoes of pre-independence days tend to become more subtle in fiction written in later years. Already in a story published as part of a book in 1952, 'A man',<sup>42</sup> Basheer's years of wandering, which were also to some extent years of exile, are alluded to, but no more, in the opening paragraph:

You have no definite plans. You are wandering around in distant parts. You have no money on you; you do not know the language of the region. You can speak English and Hindustani, but very few people there know either of these languages. So you land into many a fix: you have many adventures.

<sup>40</sup> 'Nruppuppakkorānēṅṅārnnu!' Kottayam, Sahitya Pravarthaka Co-operative Society Ltd., 1951. Collected edition 1992, Vol. 1, pp. 515–594.

<sup>41</sup> *Pattummāyūṭe āṭu*, Kottayam, Sahitya Pravarthaka Co-operative Society Ltd., 1959, Preface, p. 9.

<sup>42</sup> *Oru manūṣyan*, included in *Pāvappēṭṭavarūṭe vēśya* 1952. Collected edition 1992, Vol. 1, pp. 687–690.

Then follows a story of a 'fine man' who turned out to be a pickpocket — or a pickpocket who turned out to be a fine man.

'The walls' of the novel of this name, published in 1965,<sup>43</sup> are those of a prison, but the atmosphere of the place is very different from that of the story 'Mother' discussed earlier. That it is autobiographical is evident from the fact that the first-person narrator is addressed as Basheer, and we know that it is based on the time Basheer spent in Trivandrum Central Gaol in 1942–43. That one must expect some modification or embellishment of historical truth is made clear in the opening sentences. Unlike *Pattumma's goat*, it is certainly not 'one hundred percent true'.

Have you ever heard a little love story called 'The walls'? I seem to remember speaking of it earlier. I thought of calling it 'The smell of woman'... Listen carefully. It all happened quite some time ago. In what we usually call the past. It comes from the far side of the river of memories. Remember that I am on this side. From this solitary heart comes a sad song.

One of the walls is that which divides the men's prison from the women's. One day the narrator smells the scent of a woman coming from the other side. He begins to converse with her, and he finds out that she is Narayani, a Hindu woman of twenty-two, who has completed one year of a fourteen-year sentence. A relationship develops and they plan a meeting — in the prison hospital. Unhappily, the order for Basheer's release comes the day before the rendezvous. So much for the plot. What of life in prison? Warders are sympathetically portrayed. There is no mention of beatings or ill-treatment. There are no culinary horrors of the sort mentioned in 'Mother' ('In the rice gruel they served us, there would appear a floating layer of worms.') Basheer is allowed to make a garden:

On the edge are rose bushes, with their blossoms spreading their sweet perfume all around. Then with my meals I have fried fish, eggs, liver, and a special chutney... This life of luxury begins with the great man who brings my kanji<sup>44</sup> in the morning. He is a red cap. That means that he has killed some one. He was not condemned to hang, but sentenced to rigorous imprisonment for life.

On this man's advice he went to see the hospital orderly, another 'red cap' who had been found guilty of robbery with violence and who was 'an old friend of mine'. 'After that I experienced no trouble in getting tea, sugar, liver, bread, milk, beedis,<sup>45</sup> and so on.'

In another story recalling his activist youth Basheer displays an ability to speak humorously of the seriousness with which he entered so wholeheartedly

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<sup>43</sup> *Matilukal*, Trichur, Current Books, 1965. This period of Basheer's incarceration in the Central Jail, Trivandrum, was filmed in 1989 for Doordarshan, with Adoor Gopalakrishnan as director and with Mamoootti playing the role of Basheer.

<sup>44</sup> Rice boiled in a large amount of water until it becomes soft; a sort of gruel. The word can be found in standard dictionaries of English under the spelling 'conjee' or 'congee'.

<sup>45</sup> A cheap smoke made of fragments of tobacco wrapped in a leaf. Throughout his adult life Basheer was somewhat addicted to these.

into the fight for a free India. In this, 'A little love story of long ago',<sup>46</sup> written in the mid-1950s, he seems almost to be making fun of the earnest young men of two decades earlier who were willing even to resort to terrorism in their efforts to make the world a better place, though he manages to do this without any hint of scorn or distaste for these acts of extremism. The opening paragraphs of the story set the scene of the 'love story', which turns out to be a tale of disillusionment:

The incident is one that happened some twenty years ago. I remember it as if it were yesterday. I sometimes wonder what has become of the fervour and courage of those days. There was a single guiding force: the impulsive passion of youth. There were no second thoughts. One leapt into action, following the path that the heart directed... O age of beauty and blind faith, I salute you!

Our life was one of continuous hunger. Hunger for everything; thirst for everything. There was no way of relieving it. We were angry with some one or something undefined, violently angry. Yet our lives were lit by the beautiful glow of idealism. Everything would turn out right; we would make it turn out right: we would wash the world in blood and make it new! We were atheists. We were revolutionaries; I was the leader of a group that would not hesitate to kill... O age of terror with dagger and revolver held aloft, I salute you!

At that time fire and brimstone rained down from my pen. Life's ideal was annihilation. There were some three hundred young men who were inspired by this ideal. We published a newspaper and I was the editor.

The newspaper office was a room not much bigger than a matchbox.

It was there that we stayed. Night and day we spent thinking; and we wrote. Night and day we held discussions. Night and day we made plans.

What I said was taken as unshakeable truth. I was held in high esteem and looked on as the undisputed leader. Yet in my heart there was a strong feeling of something lacking. There was a kind of aching, along with a hint of sadness.

All this did not fit in with terrorist activities...

Even without knowledge of his stories written in the heat of the fight for national liberation, it is evident that this could only have been written after the author had travelled some distance in time from the events alluded to. Not all later references to the impact of these youthful preoccupations and their effects are completely lighthearted. 'My right hand',<sup>47</sup> for example, shows that the pain and anguish suffered were not completely erased from Basheer's memory many years later. The passion that motivated him, however, is stilled, and no explicit dating is needed for the reader to be able to detect that the dividing line of 1947 has been passed.

The story is essentially a set of skilfully interwoven anecdotes related to some of the author's periods of imprisonment, specifically in the Central Jails in Trivandrum and Cannanore. On the palm of his right hand, Basheer tells us,

<sup>46</sup> *Pazaya oru koccu prēmakatha*, included in *Viśvavikhyātamāya mūkkū* ('The world-famous nose'), Kottayam, Sahitya Pravarthaka Co-operative Society Ltd., 1954 Collected edition 1992, Vol. 1, pp. 864–869.

<sup>47</sup> *Enṛe valatukai*. In *Cirikunna marappāva* ('The laughing doll'), Trichur, Current Books, 1975. Collected edition 1992, Vol. 2, pp. 1694–1699.

there is a scar, of which he is conscious once in a while. When he thinks of it, he remembers 'the empire on which the sun never sets' and of the struggle to free India from being part of this empire. It reminds him not only of the action that produced it, but also of another event that, understandably, he cannot forget. The latter is reported in the briefest possible terms:

'Your son writes, doesn't he? We'll smash his right hand.' That's the threat that the Travancore police made to my parents when they went to their home.

The scarring incident, fearful though it was, is told not without an occasional touch of humour. It happened in the jail in Cannanore and arose out of the fact that it was possible to obtain ganja there.

How did ganja get inside the jail? ... The prisoners managed to obtain ganja, arrack, beedis, sugar, dried fish in jail. Those who were sent out for work brought them. The warders were involved too... If anyone wanted, they could even secretly bring an elephant into the jail!

Some of the older prisoners tried to persuade Basheer, a young idealist not long out of school, to join them in smoking ganja. When he refused on the grounds that Gandhi would have disapproved, one of the others touched his elbow with a hot coal. His continued intransigence led to another piece being placed in the palm of his hand in the middle of the lifeline, with consequent pain and permanent scarring. We then read of another activity he took no part in. A group of prisoners from the Telugu country went on hunger strike — a fast unto death — with a view to persuading the authorities to give them buttermilk for their meals. 'Is buttermilk worth dying for?' asks Basheer. Amusing anecdotes of prison life follow and lead to his recollection that in those days 'Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Jains, Parsis — all were brothers.' Yet partition accompanied the end of the struggle. Further reminiscences take him to the time soon after independence had been won and to his return to his birthplace, Thalayolaparambu, where he lived alone in a small house (the story of which is told with a delicate mingling of gaiety and fun with an underlying seriousness of purpose in *Pattumma's goat*). It was there that one of his younger brothers brought him the news that 'Some one has shot and killed our Gandhiji.' His deeply moving account of this terrible event is followed by his recalling the story he wrote about his mother and the way in which she waited, hoping every night that he would return from prison, and then by his remembering the actual day of his release, with the pain in the palm of his hand mingled with the ache in his heart.

Generally speaking, then, as the preceding examples from the post-1947 period show, Basheer did not show anger when writing of those at whose hands he had suffered when through his activities he risked arrest and imprisonment. On the other hand, he did not deceive himself or others by acting or writing as if what had happened did not in fact take place. Into one story, 'Valsarajan',<sup>48</sup> he inserted a digression containing some details about his various periods of incarceration. Scattered references to stays in prison are to be

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<sup>48</sup> *Valsarājan*. Included in the collection *Ānappūta*, Trichur, Current Books, 1955. Collected edition 1992, Vol. 2, pp. 1632–1639.

found in a number of his works of fiction, but these are often quite vague. Here the information is a little more precise, though not absolutely complete. Following his participation in the salt satyagraha at Calicut in 1930, Basheer was imprisoned in Calicut District Jail for a month — as prisoner number 8962. After trial in the district court he was sent to Cannanore Central Jail for three months' rigorous imprisonment (number 6012). On his release in 1931, he went to Cochin and became a journalist on *Ujjivanam* and later *Pauranadam*. Some of the articles and the political satire therein provoked the Dewan of Travancore, Sir C. P. Ramaswami Iyer, and a warrant was issued for Basheer's arrest. He made his escape and in due course went to north India, from where he returned seven years later. In 1942 he was again arrested and kept in the Kottayam police lockup. Subsequently he was taken to Quilon Kasaba Police Station and kept in the lockup there for the best part of one year. After trial he was sentenced to two and a half years in prison, to be spent in Trivandrum Central Jail (where his number on the prison roll was 5091.) This, the longest of his periods of confinement, was not quite the last. In 1948 he worked for some time on *Jayakeralam*, a weekly published in Madras. There he found himself being arrested by the Madras Police on the grounds that he was a communist. However, with the help of Dr C. R. Krishna Pillai he was released after a week. He then returned to Kerala to devote himself to literary pursuits.

The story also contains a summary of the type of harsh treatment that those committed to the independence movement could expect to receive from the police. One is reminded that beatings were commonplace, and not only after arrest. In some cases it was enough to be seen wearing clothes made of khadi (the homespun cloth urged on his fellow countrymen by Gandhi in preference to imported material). Basheer's beatings came only from the Malabar police. For this there were two reasons: firstly he was from Travancore, and secondly he was a Muslim.

Nationalists who had been imprisoned were, after independence, eligible for a state pension. It is on this thread that the narrative part of 'Valsarajan' hangs, for the story concerns one trip by bus into Calicut made by Basheer from his home in Beypore on the outskirts of the town to collect his pension. On this occasion the excessive bureaucracy provided him with material for a typical Basheer anecdote, ending with his losing his pension book at the bus stop on the return journey. Valsarajan was a boy who found it and, having recognised Basheer, took it to his home, much to the owner's surprise and great relief. In spite of the content of the digressions, the story is essentially a lighthearted one, very different in tone from 'Mother' and others that he wrote in the 1930s and 1940s.

Finally, it is appropriate to make brief mention of other stories which relate to Basheer's periods of incarceration but show influence of a different kind. In prison he met a wide range of personalities, and on some of those that he found especially interesting he based some of the most fascinating characters in his stories. Two of the best known are Anavari ('elephant snatcher') Raman Nair, who stole an elephant, and Ponkurisu ('golden cross') Thoma, who tried

to steal a golden cross from a local church.<sup>49</sup> The general lack of reference to the freedom struggle, however, make these of only marginal interest in the present context.

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How does the work of a writer such as Basheer, whose writing spans the divide between colonial South Asia and post-colonial India, relate to the hypothesis that after the attainment of independence for their country writers took on a new sort of identity and as a result wrote for an audience which also had a different identity? The very varied nature of his output makes it difficult to divide his work into two distinct parts with clearly differentiated characteristics, with 1947 as the dividing line. One can merely say that where his works of fiction are influenced, directly or indirectly, by his experiences as a nationalist, there are distinct differences in atmosphere and emphasis. In this sense, the existence of an independent India produced changes in his writing. This was perhaps inevitable, for to all who had been involved in the freedom movement as much as he had, life had changed significantly, and the land in which they lived was in ways that mattered to them a different country. The changes that one observes were less in the subject matter of his novels and stories — for these still often had a basis in his recollections of his life before 1947 — than in his treatment of the subject matter. He may have introduced the same real-life incidents or the same characters (including himself) into stories belonging to both the pre- and post-1947 period, but the lenses through which these passed on their way to being part of a piece of creative writing were different and produced different images. In that part of his fiction which is autobiographical, it can be argued that he was not so much aiming for factual accuracy as for a higher kind of truth, perhaps the kind of truth that for Aristotle differentiated the poet from the historian. It is for this reason that the picture Basheer paints of himself as a freedom fighter in 1937 is different from the one he produces in, say, 1954. Both are equally 'true', but the truth about events changes as participants move further and further from them.

The question of the membership of the imagined communities for whom and to whom Basheer spoke during his literary career is more difficult and complex. A legitimate question is how far a writer in a regional language of India (and all the modern indigenous languages are regional in this context) can claim to be addressing a community beyond those who speak his language. Yet the answer must surely be that, even without allowing for the possibility of translation into the other languages of the country, a writer can have as his target audience all those to whose lives he might see his writing as having relevance. Many, perhaps most, have simultaneously in mind a number of different audiences, with each in an expanding series including the one before. Thus Basheer certainly, in setting out deliberately to create a new 'Muslim literature' in Malayalam, spoke *for* the Muslim community of Kerala in a number of ways. He also in some works spoke directly *to* them in suggesting

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<sup>49</sup> See *Ānavāriyūm ponkurisūm*, Kottayam, Sahitya Pravarthaka Co-operative Society Ltd., 1953. Collected edition 1992, Vol. 1, pp. 797–820.

that in the modern world the community needed to change — needed, for instance, to have a greater respect for the values of education. In speaking *for* his own community, he was also necessarily addressing the wider community of Malayalis, and individual and idiosyncratic though his work is, he is very much in the mainstream of twentieth-century Malayalam literature. It is important to note also, especially with regard to his stories that portray aspects of the freedom struggle, that the characters are drawn from all the major communities in Kerala, Hindus and Christians no less than Muslims. It is evident, too, that his writing speaks both for and to the people of India as a whole. It can reasonably be said that Basheer was addressing these same imagined communities both before and after 1947. Does it therefore follow that in this respect there was no change after 1947? Such a conclusion would perhaps be rather superficial, in the sense that just as it can be shown that Basheer was a different person who saw pre-1947 events differently once his motherland had attained its desired destiny, so the various audiences he addressed were necessarily different, even if the labels attached to them remained unchanged.

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