

A CALL FOR MODERNIZATION AND LITERACY: VAIKOM MOHAMMED BASHEER'S "ME GRAND DAD 'AD AN ELEPHANT!'"

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Abstract

"Neither before nor after Basheer, lived any writer like Basheer himself. In all aspects he was an entity." This statement brings to life, the prominence of 'the Sultan of Beypore', Vaikom Muhammed Basheer, in the History of Malayalam Literature. He has been categorized as a social realistic writer who vehemently battle against the social atrocities prevailing in the society. The novel Me Grand Dad 'Ad An Elephant ! is a clear description of Basheer's reaction against outdated religious conventions and superstitions. He clearly highlights the plight of Muslim women for whom education and knowledge were a far beyond reality. Basheer suggests necessity of social reformation with the assistance of education, through his works.

Keywords: *Social Reformation, Education, religion, superstitions, past glory.*

Tagore has remarked "The widest road leading to the solution of all our problems is education." Education is the best and most effective weapon for the modernization of our society. "The one continuing purpose of education, since ancient times, has been to bring people to as full a realization as possible of what it is to be a human being. Other statements of educational purpose have also been widely accepted: to develop the intellect, to serve social needs, to contribute to the economy, to create an effective work force, to prepare students for a job or career, to promote a particular social or political system. These purposes offered are undesirably limited in scope, and in some instances they conflict with the broad purpose I have indicated; they imply a distorted human existence. The broader humanistic purpose includes all of them, and goes beyond them, for it seeks to encompass all the dimensions of human experience." (Arthur W. Foshay)

The beginning of 1940's witnessed the establishment of the progressive literary movement in Malayalam literature. When it was rooted in the soil of Kerala, the orthodox and conventional values began to disappear. This movement calls the writers to come to the forefront of society to bring about a positive change in its outdated values and outlook. Thakazhi Sivasankarappillai, P Keshavdev, Vaikkam Mohammed Basheer, Ponkunnam Varkey, S. K. Pottekkad, Lalithumbika Antharjanam, P. C. Kuttikrishnan are the major literary figures of this literary movement. As a result of this movement people had strong desires for a bright future devoid of cast, religious view of looking at things. They paved the way for a new socio – political condition in whole kerala, the reading public lost interest in the romantic way of writing and they came to recognize the virtues that a writer should have is that he should be capable of understanding the realities of society

and act according with care and concern. All the writers above mentioned, inspired and instigated the readers to undertake a social revolution.

Vaikom Mohammed Basheer is a progressive literary man in all sense. He considers literature as a means for propoganda. According to M. P Paul, the only means to get in to the heart of the society is literature. Basheer also followed the same notion throughout his literary carrier which is very obvious in his "Childhood Friend", " Me Grand Dad 'Ad An Elephant ", " Shadows of Life " etc. His novels can be divided in to three categories - social novels, autobiographical novels and humorous novels. " Me Grand Dad 'Ad An Elephant " belongs to the category of social novels. R. E. Asher is of opinion that this novel is his master piece.

The story revolves around the life of Muslim families. Kunjupathuma is the central character in the novel, who was born and brought up in a rich family, so pampered and cared. Not only her education but her childhood fantasies also were neglected in the superstitious beliefs of orthodox Muslim community. In fact she obeyed everyone and suffered patiently with a suffocated heart in the dark corner of her home. She saw the world outside the home only when his father lost all his properties in a case filed with his relatives. They had to give up everything except the memories of the past glory. Her mother treasures her old memories even then. Twist happened when a civilized and educated Muslim family came to settle near Kunjupathumma's new small house. The entirely different perspectives of these two families and the further proceedings throw light towards the necessity of education and its resulting delight. Nizar Ahmed and his family tried their best to make their neighbours come out of the shell of

superstitions. The novel ends with the fading of the compositeness of the past glory.

In contrast to the life and thoughts of Kunjupathuma's family, i.e. uneducated and ignorant, is the family of Nizar Ahmed, the epitome of modern society that has an individuality and a firm clutch over the Muslim culture and beliefs, which they re-reads in their own way, emphasizing the true values of a Muslim, rather than the orthodox behavior of a typical Muslim. Their deeds and thoughts were contradictory to many things which Kunjupathuma had known and believed to be true. According to Kunjupathuma, Nizar Ahmed's family was a very peculiar one and she misunderstood them at first as "kafirs", as their way of dressing and talks were not that of a real Muslim. Trapped in the swamp of the made-believe Muslim customs, her life became that of a caged bird. She was not given education and she had to sacrifice her childhood desires because of her religion. She had been taught many notions as that "Muslim women shouldn't go in to the presence of strange men." And even that it is blasphemy to wear sari and blouse, comb and part the hair and even to keep flowers on the hair. She was not allowed to stand in front of her house to watch a moonlit night as they believed that some devil would desire her. She was told that "it is not proper for unmarried girls to chew betel leaf." Therefore at the age of fourteen her concept of marriage was that she could chew betel leaves after marriage. When she heard from her mother about her grand dad's elephant, she even dreamt of her fiancée arriving upon an elephant. Thus Basheer portrays blind outdated beliefs of Muslim community.

According to Basheer culture and progress are the result of education and he emphasized this idea in this novel. To make us understand the difference Basheer presents an educated family in contrast to an illiterate and orthodox family. In the novel when Aysha, Nizar's sister tries to teach Kunjupathuma, the latter pronounces words in her own dialect which is in an unrefined form. This part of the novel arouses humour and at the same time makes us to think deeply. When Kunjupathuma boasts that her grandfather had an elephant, Aysha proudly says that her grandfather had a bullock cart and from that income he educated her father to become a professor. Through this episode Basheer portrays a man's virtue is not in the glory and possession but in the hard work and goodness of heart. For Basheer, capitalism seems to be a dying force, to be replaced by the stronger bonds of social equality. Thus the darling granddaughter of Anamakkar finally finds her life partner in the bullock cart

owner's grandson. Nizar married Kunjupathuma without accepting dowry, which is a perturbing social evil prevailing in the society. Only very few were invited for their marriage for several families run out of money because of dowry and extravagant marriages. Basheer criticizes the rejection of some jobs by Muslim community. In Muslim society it was believed that a man should not work in the soil and the only job that fits an Islam was trade. Kunjupathuma was shocked to see Nizar Ahmed and family planting trees and plants by their own. Though she wanted to set a garden in front of her house, she herself was discouraged by the ideology of Islam.

Through out the novel, Kunjupathuma, Kunjupathuma's mother reminds and boasts of her being as the daughter of Anamakkar who owned a huge elephant. Even in her family's deteriorated condition, she was not ready to shed off her past glory. The irony lies at the end when she stammers, "They s-s-say your uppuppa's huge elephant was an elephant ant..an elephant ant." Basheer scrapes off Kunjupathuma's grandiose past by bringing down the mighty animal to a mere down-trodden tiny creature. A comic exploitation of the innocence of heroine also is seen in various episodes of the novel. The veil of illusions in Kunjupathuma's life is drawn aside completely by Aysha and Nizar. They saved her from the world of darkness, ignorance and superstitions.

Basheer's exposure of the Muslim life was to uplift the downtrodden, ignorant and superstitious people to an awareness of the great realities and experiences of life. Thus the novel results in the self-revelation of an uneducated girl, who attempts an escape from the shell of blind faith with the initiation of an educated and modern family. Basheer also mocks at the conservative attitude of his own community that does not pay any heed to education and self-reformation. The message of the need for modernization is embodied in this novel.

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