

Reading Subaltern Histories In Literature With Reference To Selected Works Of Vaikom Muhammad Basheer

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Abstract: Historiography in India has evolved over the time. A transition from colonial to modern nationalist phase saw the Indian middle class rise through the ranks of historical agency which continues to have a heavy influence even today. But as the post-colonial knowledge production sought new areas of inquiry, a new trend emerged in the form of Subaltern Studies. Historiography in India has been facing a significant shift in perspectives with the coming of subaltern scholarship. Subaltern historians propose an approach so as to the hitherto oppressed sections of the society such as religious and racial minorities, women, transgender etc that were greatly silenced in the process of standardizing history, be rightly represented and properly acknowledged. Literary works offer an important source to revisit a past of which the existing knowledge doesn't fairly represent all equally. In this backdrop, the writings of Vaikom Muhammad Basheer (1908-1994), a prominent Malayalam writer, provide ample source for re-reading the people's history. The present paper attempts to read his selected works in a subaltern perspective. It is argued here that Basheer's characters by virtue of their subalternity question the standardized history. And also his fictional world of multiple everyday voices brings in an alternative view of a society.

Keywords: Subaltern, History, Literature, Representation. Nation.

In one of the most scintillating account of the Partition of India in 1947, Urvashi Bhutalia recounts the episode from a slightly different perspective that a historian wouldn't have been convinced to do then. In her book, *The Other Side of Silence* (1998), she interviewed more than seventy women survivors of partition violence whose experiences and memories of the violence involved in the process of geographically and psychologically dividing India and Pakistan into two separate nations have challenged the existing beliefs about how the common people are affected by the partition of India. It also influences one to think that the objective versions of the same incident do not realistically present the people who actually suffer the pain of it. Prior to writing this book, she conducted a long research that sought the personal and collective memories of some of the victims.

The data Bhutalia chooses to do a historical study are collected from oral narratives. Some may believe that such a source cannot be enough for conducting an objective historical analysis. Some others may even argue that these personal

narratives can be considered fictional. On the other hand, from a pure literary perspective those narratives are far from being called fiction because they are 'testimonies' which do not perfectly fall into any literary genre. These personal narratives of past events reshape a history that cannot be understood from the positions of formal/written history. Each woman she interviewed gives a personal version of partition through her stories which in turn become part of a collective story. The first generation of victims lived with an unspeakable horror of leaving their dear ones and a lot of memories behind in a newly imposed national border. But earlier partition historians didn't really take the idea of listening to the 'stories' of the eye-witnesses probably thinking that testimony as a source does less with history and lean towards the world of fiction and imagination. But *The Other Side of Silence* as a whole crosses boundaries of several academic disciplines such as Literature, History, Social and Cultural Anthropology etc. This paper tries to understand how literature can be studied along with history and vice versa. It is argued here that the

subjugated people who do not feature in standard history of any nation can be found in literary works and such works actually provide alternative sources for re-visiting the past.

As in the case of partition there are numerous other stories still unheard from various locations in history. Holocaust and the Trans-Atlantic slave trade can be studied from different positions if the silences of the survivors were broken. The question to be posed here is why certain people are silent in our history? Every time it is evident that particular sections of people like women, religious and racial minorities etc are absent in what is considered as our standard history. From where we get to hear about these subaltern people if at all history doesn't mark them? This paper will engage this question in some detail with reference to selected fictional writings of Vaikom Muhammad Basheer (1908-1994), a prominent Malayalam writer. *Tiger*, *Amma* (Mother), *Mathilukal* (Walls), *Pathummayude Adu* (Pathumma's Goat) are some of his noted stories which deal with the issues of marginality and oppression. Two of his stories *Tiger* and *Mother* are taken for analysis here. *Tiger* is a story of a privileged dog and some unprivileged prisoners living in a colonial jail. The story portrays the dark sides of male experiences of India's freedom struggle whereas *Mother* talks about the experiences of women in this time.

The outcasts of modernity and nationalist imagination have been one of the prominent themes of modern fiction developed in India during 1930s. The Progressive Writer's Movement enabled certain modes of expressions which were denied entry into the literary spheres until then. As a result a group of writers emerged in Kerala and Vaikom Muhammad Basheer is a prominent writer among them. His stories largely deal with less privileged people. His fictional world is full of common men and women along with other creatures. He creates a world of people who are criminalized or considered immoral in the society but he portrays them without being judgmental. It is interesting to read Basheer as a writer who creates a parallel world far from the mainstream which constitutes a lot of underprivileged men and women.

It can be said that the process of writing History was never immune to changes. But as far as a colony like India is concerned, until 1970s the modes of writing history were largely stemmed from colonial education itself. The two prominent methods of history, colonial and nationalist, although believed to be in conflict with each other, failed to involve the agency of 'common man' in the process. In other words the nationalist and colonial histories share a sense of elitism which altogether ignores the underprivileged in the society. Colonial records do not acknowledge much of the contributions of the common man in the freedom fights. On the other hand, nationalist history always tends to see the society as a homogenous unit. National consciousness was formed during the colonial period. With English education there emerged a newly educated Indian middle class who became the elites in India's socio-political and literary spheres. As a part of imagining a homogeneous community, to use Anderson's phrase, the political elites of India needed to unify the diverse territories into one whole unit and they found contradiction at India's different regions. The differences were either suppressed or reduced to silence by the nationalist

discourses. Early print and publications like Newspaper and Novel contributed to this end.

The demand for a different methodology becomes highly necessary to trace India's missing people from History. It is in this scenario Subaltern studies offer an alternative method to approach history. A lot of long forgotten sites of history and materials were made available by Subaltern historians who re-write history from the point of view of the outcasts of the mainstream. Thus India's national history, once considered an elitist affair, met critical challenges. In this context searching for the missing people in India's history does not only rewrite history, but also it contributes to the refined understanding of the trajectories of today's social order. Our interest in foregrounding the context of subaltern historiography is rooted in an illuminated reading of certain literatures in this backdrop. If history until recently failed to mark the existence of several classes (castes also) of people, how literature of the time responded to the question of marginality. It is the argument of this paper that literature represented 'those invisible people' rather realistically and therefore offers to challenge the standardized history by portraying unprivileged characters and shares a world view that is inclusive of the lives of people "from below".

The story of subaltern India that confronts the elite notion of the national subject was revolutionary when it appeared in literature. During this phase, real life characters such as peasants, workers, coolies, scavengers, thieves, prostitutes, pimps, and a lot of underworld men and their everyday world came to be represented realistically in the mainstream Malayalam literature. Basheer is a harbinger of this trend in mainstream Malayalam literature. He started his writing career at the peak of Indian nationalism. While studying at an English school, he travelled to Calicut to participate in the freedom struggle. Consequently he was arrested and imprisoned. Being a political prisoner he came to know the atrocities that happen inside a jail which might have inspired him to break the narrow boundaries of nationalist thinking. It was a moment of encounter with the state and the deprived sections of society who were considered people with negligible importance.

The prison is a place where the question of oppression, deprivation, and freedom etc. are concerned far more deeply than in the outside world. In his description of the life of a prisoner, it is understood that the reality of the prison life is worse than what it is expected to be. His jail stories like *Mother* and *Tiger* discussed the oppressive nature of the prison life in colonial India when the freedom struggle was raging outside. The inmates of the jail live in dehumanized conditions. The search for dignity becomes a daily struggle in the prison life.

In *Tiger*, a dog is treated in a prison with great dignity by the police men because the dog is owned by a police officer. On the contrary the freedom fighters are forced to lie on the cement floor. They are not served adequate food for survival. They have a strong feeling of hunger all the time. *Tiger* is living in luxury even by eating up the prisoners' share of food. The deprivation of prisoners and the privileged life a dog seem to represent the two extremities of the world inside the jail. The story takes a turn when one night *Tiger* is hurt severely and the culprit is beaten up by the inspector badly. The inspector ties his legs together stretching out through the

prison bars and beats him on his feet until he faints out of pain. When the story ends we see the prisoner lying on the floor with bleeding feet and Tiger licking blood from all over the floor and from his feet.

The story was written in a time when India itself was turned into a prison under the British rule. Ranajith Guha observes:

The relation between prison authorities and prison population is the same as that between our rulers and our people. It is a political relationship which articulates itself as a chronic and aggravated law and order situation: on the one hand, an extreme violence of the state and, on the other, peoples' response to this violence ranging from submission to militant resistance depending on circumstance and consciousness. (603-604)

Inside the prison there is a direct confrontation of people with the state. Their freedom is limited to the jail compound. Forced to live in abject misery and helplessness, the inmates are frustrated and they start resisting the orders and challenging the state. The people who live in jail are in search of dignity. They have no means of resistance as they are constantly under surveillance. They can only resist at the risk of endangering their own lives.

The life in jail depicted here is suggestive of life in India during freedom struggles especially in the heydays of national movements when many political activists are constantly kept in police custody. The prisoners are part of a marginal society and they do not feature in the mainstream narratives of any nation. Their status of citizenship itself is in a crisis as they are treated as the outcasts of society who need to be locked up strictly in a place surrounded by strong and high walls. They cannot be seen in the public sphere since their world is so closed and well guarded by police. Literature can bring the interior stories of a prison in to the mainstream and therefore challenge the idea of homogeneity of the nation by exposing the grim realities of the society. It therefore takes a major role in making them visible in the outer realms of the society. Thus Reading *Tiger* as a narrative of the freedom fight equips us to revisit the untold sides of the colonial response to the freedom movement. Such a reading is significant since it exposes the pragmatic of human life in the time of anti-colonial resistance. Official narratives however fail to mark such stories because the superficial objective reality of the world cannot contain the subjective world of experiences, memories and so on.

Mother, a story of the relationship between a son and his mother, is intertwined with the social history of colonial India. The story portrays the central character's drives in participating in the freedom struggle and his connectivity to the iconic Mother India (Bharatmata). At the same time his deep emotions towards his own mother is a strong

undercurrent. In a close reading, the story is about two mothers, real and metaphoric. The real mother stands for love, hope and ultimately life itself. She is attached to her son more than anything else in the world. The depth of her love to her son is revealed at its peak towards the end of the story. Released from jail the narrator returns home where his mother waits for him without going to sleep night after night though she had no idea when her son would come back.

The son, who is a freedom fighter, strives to die for the nation. The nation is popularly considered a mother of all the citizens. In that sense the metaphoric mother demands death from her citizens for the sake of her freedom. Tracking away from the patriarchal methodology of describing the nation, Basheer in a certain way shares a sensibility expressed largely by post colonial women writers. This is where he speaks for the suppressed. The social marginality and subalternity of women in India and most other once colonized countries are often altered, glorified, and justified in terms of patriarchal nationhood and subsequent sentiments attached to it. The events narrated are drawn from India's unrecorded history. Such a story could easily go hyperbolic but mother is written with a keen sense of the 'real' with a blend of emotion and nostalgia.

Both the stories throw light on the diverse experiences of people who are ignored in the mainstream discourses. Many of his stories in fact discuss and foreground the difference that contradicts several conventions. Basheer is one of the first Malayalam writers who disputed literary standardization of his time and devoted his works to make the suppressed sections of society visible through literature. Literatures help readers to critically revisit and therefore re-build a past from various entry points which are either overlooked or unmarked in the practice of writing a standard history.

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