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TONGUES OF FIRE: A FOUCAULDIAN ANALYSIS OF VAIKOM MUHAMMED  
BASHEER'S "MATHILUKAL"

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ABSTRACT

A world without prisons is 'impossible'. Discipline and punishment have always been a part of human story. Wherever human beings exist, discipline and punishment are inevitable. There should be a power structure to decide the rules and regulations and formulate a structure for the people under that power structure. Those who stand against the rules, regulations and the power structure will be caught, trialed and whenever they found to be guilty, will be punished and imprisoned. Imprisonment is the most 'scientific' way of punishing a criminal. It is Foucault's theory of "discipline", which later paved the way for working of prisons here. As discussed in his book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault explains the term of discipline as a series of techniques by which the body's operations can be controlled. Famous Malayalam writer, Vaikom Muhammed Basheer's *Mathilukal* is one among his brilliant portrayals of his real life experiences. It has a story behind its historicity. This paper analyzes how the 'Prison' and diverse modes of punishments suppress the soul and mind of human beings and how it objects his/her tongue which continue firing against the power structure, in the light of *Mathilukal*.

KEY WORDS: Discipline and Punishment-Suppression of the power structure-humiliation offered by the act of imprisonment.

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INTRODUCTION

Vaikom Muhammad Basheer (21 January 1908 – 5 July 1994) is a Malayalam fiction writer in Malayalam. He was born in Thalayolaparambu in northern Travancore as the elder son of KayiAbdurahiman and Kunhuthachumma. He was a humanist, freedom fighter, novelist and short story writer. He is noted for his path-breaking, disarmingly down-to-earth style of writing that made him equally popular among literary critics as well as the common man. He is also regarded as the translator's nightmare. This is mainly because of the colloquial touch he added to his writings, which ethnically speaking would lose its humor and meaning when translated to other languages.

An astute observer of human character, he skillfully combined humor and pathos in his works. Love, hunger and poverty are recurring themes in his works. There is enormous variety in them – of narrative style,

of presentation, of philosophical content, of social comment and commitment. His association with India's independence struggle, the experiences during his long travels and the conditions that existed in Kerala, particularly in the neighborhood of his home and among the Muslim community – all had a major impact on them. Politics and prison, homosexuality, all were grist to his mill.

His notable works are, 'Premalekhanam' (1943), 'Baalyakaalasakhi' (1944), 'Ente Uppuppakkoruuaana Undayirunnu' (1951), 'Jeevitha-nizhalppaadukal' (1954), 'Vishwavikhhyaathamaaya Mookku' (1954), 'Paaththummayude Aadu' (1959) and 'Vishappu' (1954).

Basheer was a voracious reader. His habit of reading made him aware of the current issues particularly of Indian Independence Movement and freedom struggle. His father brought him photos of Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Abdul Kalam Azad and many others. Thus he became familiar with these leaders. In 1925, he had met and 'touched' Mahatma Gandhi, when Gandhi reached Vaikom. He considers it as the golden moment in his life. As a fond memory, Basheer had later mentioned the incident in many of his writings. Thus he loved freedom fighters, freedom struggle and most importantly 'freedom'.

He went directly to Calicut where the 'Salt Satyagraha' was taking place. He also sent a letter to famous freedom fighter and the sub editor of 'Al Ameen' daily, Mr. Said Muhammed who was imprisoned in Bellari jail, telling that he is completely devoted to his native country and is preparing to get arrested by the Police. But Said Muhammed sent him a reply telling to withdraw from his decision and to wait until they meet. The interesting thing to remember is the reply that Basheer sent, in which he tells "there is no enough time to wait as India is about to get freedom. So if he wastes time, definitely he will lose the chance to fight for the nation."

Basheer was selected as one among the group to make salt from the sea water as part of the Salt Satyagraha. But unexpectedly Police came to the Congress Office and arrested almost all the freedom fighters including Basheer who were assigned to participate in the Salt Satyagraha. They were kept in remand for fifteen days and after the trial they were sent to 'Kannur Prison' for three months. The shocking and painful experiences in prison and the harsh treatment of the Police in the prisons is deeply imprinted in Basheer's heart.

But for Basheer, prison was a place where he didn't spend much of his time thinking of his fate of imprisonment, instead, he felt prison as a place where he could meet and interact with freedom fighters from various parts of the nation. Prison experiences made him to remain strongly with Gandhian principles and freedom movement.

The most unexpected and shocking news came to Basheer on 23rd March, 1931 that Bhagat Singh was hanged by the British Government. He was released from the prison with a strong determination to fight against the British rule and the native Police who brutally oppressed the freedom fighters. He was even prepared to kill a policeman who brutally beat him in the prison. He had a great desire to meet his lovely mother but was ashamed of facing his family. Even then, he went one day and saw his mother waiting for him with delicious food. His eyes were filled thinking of many such mothers who are still waiting for their imprisoned sons by preparing delicious food. He told himself that such freedom fighters who spent years and years in prison are not even recorded in history.

As mentioned earlier, Basheer was giving another meaning for prison, where he befriended with many people and he even started a newspaper together with one of his prison mates. It strongly criticized the British rule and the Travancore Government.

He formed a revolutionary movement aiming students to make them aware of the freedom struggle. He even formed another movement to defend the police system and to fight against the police if needed. Basheer made posters with his friends which critiqued the British Government and pasted them on the walls in towns. And he gave coverage to such posters in the newspaper also. But the police found the person behind all these 'criminal' activities and again issued arrest warrant against Basheer. Without being caught by the police, Basheer left the place and came back only after some long eight years. Later he found himself as a writer and started writing stories along with the adamant criticism against the British Government. He published

hundreds of articles in leading dailies, but the British Government banned his articles. The leading newspapers become hesitant to publish his articles fearing the British Government. Being irritated of his unending criticism, the British Government again issued arrest warrant against him.

After many long years of solitude, he came to know that his family is being threatened in search of Basheer. He couldn't bear it and he himself surrendered. He was imprisoned for one year and it was a period of unimaginable experiences and tribulations. He had to go through painful and terrible kind of treatments. He understood that there is no limitation for the cruelty in man to man relationships. He confronted with the prisoners who lose their self-esteem before the cruel police officers. His mind and heart filled with anger towards the police officers and compassion towards the prisoners. He had produced a great account of letters during his imprisonment which made the outer world to know the pathetic condition in prisons. But he was facilitated to write poems and novels in the prison, so that he didn't break himself into pieces when compared to other prison mates.

He was awarded the Padma Shri in 1982. The University of Calicut has honored him conferring 'Doctor of Letters' on 19th January, 1987. He has also won the 'Kerala State Film Award' for Best Story, for *Mathilukal* in 1989. He has also bagged other awards like Lalithambika Antharjanam Award in 1992, 'Muttathu Varkey Award' in 1993 and 'Vallathol Award' in 1993. He died in Beypore, on 5 July 1994.

He was arrested and imprisoned for participating in the freedom struggle and for being a part of Independence Movement in India. The pathetic conditions in prisons and lockups made him to produce a great account of literature and it also helped himself to become a good writer of the age.

Most of his works are purely autobiographical including the stories of his youth, family, social problems and political issues. Most of the stories are woven with the thread from his life. Works like *Mathilukal*, *Tiger*, *Ente Valathukai*, and *Amma* share his real life experiences in prison.

*Maranathinte Nizhalil* and *Janmadinam* also portray the humiliation, poverty and the hard and harsh realities of life. He had told in a speech that "I was one among the non-violence group, but when I am released from the prison I had shifted to a different person- 'terrorist'"

Renaissance in Malayalam literature was a period of total change in various discourses. It was a revolution against the traditional way of analyzing life. Renaissance writers like Thakazhi Shivashankarappilla, Ponkunnam Varkey and P keshava Dev are men who analyzed life with a different perspective. Vaikom Muhammed Basheer was also one among them to observe and write in a different way, especially in the genre of novel with a revolutionary change in the style of narrating and bringing a novelty in the selection of themes and moreover in the use of language. He had a great sense of humor. Every humor he uses is preceded by a thousand kinds of realities. His humor was that thought provocative and insightful. But the government couldn't understand the legendary of Basheer as an artist. They arrested and imprisoned him for taking part in the freedom struggle. He had to face harsh humiliations and oppressions in various prisons. But he was defining prison in another way. He was portraying what he is confronting with and it came out in *Jeevitha Nizhalppadukal*, *Balyakaala Sakhi*, *My Grand dad 'd an elephant* and it reaches its zenith in *Mathilukal*. *Mathilukal* is one among his brilliant portrayals of his real life experiences. It has a story behind its historicity.

In 1942, Basheer was arrested and imprisoned in Poojappura Central Jail, Thiruvananthapuram, convicting high treason. This was the time when the power of rule rested with the Travancore government. An active member of the Indian political struggle was thus put in the four walls of the prison. Here, we can clearly see Foucault's theory of "discipline", which paved the way for prisons later, working here. As discussed in his book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault explains the term of discipline as a series of techniques by which the body's operations can be controlled. Discipline worked by coercing and arranging the individual's movements and his experience of space and time. Basheer's expression of contempt with the British rule, his interactions with the great leaders of Indian freedom struggle- the leaders of Vaikom Sathyagraha in particular, his acceptance of Gandhiji's swadeshi movement, his 'crime' of writing against the British Government was hence punished by this act of imprisonment. His body's operation was brought to

control within the four walls of the jail. His experience of time and space was coerced and arranged by the people in power. The link between Basheer's crime and punishment becomes a question here.

In the theories put forth by Foucault, the self-evidence of the prison is based on its role in transforming individuals. It corrects and reproduces the mechanisms found in the social body. Prison always covered both the deprivation of liberty and the technical transformation of individuals. Applying the theory to the novel, we clearly find Basheer's imprisonment is to clearly transform him to a person who can very well adapt to the colonial rule. Clearly the people in power wanted to make him completely confine to the norms and regulations of the people in power. Basheer was a person who writes well and it is sure that his writings can definitely harm the colonial rule in the country, especially in Kerala. As mentioned earlier, he was a man who keeps constant relationship with leaders of Independence movement and was ready to fight for the nation. The government was sure that he would participate in the freedom movement and it will affect the government in the state. So, it was necessary for them to silence Basheer and to control his interactions with people and the leaders. The heroine of the story, Narayani, is a girl of twenty two years old; she is being imprisoned until her death. For her all the dreams and desires are dead. She represents the oppressed, helpless and isolated women in the society. She shows the meaninglessness of life. She is young; her desires and dreams are as wide as the blue sky. But the society and the system which is ruling her caught and imprisoned. The question of freedom and the right to prove her guilty is remaining unsettled. The same is happening with Basheer, as he was caught and imprisoned for fighting for his nation's freedom and even for his own freedom as a human being, this was the crime that he committed. He protested against the system which suppressed a nation's people and he was caught and imprisoned convicting high treason. How it becomes treason when a person fights for his/her nation's freedom and independence? Then what would be the result when they imprison people convicting these kinds of crimes and how can they mould their character after their period of imprisonment? Foucault states that, Criminal justice should not be a mode to take revenge but should punish. It is must to recognize the humanity of the criminal. Criminal justice should not be a mode to take revenge. But if we examine any work from the writers of prison, it can easily be understood that prisons were always a place where the revenge and grudge of the police officers towards the criminals comes out through their treatment. Especially, if the prisoner is like Basheer, who is caught for fighting for the nation, would definitely be punished harshly, because, the power system is always vigilant to suppress the tongues which stand against its attitude and will. Foucault adds that the eighteenth century reform of the criminal law aimed not to punish less but to punish better; this is true when we analyze the experience that the freedom fighters had to face. A prison is meant to make change in criminal's character and behavior, but if fighting for one's freedom and being imprisoned, what change should he/she make throughout the tenure of his punishment? Should he change to a person who is not ready to fight even for his fundamental rights? So what the prisons are actually meant for is still a question remain unanswered.

In the novel, Basheer clearly mentions the loneliness he had in the prison. Often in the novel, he thinks about the prisoners, who had been imprisoned for years without release, their isolation from the world, their separation from their closed ones and so on. He also thinks of the husbands separated from their wives and wives who are separated from their husbands. He tries to study the physical structure of the prison and finds that its right side was confined to male prisoners where as its left side was for the women prisoners. As the title suggests, "the wall" stands not only as the wall of separation between two loving hearts, but it is the wall of isolation; the wall of separation. Again, all these highlights Foucault's observation of prison as "Omni-disciplinary", a complete reformation of character that takes several forms of which the first principle is isolation from other prisoners and from the world.

Basheer is arrested and put in jail. This is a clear act of curtailment of his liberty and it is for this deprivation of an individual's freedom and liberty, Foucault comments, a prison is being set up. In the novel, there are characters like jail warden, and other inmates in the prison. The jail warden shares many similarities with the jailor of eighteenth century British prisons. They were rude and cruel towards the inmates. Their main duty is to watch the prisoners and to mould their character in such a way that they will truly confine

themselves to the existing administrative system. The jail warden undoubtedly reminds us of the concept of "Panopticon" put forth by Jeremy Bentham and later popularized by Michael Foucault. Panopticon can be referred as the precursor of modern prison as it is a building with a tower at the center from which it is possible to see each cell in which a prisoner or schoolboy is incarcerated. Visibility is a trap. Each individual is seen but cannot communicate with the warders or other prisoners. The crowd is abolished. The panopticon induces a sense of permanent visibility that ensures the functioning of power. Bentham decreed that power should be visible yet unverifiable. The prisoner can always see the tower but never knows from where he is being observed.

Basheer stands for the entire prison community whose desires, emotions and feelings are swept off without a ray of hope. Narayani also represents innocent and basic human desires. Man's unending thirst for freedom is beautifully portrayed through both the characters. Their relationship and dialogues emphasizes a simple fact that prisoners are also human beings. Their innocent at the same time natural love symbolizes the desires, necessities, emotions, feelings and mental status of all the prisoners. How freedom becomes the most important phenomena in life is beautifully portrayed in the story. Their expression of minute desires shows how important a relationship is and how these kinds of basic human rights are violated in the prisons. The squirrel that sits on the top of the wall and mocks at Narayani also represent the people who are sitting on the top of the power structure. It shows how they and the society around us observe the prisoners through the eyes which can never ever understand the people who live under that wall, because it sits only on the top of the wall, not either the left or right side under the same wall. How state violates human rights in an institution like prison is directly portrayed in the novel.

The novel also deviates into many other meanings. Wall stands like an unbreakable existence. It holds a proud existence separating two prominent religions, culture, and moreover separating a man and woman and their deep love which is actually separating not only the two true loving hearts, but the world of males and females on the basis of their gender. Basheer and his beloved, Narayani, can at least hear the sound and have the smell of each other. But, what is the condition of the others? This makes us think about other prisoners who are isolated in the limited space provided to them, and also about their family members who wait for their return, every second. So, the question of the role of prisons in a state arises. As a punishment for crime, the state imprisons people in order to mould their character. But the question of what is actually happening to these prisoners is yet unsettled. They lose themselves with dead emotions and feelings even without the desire to see their loved ones, and finally they get released. At this moment, change that happens to the prisoners should be examined with a great sense of seriousness. In the novel, walls also symbolize the state and its rule and regulations. How the rules and regulations are powerful to shrink an individual in a state is unimaginable. Here in the novel too, the walls stand against all their desires and basic needs. The power of rules and regulations to rule and regulate its citizens, and its far reaching effects in the minds of the people especially in prison people is crucial. The wall symbolizes the society also, because in many of the incidents, society creates criminals and sends them to prisons. In the last part of the novel, though he had enjoyed all the facilities in the prison during his tenure, Basheer couldn't say good bye to Narayani. Even when he was walking towards freedom after his release, he was again and again being imprisoned by the love of Narayani. It means, imprisonment is not just pulling one into the four walls of a prison, but it is the imprisonment of his minds sometimes midst of all the comforts. It is also another implication of the novel. Thus, Basheer was also redefining the word freedom into his level, or to a vast concept than it exist now. Freedom never be freedom even one is midst of all the comforts and luxuries. It is something which can release the mind and heart of the people. That is why Basheer asks himself when he falls in love with Narayani that "why should I be free? Who wanted freedom?"

The story brings back the history of Gandhism, Indian National Congress, Independence movement and freedom struggle which reached its peak during the period. Both the British and Travancore Governments were not arresting the criminals; instead, freedom fighters were caught and imprisoned. There is a direct

mentioning to the Hindu-Muslim viewpoint in the novel. And it has a close connection with the India Pakistan partition and Basheer's strong opposition towards the issue is clearly portrayed in the novel.

The question of validity of prison is another matter of concern in the novel. The walls here symbolize the power structure of the society. It also represents the state which holds power over the people. The walls never show a ray of hope. Its height, its smoothness and its impossibility even to make a hole on it represents the cruel face of the rules and regulations of a state. There is an incident in the novel that the hole which opens to the female prison was sealed by a jail warden seeing this, a prisoner beats him cruelly and later that prisoner had to face a lot of tribulations. This brings to light how strict and rigid are the laws. How flexible are laws towards the citizens of a state is also often doubtful. The question of to whom these laws are actually made remains unanswered. Laws, rules and regulations of a state are clearly made for the people of that particular state. So it should be flexible to them, especially in this kind of situation. Here, I never mean that all the prisoners are innocent, and the condition of all the prisons is quite unbearable and so all the prisoners should be made free. My concern is that no prison should be a place to violate all the basic rights of the prisoners as they are caught as 'criminals'. If prisons are meant to be a place to mould a criminal's character, or to make a criminal understand the kind of crime that he/she committed is wrong to the constitution of that particular state, such kind of an atmosphere should be created there instead beating them up and treating badly. In the novel, walls always stand as an obstacle for their love. It also represents the hypocrisy of the society. Rules and regulations create a group of people who holds power capable of doing whatever they wish to. Even rules take the role of a suppresser or an oppressor. Even when the basic rights of men are being violated, the hero, Basheer asks the question "why should I be free, who wanted freedom". This question doesn't mean that Basheer is in love with Narayani, so that he is refusing to get out of the prison. But it means that the state is often a failure to provide what actually the citizens needed. When Basheer eagerly awaited and expected his release with other prisoners of that prison, he was denied freedom. The trauma that he faced at that point of time can easily be understood by everyone. And later, as a relief for his loneliness, Narayani came to him with a heart full of love. But, his dreams were shattered when an order of his release was issued. And, Basheer, disappointed to the core, couldn't utter a single word. Prison like experiences many often offer tragic situations in life more horrible than of death. It is the other dimension of the novel when Basheer feels prison as heaven and the outer world as prison. It again emphasizes the principle that wherever man exists he yearns for freedom in every sense. Thus the concept and meaning of prison rises to another level. Basic human desires and feelings are the most important things in life and to be lucky to satisfy all such minute rights is the heavenly state for man.

It is an important thing to note that the love occurs here between Basheer and Narayani who belong to two different religions. This theme is historically relevant as when Basheer and Narayani represent two different entities of Hindu and Muslim religions, the significance indirectly goes to the unforgettable partition of India. The novel reaches at a vast concept of International secularism through the true love of both Basheer and Narayani to the love of Hindu-Muslim cultures and thereby a love of India and Pakistan. Thus the work brings back many realities of life of Basheer and it is very relevant in the case of the history of India. The work wonders the reader how a mere love story that occurred in prison could bring all these meanings and historical representations. The relevance of the work lay on the hard and harsh realities of freedom struggle, Indian Independence Movement and even opens the eyes of the reader into the history and the vast concept of secularism. This work is a testimony of true love among people irrespective of religion and national boundaries. It also teaches how to love people even without seeing them. It also mock at the people who discriminate people on the basis of religion, caste, class, race and color. It also criticizes the disputes between countries on the basis of boundaries and other silly matters. Thus the work works as a bridge between the people who are going to be separated on the basis of religion and nation. Especially the relevance of the work lay on the eve of freedom and partition of India and Pakistan. Thus the legendary of Basheer as a writer is very much obvious in *Mathilukal*. As it simply tells the love story between two individuals, it has got wide relevance in the production of meanings.

The viewpoints that are formed in *Mathilukal* are significant in every sense. As a novel, it is only a story of two true loving hearts. But the wall that separates both the male and female prisons deviates into many meanings. It is a reality; a real life symbol of obstacles that we face in human relationships. 'The walls' symbolizes the human disability to love each other amidst of all these differences. More importantly, it symbolizes the unending human thirst and desire for freedom. Basheer considers everyone as consider himself. He can't find any hierarchy between Jailors, Police officers and prisoners. He dreams of a freedom where people can find true loving hearts above all walls. And he also redefines the existing meaning of prison. Prison is not a place to imprison people and treat pathetically for the mistakes that they commit. Basheer is canonizing prison from its existing level. He dreams of a place where people can love and embrace within the walls and where there are no scopes for any kind of walls.

*Mathilukal* also brings the horrible situations in the prisons, like the capital punishment. On the day of hanging criminals, the other prisoners lived in utter fear and anxiety, because, they were scared of being hanged. How these kinds of punishments can mould the character of a prisoner? The effect of being victimizing for these kinds of punishments would be dangerous, because, psychologically it will affect the people. There is a statement in the novel that "Basheer accompanied death on the nights of hanging people". There is also another touching question asked by Narayani that, "Will you remember me after my death?" It is a question which comes out of helplessness when they feel the presence of death in the rooms and the other rooms nearby. It shows the mental state of the prisoners even when they were caught and imprisoned for silly crimes. Another important thing is that as most of them are being imprisoned for fighting for freedom, their desire for freedom and independence is unpredictable. Then what would be the pain when they were being 'imprisoned' again in a more narrowed prison?

#### CONCLUSION

To conclude, it was the crime of 'writing' that Basheer committed during the reign of Travancore government. But the major crime that he committed was he participated in the 'Salt Satyagraha'. It portrays many of the horrible experiences that prisoners had to face during that time. But the thing is that the condition still remains the same even in the twenty first century. It was only love as a resort for both Narayani and Basheer in the darkened four walls of the prison. It is only love which lacks in the prisons. I never felt it as a mere love story; I even doubt of such a love story taking place in the prison. But Basheer was trying to bring the entire trauma experienced by the prisoners to the people in the outer world enjoying all the freedom. It is easy to make a criminal listing out various "crimes" he/she does. But it is impossible to bring back a prisoner completely to a mental state which he had before.

I again say that it is not only a love story of two true loving hearts. But it is a story of a prisoner who had being imprisoned for fighting for the independence of his nation. It is also a story of a twenty two year old girl and her feelings. The twig that she used to convey her presence on the other side of the wall clearly symbolizes hopelessness. It tells how impossible for her to blossom again to an individual, a woman, a lover and to a wife who live under the wings of a man.

In a nutshell, the whole novel is a symbol of nationalism, patriotism, Indian independence movement, Indian national Congress and more importantly Gandhi and Gandhian philosophies. The image of the wall here reaches at its zenith as it physically appears in the novel. It is important to note that love is not the important theme of the novel, but the unimaginable state of lacking freedom.

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