

THE SEED OF A PROBLEM:
BODY AND SPEECH IN BASHEER'S
KATHABHĪJAM

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Vaikom Muhammad Basheer's *Kathabhījam* came out as a book in 1945. It was originally performed as part of the sixteenth annual conference of the Samastha Kerala Sahitya Parishad. With regards to the formation of a trade union for the writers, the play progresses along tropes familiar to the representation of the realist mode of poverty. It is stricken on the body, expressed in terms of the protagonist's hunger and general sense of unfulfilled promises, with the religious and political establishments as the symbols and rhetorical resource of the oppressive order. *Kathabhījam* can be translated as "the seed of story." The present paper reads this one-act play to unravel a concern regarding the postcolonial nation-state in its performativity. The question specifically is this: at what cost to the promise of citizenship is the idea of a nation as a fraternal enterprise established. Through a structural analysis of the play, I argue that the notion of citizenship built on the individual and with the idea of brotherhood/sisterhood at its heart is evoked by the significant elision of an idea of citizenship based on a relation between strangers – a model which would have held radical promises for a postcolonial nation-state like India which is governed on the lines of population groups (Chatterjee 2004).

Like most of Basheer's other stories, this play has many moments that have to be read in conjunction with, and are better appreciated in the awareness of, the metatext of the Basheerian world—his stories of himself, published as anecdotes by others and as fragmentary biographical pieces strewn across his *Ormayude Arakal* [*The Cells of Memory*] (2013), first published in 1981. If *Kathabhījam* is to be read for what its title suggests it

is—the seed of many of his stories—then this seed is a story of impoverishment, both material and intellectual. The one-act play depicts the story of one afternoon in the life of a short story writer, when he is thrown out of his rented room on account of longstanding defaults on the rent as well as the credit in the restaurant he has been eating at. Through the afternoon he is impoverished of all that belongs to him—his kerchief, his books, his paper cuttings of his own stories, his ownership of what he has written so far, his pen which was gifted by his now deceased amour, and finally even his clothes. Here we have a man brought down to his labour, the working class that is now calling for a fight back, a proletarian writer.

If the capitalist lives off the labour of the working class, its ideational engines live off the same. Sadasivan, the protagonist, is waiting for a publisher to whom he would sell many of his published stories, which would give him, or so he expects, at least eight hundred rupees. He is so sure of this happy ending to his present misery—a misery of not having had anything to eat for the day, of being on the verge of being thrown out from the rented house as well as the credit books of the restaurant to the annals of demeaning starvation—that he promises a beggar, new to the protagonist but seemingly a regular in the area, a full rupee (a tea costs an *aña*, or so the play suggests; sixteen *aña* make a rupee). In addition, he promises not just to pay off all his debt, but also to buy a shirt and trousers for the child who labours at the restaurant. Dreams, promises, and privation abound in that room, in crumbled papers on the floor, in the paper-cuttings of his stories published in newspapers, in the stack of papers with ideas for stories yet to be written. Sadasivan is however soon brought back to the world of bleak reality, as neither of the publishers brings him any financial consolation. At the end of the play we have the protagonist walking out of the house in just his towels to that primitive stage where Nietzsche might, in the context of tragedies, find an appeal to the primeval sense of solidarity, where we are devoid of our status and are reduced to the human substratum (1967), yet the seed of the story is not a man who would evoke humanity but rather the terrible ideology at work, and is also the story of alienated labour and the fight for dignity. His promises are unfulfilled from no fault of his own. Promise implies future and the future is to be won—the new world *will be* won, but only as a future promise built upon the eschatology of a compound of contradiction and a willingness to stand up.

Yet, how exactly is this impoverishment communicated? What does the form of the play say of its inner workings? It starts with the fourteen-year-old daughter of the house owner, Madhavi, flicking away the pen, a

gift that he would never part with, now part of his biography as an artefact of loss and could-have-been, when the protagonist has dozed off in the midst of his writing. The short story he is writing is called “Ātmakatha” [“Autobiography”]. In that room of desperation what passes for a pillow is his book that has so far sold fifty copies and has been given as a gift and personal favours in the hundreds. The book is titled *Kazhinjakālam*, or “the by-gone days.” We have here a writer whose labour power is his own life. Through the play, the list of central ideas that he will one day build into stories stretches out, torn from his conversations and situations that condition his life. The writer as the proletariat protagonist lives off the blood of his desperation.

Long before Basheer became a writer he was a self-styled Bhagat Singh. He had experienced life in prison for his writings against the incumbents of the princely state of Travancore, the southernmost princely state. By the time of *Kathabhijam*, Basheer was well known as the writer of *Balyakalasakhi*, a novel of separated lovers, cruel fate, and untimely death. The writer in the play relives his memories of his lost love through the pen that was gifted by her. Suhra withdraws from *Balyakalasakhi* [childhood friend] without even letting us know what her final words were. Basheer's departed childhood friend appears to him in Kolkata during a desolate night and inspires the novel, initially written in English and then rewritten in Malayalam. But the love of the protagonist could not be his because there were “social contradictions” between them. They differed in their religions and beliefs. M.K. Sanu (2007) says that in the days of *Kathabhijam* Basheer had an interest in a Nair girl. *Kathabhijam* is a rare work, the only play of his that has come out as a book by this otherwise prolific writer. He had written other plays (as recorded by Karassery [2008]), but they are very few in number (four). Basheer's role as a playwright is the most overlooked.

Basheer the author was then still unfamiliar with financial stability. Uncertainty loomed over the future. It was then that the doors of *Navayugam* [*The New Age*] based in Thrissur opened to him (Sanu 2007). His editor, Joseph Mundassery, would later be the first education minister in the first communist ministry of the newly formed state of Kerala. Basheer would, over the decades, be the most celebrated short-story writer and would gain acclaim for his portrayal of the Muslim community in Kerala. The trope of poverty would keep coming back in stories of poverty by litigation as a condition, a philosophical problem, and a lived reality.

The loss of the pen—and Basheer did have a noticeable pen at this time according to Sanu (2007)—however turns out to be an occasion to display the fondness of the young girl, Madhavi, towards the protagonist. The pen

is returned by the girl soon enough, but the condition of being wronged is already maintained as an unbroken fact of the play, as *before* the returning of the pen by the ever-so-fond-of-him girl, a beggar came that way and found the protagonist alone and napping, and managed to hide the latter's kerchief in his saddle. Sadasivan would ultimately lose the pen as well as the kerchief, but the pen is taken away from him by the cruel house owner, who is also a man of despicable morality, while the kerchief is given away to the beggar along with the last pieces of clothing the protagonist has as a gesture of understanding, and a token of camaraderie in the impending class war: "Go uncle, go, and get hold of all the beggars, and all the downtrodden, and ready yourself for the war against the world. You be our forerunner" (Basheer 2012, 2).

The postcolony is characterized by the patrimonial use of resources which turns the state into a fetish to be reified and paid homage to in rituals. The fetish breeds in the sense of fun directed towards it by the subjects (Mbembe 2010). Laughter and commandment go together; they take the steam off of each other, and protect each other. The characteristic of a dictatorship is that the superego manages to play like the id. Power begets power, and power corrupts. If the id is indeed the corruption of this mind ever craving for more ways to shock, dictatorship doubles up this id as the superego. Conversely then, the characteristic of a dictatorship is that the id manages to be the superego. The king has two bodies, and neither is immortal. With the caesura in "The King is dead, long live the King," it is not just the flesh -and-blood king who makes it to the seat; rather, the king is the last of the princely siblings alive. Between the death and coronation is the frantic play of murders. The caesura is an interregnum of fratricide. Dictatorship brings the superego out of language to the pure double body, one of representation and the other of sensation, to a oneness in simultaneity. All Kings are usurpers, and if the beggar is the superego of Basheer's *Kathabhijam*, he is no less injunctive than any other. Sadasivan is in dire need of money; he has to pay his rent and food bills, his father is ill, and his parents are poor, but all of this only after the first obligation announces itself—to the beggar who asked him for old clothes, Sadasivan promises a rupee. He cannot give it instantly as he has no money, not even an *añā*, and he informs the beggar that he is to get a decent amount of money that day and that he can have his rupee after that. In Levinas's terms, it is thus that the primal debt is announced (Levinas 1969).

Wherein lies the obligation that Sadasivan feels towards the beggar? It is in the superego. Yet, when Sadasivan feels this obligation, the audience perceives it as an act of kindness, a sign of idealism. There is a decipherable gap between these two superegos at work. The sense of

obligation, the idea of duty, is a very weak superego to start with, a non-effective and relativist superego, and precisely because there is a coup in the wings, one mounted by a superego which would command ideas of rights over those of responsibility, of being oppressed rather than finding solace in your oppression. The beggar is the guest as well as the face, the indebted to as well as the medium on which the indebtedness is inscribed. It is the initial debt that allows the beggar a constant presence in the play such that the beggar is available on the stage as the lone interlocutor of the protagonist as well as in conjunction with the two young characters individually, the house-owner's daughter, Madhavi, as well as the boy who works in the restaurant, Prabhakaran, who, unknown to each other, are born of the same father. There is never a time at which the two characters are present together, except at the very end. While each of them may appear with the protagonist, with or without the beggar around, it is then interesting to note that such a scene in which Madhavi and Prabhakaran are together on the stage occurs the first and the only time after the beggar leaves the place. The beggar fades out of history as the forerunner of a promised revolution, but the final resolution—that of the protagonist himself leaving the place—is not with the enthusiasm of a revolutionary but the dejection of a homeless person. The fratricide precedes the new order. It is to Madhavi that he says his final leave. He runs his finger around her hand; he doesn't take away his face from her even when Prabhakaran enters the scene. Exhortation to the beggar gives way to silence with Madhavi; direct address gives way to affect. The king is dead, long live the king! Mind the caesura of the many 'disappearances'.

M.N. Karassery (2008) says that realism was the reigning ideology on the stage in those days. Yet, how strange! Was it the part of exhortation to fight that was realism? Is realism a call for a better society? Or is realism the expectation of an audience capable of making meaning out of their peeping-tommery? Or are they both realisms? Does realism exist at both the level of form and the level of clairvoyance? Is it a bourgeois love story gobbling up a social realist political drama, or is the political drama taking cover within the love story? To be torn between the citizen and the revolutionary is difficult business. It is in the contradiction that the id finds pleasure in. One could claim that the fragment is what achieves the movement from one ideology to another without showing much of the seams (Prasad 1998, 225). However, the brevity of the part would argue against an application of that here. But precisely because of that one could claim that the ending is important, as it was still found worthwhile to be *the ending*. *The Merchant of Venice* did not end with Daniel coming to justice; the human intellect was rounded off with the divine will (Wilson

2014, 711). Yet, it was precisely the part on the human intellect which could afford a statement in favour of grace rather than vocation—a question of the divine order. What matters pertaining to the bourgeois citizenship were resolved within the social realist totalitarianism?

One can only gesture in vague directions now. The question could be answered better if we address the question of whether modernity is an unfinished business by accident or by our sloppiness, or by design. Mimicry (Bhabha 1984, 128) would cease to bear feature of the colonialist phase and betray its deep undergrowth in the postcolonial state. The “Other” understood as an otherness in its very corporeality. A very finite “Other” is available as a body with well-defined limits. It is no wonder that the pen and the kerchief, both companions to the protagonist’s sweat, both available to one as sensations, are what establish the protagonist as a wronged party. An irreducible concreteness cuts off the nation-state from its proposed ideals—the body as itself is unavailable to abstractions. The double body of the mirror and the senses¹ *remembers* by smell even as it *acknowledges* in language. The lost thing, the repository of sensations, is lost even before it is articulated. It is the body of the protagonist who bears this mark of the pre-linguistic loss. What is lost is articulated as an archive for the audience even before they are known to the protagonist. This is how this indebtedness on one side gets translated as charity on the other. The corporeality of the other resides in the wrapping of the play, to be subsequently substituted by direct address. If direct address is the bid to succumb the body to the speech, that speech is muted at the end. On either end of the play the body asserts itself, causing the doubling of consciousness in the first part, giving way to speech in the second, only to regain itself as the site of looking and feeling at the end. The young bodies in their stillness stare at the departing protagonist, the young girl and boy “with two completely different expressions,” the unacknowledged siblings fighting their own battle, with the revolution getting prepared on the one side and the resignation of the homeless on the other. On the other hand, the protagonist is available as a pure sensation of loss. The body rounds off the loss in language as tactility. One of them (the young girl) has taught the other (the restaurant boy) to read. And yet no alphabet is in sight here.

Notes

¹ For a lucid exposition of the “two-in-one” body see Silverman (2000).

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