



Translating Basheer: A Bakhtinian Critique

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ABSTRACT

Translation plays an important role in a multi lingual and multi-cultural country like India. Indian literatures in English translations have translations of various great works in Indian regional languages. Malayalam writers like Thakazhi, Basheer, Kesava Dev, O. V. Vijayan, Uroob, Anand, M. T. Vasudevan Nair, Kamala Das, M. Mukundan, Paul Zacharia, V. K. N, and many others were translated into English. Vaikom Muhammad Basheer is one of the most important writers among them. He wrote only in Malayalam and is still being translated to both Indian vernacular and European languages. The present work is based on R. E. Asher's trilogy *Me Grandad 'ad an Elephant: Three Stories of Muslim Life* which consists of *Childhood Friend*, *Me Grandad 'ad an Elephant* and *Pathumma's Goat*, the English translations of Basheer's Malayalam novels *Balyakalasakhi*, *Ntuppoppakku Oraanandaarnnu* and *Pathummayude Aadu*. This article is about how the Bakhtinian elements polyphony, dialogism, heteroglossia, and carnivalesque are retained or reconstructed in these translations.

Basheer's writings differ from mainstream Malayalam literature by virtue of its unique dialect and style. He portrays the real life and is concerned least about the form, content and style. His works contains autobiographical elements in varying degrees. Lives of various social classes living on the margins are brought to the centre of the Malayalam literature using simple conversational language in his writings.



Basheer has projected personal, social and literary decays with humour and is always concerned about social realities. *Balyakala Sakhi*, *Nteppooppakkuoraanandarnnu* and *Pathummayude Adu* are the three important novels in which Basheer has depicted Muslim life in Kerala. R. E. Asher has translated these three novels into English as *Childhood Friend*, *Me Grandad 'ad an Elephant* and *Pathumma's Goat* and combined them to a single text *Me Grandad 'ad an Elephant: Three Stories of Muslim Life*.

Mikhail Bakhtin, has introduced the key concepts polyphony, dialogism, heteroglossia, and carnivalesque through his classic texts *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, *The Dialogic Imagination* and *The Rabelais and His World*. Polyphony, a unique characteristic of prose literature, is the hallmark of Dostoevsky. In literary works, characters are guided by the need of overarching patterns and are subjected to foreshadowing. This makes the text a satisfying aesthetic artefact where the readers can predict the action of the characters. Dostoevsky imagines the characters and their voices and then places them in a situation that provokes them. The unpredictability of a character in a novel shows the uncertainty of the author. Sensing this double uncertainty, readers experience suspense. Thus, the work has multiple voices and multiple centres. This is the specific sense of polyphonic novel. Polyphony is manifest in two forms, either as multiple voices or as multiple versions of language. In a fictional work, there may be many narrative voices leading to multiplicity of narrative voices, popularly termed as multiple voices. As language is an index of the social class of the speaker, there is always a difference between the narrative language and the conversational language of the characters. This difference gives rise to dialogism. As the characters of different classes speak different social dialects, there is a polyphony of language in the novel.

In the trilogy, *Me Grandad 'ad an Elephant: Three Stories of Muslim Life* there are several contesting voices at the same time. Voices of different characters with different perspectives co-exist within the stories and represent a variety of ideological positions. These different voices are represented in an unmerged manner engaging equally in dialogues. Different opinions of different characters based on their different life experiences are presented in these three stories without authorial judgement.

In a polyphonic novel, the different independent voices are in a dialogic relationship. Dialogics or dialogism, according to Bakhtin is the process by which the meaning is evolved out of interactions among the author, the work and the reader or listener. When the purpose of an utterance is related only to the speaker, it is monologic. When the utterance is to engage in an unpredictable dialogue with the other, in which both the speaker and the listener seek to enrich meaning by an exchange with no predictable outcome, then it is dialogic.



Dialogism is associated with dialogue used in everyday life. But what gives dialogue its central place in dialogism is precisely the kind of relations and conversations manifested in the narrative. In a conversation, both speakers and listeners are different from each other and the utterances each makes are always different from the other's and yet all these differences are held together in relation with the dialogue. Dialogue and difference are connected together by an act of communication that generates new ideas. Models of dialogue familiar with day-to-day conversations serve the dialogues in a novel. According to Bakhtin, all the thoughts are a matter of dialogue and difference.

Dialogue features not only exchanges of whole utterances but also those at the level of individual words. It exists at the level of individual words as well as at the relatively entire utterances in all communications, written or spoken, and it is a volatile action beyond the control of reader or author. All the words, sentences and utterances are oriented towards someone else regardless of whether the 'other' is present or not.

Dialogism assumes that at any given time, in any given place, there is a set of powerful but highly unstable conditions that gives a meaning to a word that is different from what it will be at other times and in other places. What marks the novel more distinct within the range of all possible genres is the novel's peculiar ability to open a window in discourse from which the extraordinary variety of social languages can be perceived. Dialogism assumes that all speech activities possess a high degree of internal organization. As per dialogism literature is seen as an activity that plays an important role in defining relations between individuals and society.

Basheer's fiction illustrates the relevance of Bakhtinian dialogism. Basheerian writings have abundance of dialogues, not only between characters but also between men and women, or pure literature and progressive literature, or conventionalists and non-conventionalists and so on. In his writings, even the words or utterances which have no meaning in the language also generate a dialogue. The utterances children use for teasing Kunju Thachumma in *Ntuppuppakk oraanandarannu* are examples. Children use utterances like "kulu kulu", "lu llulu", "mme mme mme", "ppe ppe ppe" for teasing Kunju Thachumma. These utterances children used for teasing Kunju Thachumma in *Ntuppuppakkoraanandarannu* are transliterated in the translation.

Basheer uses dialogues not only among human characters. Dialogue formation in dialogism does not demand the reply from the other. A Scene from *Pathummayude Aadu* illustrates this. The narrator tells a goat that ഹേ അജസുന്ദരീ! ഭവതി ആ പുതപ്പ് തിന്നരുത്. അതിനു നൂറു രൂപ വിലയുണ്ട്. അതിന്റെ കോപ്പി എന്റെ പക്കൽ വേറെയില്ല. എന്റെ പുസ്തകങ്ങൾ ഇനി വേറെയുമുണ്ട്. ഭവതിക്കതെല്ലാം വരുത്തി സൗജന്യമായി തരാം. (28)



Asher translated it as “hey beautiful, please don’t eat that blanket. It’s worth fifty rupees. I don’t have another copy of that. But there are other things I have written. I’ll get them all for you and let you have them free of charge” (135). In this translation, the terms “aja sundari” and “bhavathi” by which the narrator addressed the goat are absent in translation. At the same time, in *Me Grandad ‘ad an Elephant* Asher transliterates *sundari* to make sense: “Sundari! Anyone so beautiful must be called Sundari” (89.)

Ntuppuppakkoraanandaarnnu have another example in which Kunjupathumma speaks to the sparrows and squirrel. എന്തിനാ വയ്ക്കിക്കണത്? ചുമ്മാതിരി. പറഞ്ഞാ കേക്കെലെ? ചുമ്മാതിരി. ആയിനെ എന്തിനാ കൊത്തണെ? (48) Kunjupathumma’s conversation with sparrows and squirrel in *Ntuppoppakku Oraanandaarnnu* is also translated into English without losing its innocence and dialogic elements as “Why are you quarrelling? Stop it! Don’t you hear?” she said again. “Stop it! Why are you pecking it?” (81). However, the slang used by Muslims of that particular time and place is present in the source text but absent in the translation.

Bakhtin discusses heteroglossia in “Discourse in the Novel”. Heteroglossia literally means ‘a mixture of tongues’ - social diversity of speech types that are discovered in the novel. Bakhtin views heteroglossia as committed to the representation of the widest possible range of social classes. Each and every novel orchestrates all its themes by means of the social diversity of speech types and by the differing individual voices. Authorial speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters are the fundamental compositional unities of heteroglossia. Each of them permits a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships. These distinctive links and interrelationships between utterances and languages, movement of the theme through different languages and speech types, its dispersion into the social heteroglossia is the dialogization. This is the basic distinguishing feature of the stylistics of the novel.

In real life and in literary works there are oral and written forms of language. Within the scope of literary language, there is already a sharply defined boundary between everyday conversational language and written language. The novel can be defined as a diversity of speech types and a diversity of individual voices which are artistically organized. Novel includes dialects, languages of different social groups, professional - genetic languages, languages of generations, and so on. The novelist incorporates the heteroglossia and diversity of literary language into his work. The development of a novel is a function of deepening its dialogic essence, scope and precision.



Basheer is a writer well known for portraying characters from different social classes. His characters like Ottakannan Pokkar, Mandan Muthappa, Ponkurishu Thoma, Anavari Raman Nair, Ettukaali Mammoonju, Sinkidi Munkan, Vattan Adima, etc are some examples. Such characters are from different religions, regions, professions, classes and age groups. Language used by different members of the author’s family in the *Pathummayude Aadu* is of heteroglotic nature. There are uneducated women, differently employed men, children and of course the writer.

Cuteness of the children’s voices in *Pathummayude Aadu* comes with their wrong pronunciation, especially of Abi. Dialogues of Pathukkutty are also made sweet by funny pronunciations as she has lost her front teeth. Basheer maintains it artistically using the similar language that children are used. While selling Jambu fruit, Abi is telling: “നീടെ ഒരു കൈച്ചു കാലണ. നീടെ രണ്ടു കൈച്ചു ഒന്നിനും കൂടെ രണ്ടു കാലണ.” (73). But when translated into *Pathumma’s Goat*, the cuteness of children’s language is absent. They speak the same language of the elders: “One of my hands for a quarter anna. Both my hands plus one for two quarter annas!”(172)

The difference between the language used by Majeed and Suhra’s father in *Balyakalasakhi* easily conveys that one has education and the other not: അവളു ബല്യ ഉദ്യോഗം ബരിക്കമ്പ ഞമ്മളേക്കെ മറക്കും. അതെന്റെ ബാപ്പ ആണെന്ന് പറയാൻ അവക്കു ബല്യ നാണായിരിക്കും. Majeed replies to that: അതു ശരിയാണ്. സുഹറു വലിയ അന്തസ്സുകാരിയാ (140). On translating these, both are speaking the same language: “when she holds a good job, she will forget us all. She will feel ashamed to admit that I am her father.” And Majeed replies: “That’s true. Suhra is a very proud girl” (16).

Heteroglossia can be retained by replacing the events and texts that represent similar meaning or theme in the target language even when the two languages have different sign systems. The wrong pronunciation of words by Kunjupathumma is retained beautifully by using the English words without losing any of the components of humour in Malayalam in the translation *Me Grandad ‘ad an Elephant*. Instead of bayi for vazhi Asher uses balue for value which makes the same sense:

That letter is called “B”. What’s called? B said Kunjupattumma.
Say a word beginning with “B”.
Balue.
Booby! Silly Booby! You should say “value”!
Value!
Is there a “B” in that?
No.



Then think of another one.

Brinjal!

Good ... (111)

Heteroglossia is the Bakhtinian concept which is hard to retain in the translations. Culture has its own sign systems or languages on the basis of which the members of the culture communicate. Heteroglossia arises from the difference. These differences may get diffused while translating to a language of another culture. Also, the difference may be retained in the translation as in the conversation between Aysha and Kunjupathumma cited above.

Bakhtin's concept of carnival states that unrestricted celebration of carnival season permits a reversal of the typical social, political and religious standards. According to Bakhtin, carnival is the context in which distinct individual voices heard, flourish and interact together and it is characterised by subversion or mockery of authority through humour. The carnival creates threshold situations where regular conventions are broken or reversed and genuine dialogue becomes possible. The carnivalesque spirit, therefore, is a form of popular humour which celebrates the anarchic and grotesque elements of authority and encourages the temporary "crossing of boundaries". Here the lower classes are crowned, the higher classes are mocked, and the differences between people are flattened or levelled

Bakhtin views carnivalesque as an intended humour that serves as a social force which permits a text to enter a socio-political discourse, enjoying impurity and bringing cultural transformation. According to Bakhtin, the carnivalesque emerges in those moments in history when an oppressive system begins to crack and the decentralization of a culture undermines the authority of social establishments. The act of carnival serves to critique and subvert norms of political, social, and cultural behaviour. In literature, the carnivalesque involves providing a public venue through which standards, norms and laws of governing cultures and societies are questioned, reworked and countered.

Basheer's fiction challenges the personal, social and literary decays through humour. He never shows unnecessary attachments to any religious or political institutions. He fights honestly for all types of breakdowns of social systems.

Basheer narrates the theme of love in many of his writings like *Balyakalasakhi*, *Premalekhanam*, *Ntuppupakku Oraanandaarnnu*, *Mathilukal*, *Anuraagathinte Dinangal*, *Vishappu*, *Pazhaya Oru Kochu Premakatha*, or *Sabdangal Neelavelicham*. Basheer portrays the love that develops through emotional moments and affinity which are human and it develops in natural situations and reacts in a natural ways. Suhra and Majeed in *Balyakalasakhi*, even after their separation and Suhra's marriage with another man, have not ended their love and tend to continue it.



“സുഹറ സൂക്ഷിക്കണം സ്ത്രീയാണ്. പേരിനു കളങ്കം പറ്റാതെ” -

“ഓ, കളങ്കം പറ്റട്ടെ! എന്റെ ആത്മാവിന് കൂടി കളങ്കം പറ്റട്ടെ - മറ്റെങ്ങുനമല്ലല്ലോ?” (70 – 71)

The translation of the same in *Childhood Friend* is as follows:

“You Must be careful, Suhra! You are a woman; your name must be free from stain.”

“Oh! Let it be stained! Let even my soul be stained as long as you are the cause.” (38)

Basheer mentions the evil side of dowry system and remarriage and discusses other unnecessary customs and practices of Muslims in *Balyakalasakhi* and *Ntuppuppakku Oraanandaarnn.*: “മജീദിന്റെ സഹോദരികളുടെ നാലു കാതുകളിലും കൂടി നാല്പ്പത്തി രണ്ടു തുളകളുണ്ട്. അതൊക്കെ എന്തിനു കുത്തിത്തുളച്ചു? കഴുത്തിലും അരയിലും ഒന്നും സ്വർണ്ണം ഇട്ടില്ലെങ്കിലെന്ത്? സ്ത്രീധനയേർപ്പാട് തന്നെ ഇല്ലായിരുന്നെങ്കിൽ!” (72). This is translated as: “Between the two of them Majid’s sisters have forty two holes in their ears. Why were all these holes made? What if there are no ornaments for the neck or the waist? If only there were no dowry system!” (39). Basheer ridicules the usage of the grammatical language through Abdul Khader in *Pathummayude Aadu*. Basheer shouts at and drives away Abdul Khader for his high concern on grammar:

“പോടാ എണീറ്റ്. അവന്റെ ഒരു ലൊഡുക്കുസ് ആവൂ! ... എടാ ഇതെല്ലാം ഞാൻ വർത്തമാനം പറയുന്ന മാതിരി തന്നെയാണ് എഴുതിവെച്ചിരിക്കുന്നത്. ഇതിൽ നിന്റെ ഒരു ചട്ടുകാലൻ ആഖ്യാദമില്ലെങ്കിലെന്ത്? അവന്റെ ഒരു പള്ളുസൻ വ്യാകരണം! ചട്ടൻ! (87). Asher translated it as: “Clear off! Get up and get out! You and your grammer! ... Look, what I have put down in writing is the way I talk in conversation. What of it, if it doesn’t have one of your silly predicates? Cripple!” (184)

At the same time, Basheer instructs the society on the necessity of learning language in *Ntuppuppakku Oraanandaarnnu*.

Carnavalesque can be traced in almost all works of Basheer. Through his satirical writings he questions all existing decays in society. These social conditions may be unknown to the readers of target language. But it is hard to retain the religious terms and practices in translation. But in *Me Grandad ‘ad an Elephant: Three Stories of Muslim Life* the voice of protest in all the incidents and events are retained to the possible extent.



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