

# Vaikom Muhammad Basheer's: 'The World-Renowned Nose'

## An Analysis

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### Objectives

1. To introduce you to the author and familiarize you briefly with the Malayalam literary scene.
2. To introduce you to the genre of Satire and acquaint you with various aspects of satirical writing.
3. To take you through a critical reading of 'The World Renowned Nose' and help you note the major issues in the story and its satirical features.
4. To help you critically assess the story and note the interplay of humor and pathos in it.
5. To facilitate you in noting the underlying message of the story.

### **About the Author**

Basheer was born on January 20, 1908 at a small village in Vaikom in Kerala. He was the eldest of six children of Kaji Abdu Rahiman, a prosperous timber merchant, and Kunchachumma. He attended a primary Malayalam School in his village for some time but because his parents were slightly progressive in their attitude, he was sent next to the Vaikom English School. He continued to learn Arabic from a Muslim Tutor at home.

Basheer was at an impressionable age when Gandhiji came to visit Vaikom in March 1924. He ran away from home to participate in the freedom struggle and reached Calicut which was the hub of nationalist activities in Kerala and took part in the Salt Satyagrah on the Calicut beaches. His arrest was inevitable and along with the other freedom fighters he too was incarcerated and sent to the Cannanore Central Jail.

Basheer's experiences at the jail were painful and tortuous. He was subjected to a number of atrocities which in turn wrought a dramatic change in him. From one extreme he went to another. Abandoning the Gandhian doctrines of Ahimsa he became a revolutionary and made Sardar Bhagat Singh, Raj Guru and Sukhdev his role models. Needless to say, once again the police came into action. Basheer, along with his other mates, went under-ground in order to evade arrest.

For the next seven years he travelled all over India, reaching as far as the shores of Arabia. In all his years of wandering he had to resort to the use of various disguises in order to avoid recognition. At times he posed as a beggar, at other times as a palmist, an astrologer. He worked as a magician's assistant, as a private tutor and also at a tea shop. In addition to these few he took up many other odd jobs during his various sojourns.

Basheer came under Police surveillance once again due to his criticism of the Dewan of Travancore. The weekly *Pauranadam*, which he had started with a purpose of finding a platform for his satirical writings, was banned and he was put in the Kollam Kasba Police Station lock-up. Basheer's experiences at this prison featured in many of his short stories like "*Tiger*", "*Itiyan Panikker*" and "*Mathilukal*" (*Walls*). He even wrote stories on request from the prisoners who were sick of reading the *Ramayana* and the *Bible*. A hilarious love story "*Prema Lekhanam*" was the outcome of such a request.

In many ways Basheer's experiences as a freedom fighter penetrated his writings. Once India gained independence however, Basheer withdrew from active politics and chose not to hark back to the past but to look forward. Thus we find that there is no bitterness in his novels and stories written after independence. Nor is there an attempt to include an account of or any comments on the past oppression in pre-independence India. Post-independence however Basheer was disheartened to find things not going the way he expected them to. Being a politically conscious and aware writer he tried to show the mirror to society through his satirical writings.

### **Basheer the Writer**

Basheer began by writing stories for a paper called *Jayakesari*. His first Story "*Ente Thankam*" (*My thankness*) was published in this paper sometime between 1937 and 1941. This story had an immediate impact on the Malayalam literary scene as it broke away from the traditional concepts of romantic fiction. Basheer's heroine was not a slim, fair, beautiful, maiden but a dark complexioned hunchback. He marked his difference from others in this departure from tradition. His later works proved the point further when not only were his subjects and themes different but their treatment too was markedly different from the Malayalam literary conventions.

Basheer's career as a writer and journalist witnessed a boost when he moved to Madras. He wrote extensively for the weekly *Jayakevlam*. When he returned to Ernakulam he opened a tiny book store which began as a Circle Book House but was later renamed Basheer's Book Stall. His columns "*The True and the False*"

appeared regularly in *Narmada*, a paper run by Raghavan Nair. In Basheer's literary pursuits, M.P. Paul, a teacher and literary critic, proved to be his guide and mentor. Paul urged him to devote more time to his writing after reviewing his novel *Balyakalasakhi (Childhood Friend)*, that had appeared in 1944.

### **Basheer's Style**

It was in early 1930s, that the Progressive Writer's Movement made its impact on Malayalam Literature. Writers wrote consciously about socialist themes, about poverty, unemployment and hunger. Basheer too wrote on these subjects but drew upon his personal experiences of sordidness and poverty. He had seen it all at first hand yet he chose to be objective rather than sentimental. In fact, his picaresque life provided him with ample material for his creative work. As M.N. Vijayan puts it "Politics and Prison, asceticism, pick pocketing, homosexuality, all were grist to his mill". (From "Introduction" in Vanajam Ravindran ed. *Vaikom Mohammad Basheer: Short Stories*). So varied were his experiences that no two stories of his shared any similarities. He forged his own style and his ignorance about literary conventions became a reason for his uniqueness. In his own words "agonizing experiences and a pen" were all the material he had when he ventured into the literary world. The conventions of Sanskritised Malayalam were challenged by his colloquial style and the unconventional subjects. The rogues, the dimwits, the prostitutes, the eunuchs, the pickpockets and the wicked as well as the innocent all made an appearance in his works and all were treated with the same ironic humour and subjected to the same satirical gaze of the first person narrator called "the humble historian" by Basheer himself. His seminal work "*Sabdangal*" (*Voices*) which appeared in 1947 was almost a microcosm of the surrounding world and dealt with issues like poverty, unemployment, death and destruction. His three novellas for which he is well known, *Balyakalasakhi*, *N'te Uppooppakoru Anadarnu* and *Pathummayute Adu* - depicted the life of the Kerala Muslims. But his writings are not focused on any particular community. In fact, it is the human community which interests him, particularly the issues that are of concern to the present generation. Thus he could sensitively express the despair and anger of a modern man in "*The Invaluable Moment*" and "*An Evening Prayer*" as well as express his concern for the environment in a story like "*The Rightful Inheritors of the Earth*".

Basheer passed away on July 5, 1994, leaving behind his wife Fabi, daughter Shahina and son Anees. He also left behind his works that continue to amaze by the sheer variety contained in them and also the manner in which he 'transformed the biographical into the historical, the transient into the perennial and the trivial into the sublime.' (M.N. Vijayan). Forging a style which was the exigency of his subjects and themes, he introduced the Malayalam readers to a new way of looking

at things. His racy humour, pungent satire and tendency to debunk rhetoric, all were refreshingly different from the convention-ridden works of his contemporaries. Basheer drew upon his everyday experiences and yet could delineate equally well the sublime and the infernal. As M.N. Vijayan observes ‘whether it be the crook or the nitwit, the wicked or the innocent, the “I” of his tales gazes at “god's Plenty” spread out before him and presents this to us, distilled in the alembic of his rich humour.’ For Basheer, life provided a model for art, whatever he wrote and whoever he wrote about, compassion and acceptance remained the key to his humour. It was seldom malicious. The Sahitya Akademi honoured him for his contribution to literature in 1970 and he was awarded the Padma Shree in 1982.

### **Introduction to the Story**

“The World Renowned Nose” was published as *Vishvavikhyat Mookken* in 1954 in an anthology by the same name. It is a characteristically satiric tale that is marked by humour as well as pathos. In this tale Basheer takes us through a story about a simple man who experiences both the zenith as well as the nadir of his fortunes all because of his nose which suddenly grows to a disproportionate length in his twenty-fourth year. We are told that ‘within a month its tip was level with his navel.’ It is an aberration, a freak happening. The rest of the story deals with the events that come about subsequent to this occurrence. It goes without saying that we are not to interpret the tale too literally.

- The sense of the teller and the tale is created in the opening paragraph itself where the first person narrator makes his entrance and declares that he would now recount a stunning tale.
- The sense of history being recorded is also created at the outset for Basheer categorically says that he is now going to record the history of that controversial nose.
- The logical and rational reader has to set aside his credulity in order to fully enjoy this tale where irony, satire and caricature all combine to makes us laugh as well as squirm in our comfortable positions.
- With its brilliant satire the tale exposes the farce behind the political scene in post colonial modern India.
- The tale is a stringent though humorous satire on the psychology of the crowds and the inanity of the masses.

Basheer’s emphasis is not so much on the nose as it is on how society reacts to it. The thematic focus of the story is therefore on the psychology of the masses and also on the idiocy of the crowds that can at one instance put a man on a pedestal

and worship him and at another pull him down and trample him all for the same reason. Irony, satire, sarcasm, caricature, humor, pathos are the tools wielded skillfully by the writer to expose the folly, the stupidity of the masses and give a parodic representation of polity at the same time.

### **The Title**

The title of the story clearly states that this particular narrative is going to be about a person's nose – a simple and essential feature of the human anatomy. The nose under consideration however is 'world renowned' – indicating that due to some reason this simple feature, in a particular case, has achieved considerable fame. The title smacks of exaggeration and immediately makes us aware that the story we are about to read is probably going to be a satire.

### **What is Satire?**

Satire is a particular kind of writing that is aimed at criticizing something for the sake of improving it. It employs a lot of literary devices such as irony, sarcasm, parody, burlesque, humor, caricature etc for the purpose. Given below is a short explanation of the term that has been sourced from *Wikipedia*.

Satire is often strictly defined as a literary genre or form; although, in practice, it is also found in the graphic and performing arts. In satire, human or individual vices, follies, abuses, or shortcomings are held up to censure by means of ridicule, derision, burlesque, irony, or other methods, ideally with the intent to bring about improvement. Although satire is usually meant to be funny, the purpose of satire is not primarily humour in itself so much as an attack on something of which the author strongly disapproves, using the weapon of wit.

A very common, almost defining feature of satire is its strong vein of irony or sarcasm, but parody, burlesque, exaggeration, juxtaposition, comparison, analogy, and double entendre are all frequently used in satirical speech and writing. The essential point, however, is that "in satire, irony is militant." This "militant irony" (or sarcasm) often professes to approve (or at least accept as natural) the very things the satirist actually wishes to attack.

[From *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia on the Net* at wikipedia.com]

In Basheer's story the tone for the entire narrative is set in the title itself. The first line of the story maintains the tone and introduces us to the first person narrator who brings us a stunning piece of news that a nose has become the subject of heated debates and arguments among intellectuals. The narrator then quite pompously states that in the following pages he is going to 'record' the 'true history' of that nose.

## Why history?

In his entire writing career Basheer wrote a number of stories using a new literary device – that of historical writing. The first person narrator who narrates all these stories even introduces himself as ‘the humble historian.’ The difference however from actual historical writing is that while these stories are consciously written as histories and employ the whole textual apparatus of historical writing, yet the aim is to debunk and undermine this narrativization of histories as well as undercut the rhetoric that often accompanies it. The aim is not to narrate actual histories but to parody the structuring of these historical narratives. What we find in these stories therefore, is a parodic representation of polity. The same is achieved by the deft use of a few rhetorical devices where the choice of subject and theme along with the tone in which the narrative is presented, which in turn employs the terminology of political discourse - all together create the desired effect of burlesque at its best. There are basically the following three rhetorical devices at play here:-

- First of all, the choice of subject is ingenious. Basheer selects ordinary people as his protagonists and then shows extraordinary things happening to them.
- Having chosen a banal theme and puny subject, Basheer then proceeds to narrate the event in a grand inflated tone, using rhetoric drawn from the discourses of national and international politics, particularly the Marxist discourse which was extremely popular at the time in Kerala. So we find words and phrases like "reactionary", "foreign regime" and "comrade-in-arms", "Politically conscious", "bourgeois" and so on, liberally sprinkled throughout the narrative.
- The third rhetorical device is a conscious attempt at writing history. Thus we have the whole paraphernalia of historical writing put to use here and made evident at once in the manner in which the first person narrator declares that he is writing history. Not only that, he proceeds to make it very clear that he is writing this piece of narrative for "the benefit of the students of history". In keeping with the textual implements of any historical writing "the humble historian" includes foot notes and also cross references to other "histories". He alludes to and makes comparisons with historical events in the past. He draws parallels between his hero and other great men in history. There is also an explanation given of certain terms and at times this elucidation may use an analogy as we find happening in our story when Basheer explains the word ‘appropriation.’ This is exactly how academic historiography works, entering into a process of validation and authentication. This is how histories are written. The method is fool proof but the irony lies in the fact that this method is being applied to a subject and event which is of no historical

interest whatsoever. The whole regalia of historical writing are at once debunked and deflated.

- The undercutting of the discourse of political analysis runs parallel to the debunking of historical writing. When the grand inflated style of political discourse is applied to insignificant themes and ordinary subjects, it serves to expose the emptiness of political rhetoric rather than just the triviality of the subject and theme. The constant process of inflation and deflation is carried on throughout the narrative and the mock-grandiose tone creates humour because of its burlesque. It also creates satire because of the implied criticism of the rhetoric driven historical and political discourses.

‘The World Renowned Nose’ is a brilliant example of the entire process at work.

## **A Critical Summary**

### **The Beginning**

The satirical tone that has entered the narrative with the first line of the story continues unabated. Entirely in keeping with the traditions of historical writing, the first person narrator decides to begin from the beginning, in the twenty-fourth year of ‘our hero’ when the momentous event happened. As explained above, the entire exercise is done in a tongue-in-cheek manner. The ‘historian’ is taking a dig at historians and historical writing when he draws a parallel with histories and mentions with quite a straight face that if you ‘care to look into the annals of history . . . you will find something remarkable about the twenty-fourth year in the lives of all great men.’ The undercutting of the process of historical writing is already under way. The irony and the sarcasm underlying such an observation is a jab at history, historical writing and historical personages.

### **The Background to the Event**

In keeping with the demands of a historical narrative, the narrator gives us some background to the event and to the one person at the centre of that event. Mookken, our protagonist, is a humble, illiterate man not particularly known for his intelligence. His kitchen is his world and he is not particularly bothered about what happens outside it. Mookken’s daily routine has nothing special about it. He cooks eats, takes a good pinch of snuff, sleeps, wakes up and cooks again. His mother comes and collects his wages and brings him his favourite snuff. Day in and day out he continues to live out this mundane routine and is quite content with his lot.

“And then it happened” – announces the narrator quite dramatically, making the readers sit up and take notice and ask ‘what happened?’

Something happened that changed Mookken’s life for ever. An event over which he had no control and which plunged him first into the depths of despair and then

took him to the heights of his fantasy, bringing him money success, fame, importance and all that he never even had dreamed of.

What happened was that Mookken's nose started to grow all of a sudden. It soon 'extended past his mouth and down his chin in no time. Within a month it was level with his navel.' While it grew to this enormous length it still continued to perform its basic functions. It could still breathe, take in snuff, and distinguish one smell from another. In other words, it behaved like a perfectly normal nose.

At this point we need to remember that the first requirement from any rational or logical reader is that the events in the story cannot be interpreted literally. The fantastic here has become the vehicle for bringing out the humour as well as the pathos in the ordinary. Exaggeration is a major tool in the hands of a satirist. Basheer being a master craftsman of satire uses it to the hilt and looks at the human scene before him through the magnifying glass. The device of caricature too has come into play here. Mookken's nose has been deliberately exaggerated to create an effect that is grotesque as well as comic.

### **Subsequent Events**

The immediate outcome of Mookken's nasal aberration is that he begins to attract attention. People throng to get a glimpse of his nose. 'Photographers, reporters, T.V. crews . . . it was a roaring sea of humanity that laid seize on the house' writes Basheer. The tragic consequence of the swelling crowds is that Mookken gets thrown out of his job.

The device of inflation once again comes in to play here. Basheer uses big words to express his opinion calling it an "act of gross injustice." The expectation that 'unions, 'philanthropists' or 'socially conscious intellectuals and philosophers' would come forward to fight on behalf of Mookken is itself misplaced. But Basheer is just warming up to the great political farce that his tale is ultimately going to shape up as.

While showing us the curiosity of the masses Basheer the satirist lets us have a glimpse of a harsh societal truth here. The multitude or the masses are driven by a bandwagon mentality. They do not care to look beyond the spectacle nor do they have the intelligence or sensitivity to feel the pathos of the situation. They forget that Mookken is one of them and not a 'starving animal on exhibition.' People are not bothered whether he is hungry or poor. All they want is to sneak a look at the extraordinary nose. Humor at this point in the narrative subtly and obliquely makes way for pathos.

Thoroughly disgusted with the huge sea of humanity Mookken asks his mother to close the doors on them so he can have some peace. This however proves to be a

turning point in Mookken's life. Being denied a free look the crowds now offer to pay to get a glimpse of his extraordinary nose. Fortune now smiles on Mookken and his mother. Being denied a view the crowd now offers to pay for a glimpse of the famous nose. In the wake of its growing popularity Mookken's nose brings him name, fame and lots of money. The underlying irony however is that Mookken might have unwittingly used the situation to his advantage but nevertheless he has ended up becoming something of an exhibit even if for a price.

### **A Satire on the Psychology of the Masses**

Basheer's observation that the 'mob is a stupid lot' is an overarching comment at this point in the story considering that the entire narrative is a brilliant satire on the psychology of the masses and the complete idiocy of the crowds. In a mock serious tone Basheer informs us that the nondescript, illiterate, unpretentious cook became a millionaire in six year's time and moved from his humble hut to a mansion. He acted in three films. Nine biographies were written on him along with a film on his life. In addition six renowned poets wrote encomiums on him.

A discomfort begins to creep into the humour of the situation. We need to ask ourselves a few disturbing questions here. The mob that was willing to pay for a glimpse of Mookken's nose may be stupid but what of the writers, the filmmakers, the intellectuals, who join the bandwagon? These are the people who are thought to be the enlightened lot. If they too are behaving in a manner similar to the hundreds who want just one look at Mookken's nose then Basheer is surely sweeping them all into one group. In a crowd all distinctions between uninformed and enlightened get erased. The mob is driven by just one mentality and that is a collective mentality of the crowd. Reason, rationality, logic are the first casualties in such a situation. If the masses are swayed in one direction then they will all move in that direction together. But so fickle is human nature that it takes only a slight spark for the crowd to sway from one extreme to the other. The crowds make Mookken a celebrity. All this while we must not forget that Mookken's only claim to greatness is the sheer size of his nose. Nothing else! In a tone laced with sarcasm and humor Basheer asks if 'a universally acclaimed nose, long and beautiful, reaching down to the navel is not a sign of greatness then what is?' It goes without saying that the opposite is implied. The irony is aggressive. The satirist is pretending to agree.

A delightful parody of the psychology of the masses follows next. Mookken, the simple illiterate man suddenly finds himself scaling heights of greatness that go beyond his imagination. His opinion is sought in everything. From new generation jets to the miraculous success in bringing a dead patient back to life going on to the conquest of the highest peak in the world. Matters have reached such a state that if Mookken does not have an opinion on the matter then the matter is of no

consequence. It would be helpful to recall at this point that the man is illiterate and his only claim to greatness is his abnormal nose. Does such an abnormality equip him with the right kind of intelligence that can attach some worth to his opinion on such matters? Obviously not! Basheer is having a quiet laugh here at all of us who put such people on a pedestal and then worship them. The foolishness of the reporters who eagerly jot down Mookken's words and the stupidity of the people who wait equally eagerly to read them – all are burlesqued. It is a perfect parody of the masses!

If fame and recognition come conspiracies cannot be far behind. This is the rule of the game and the same happens with Mookken. Realizing that Mookken's nose is a confirmed noise maker and attention grabber, various people are in a race to appropriate it, lay a claim to it or be associated with it.

'If you have read enough of history, you will know there is nothing very original about appropriation,' writes Basheer. Entirely in keeping with the tradition of historical writing, Basheer gives us an explanation of the word 'appropriation.' 'Let me illustrate' he says and moves on to expound on the word 'appropriation' by drawing an analogy with a coconut grove:

You plant a few coconut saplings on a plot of uncultivated land. Fence it. Water the plants everyday. Years pass. The saplings grow into tall handsome trees, heavy with bunches of large coconuts. Anybody who sees the grove is tempted and tries to grab it by hook or by crook. This is appropriation.

In very simple words, using a simple example, Basheer successfully lays bare a historical truth. Grabbing by hook or by crook has been going on in history for a long time now. In fact the British conquest of India was itself 'appropriation' as have been other such conquests all over the world. What to talk of nations and conquests, appropriation happens in relatively small things in countless steps of our lives. One can locate numerous examples in the lives of ordinary people as well. If a child does well at school teachers would be vying with each other to take the credit. If a person excels in his field of work or interest once again you would find many people wanting to call him their protégé. Take the example of haldi or neem. Now that their beneficial effects are scientifically confirmed many countries want to patent their products even though their medicinal use has been a part of ancient wisdom in India. And so the story of appropriation goes on.

Basheer, the historian steers our response by commenting that 'the entire history of human society is a history of appropriations.' The tradition of historical writing comes under the scanner here once again. A historian has to be objective and needs to stick to facts. He must not express his opinion about what ever he is recording. More often than not however, we find historical narratives replete with an

underlying commentary that is constantly guiding our responses and preventing us from seeing things objectively. Basheer chips away at the mammoth apparatus of historical writing presenting here a parodic debunking of historical explanations as he proceeds to explain ‘appropriation’.

### **The Tale a Satire about Modern India**

There may be humor in what Basheer is trying to show but there is truth as well. Mookken with his extraordinary nose is a crowd puller and a prospective [has the confirmed potential for being a noise maker] as well. His nose is invariably the subject of conversations everywhere. It is therefore inevitable that people would strive to get a share of the attention. What follows is a brilliant expose of modern India bringing first the government and then the political parties under its critical gambit.

At first it is the government that wants a share of this popularity. Maintaining a mock serious tone Basheer describes how the government confers a title and a gold medal on Mookken at a special award ceremony. Surely an elected government is always in search of allies and what better way to ally an already famous citizen than to confer a title on him? The scathing irony lies in the fact that Mookken’s worth is being measured only by a unique feature of his anatomy towards which he himself has never contributed nor does he have any control. The conferring of the award speaks volumes for like ceremonies that are held every other day, some of which being totally meaningless and worthless. Now that the country has climbed out of the clutches of the colonizers and has established itself as an independent nation having an elected government it has the freedom to constitute and bestow awards. The problem arises when these awards are conferred on unmeritorious people. They cease to have a meaning then. We as citizens of modern India are aware that critical discernment is not always the criteria for judging the worth of a contender. At times other considerations come in which dominate and lead to a choice that is inappropriate and misplaced. This is not to say that it does not happen in other countries or by other governments. But two wrongs do not make a right so what is being satirized here is the hollowness of such ceremonies irrespective of where they are held. Such is the universality of Basheer.

### **A Brilliant Political Farce**

After the government it is the turn of the political parties who go into frenzy in trying to outmaneuver each other to persuade Mookken to join. How would the political parties gain? One wonders. It is not as though Mookken possesses political wisdom but he does possess a controversial long nose about which

everybody is talking. So the parties want to use it for political propaganda. Very soon there is a political flurry with parties racing against each other only to make Mookken a member.

Being the brilliant political satirist that he is Basheer exposes the real purpose behind the political parties' attention to Mookken. They are not interested in his political views or ideals. His merit lies in him being a constant source of publicity. Whichever party he joins is sure to stay always in the news. He is a sure bet for a hype. Whether the publicity is good or bad is of no consideration. Whether the subjects of discussion are intelligent or sane it hardly matters. What matters is to stay in the news and Mookken's nose is a guarantee for that.

### **Basheer's personal Views**

Basheer having taken part in the independence movement and participated in the freedom struggle was a politically aware writer. He was fully conscious of the socio-cultural necessities for any party to prosper. The great Indian democracy as we know it today is lauded the world over. But increasingly with each passing phase we notice how the political game is being played on non issues by many parties. Basheer uses political catchwords and phrases to parody the Indian political scene. The communists were very active in Kerala and Basheer got branded as Comrade Basheer himself. 'Comrade Mookken', 'people's revolution' 'bourgeois reactionary' 'Inquilab Zindabad', 'People's revolutionary Party Zindabad,' are all used to debunk the dominant political discourse. Basheer was critical of the way things had shaped up after independence. Principles and ideals were often being compromised for the self vested interests of parties. It had become a wrangle for power. Basheer was a revolutionary in pre-independence and had fought with all his might for a free India. After independence he joined the Congress Party only because he thought his presence would include a Muslim representation in the party.

Whatever his personal views may be we have to admit that Basheer has given us here a true picture of what has come to be popularly known as 'the great Indian tamasha.' Popular actors and actresses are roped in by political parties simply because they are crowd pullers. Political parties fighting over potential newsmakers are a common occurrence. We have seen sudden revivals of certain parties happening only because of a controversy generated within. This controversy may relate to either a party member or about some sensational issue that the party rakes up which is able to stir the interest of the multitudes. Issues that are of national interest take a backseat. In showing these parties fighting over Mookken's nose Basheer is using the technique of parody or burlesque to drive home the point.

## **The Conspiracy**

It is a societal truth that whatever is popular is bound to lead at first to controversies and then to conspiracies. Mookken's tale which till now has been a tale of success is about to turn into a tale of betrayal and tragic controversy. A storm is generated by one of Mookken's secretaries who forced by one of the warring parties gives a damaging statement. She declares that Mookken is 'the worst bourgeois reactionary of our times' is an 'appalling fraud' and his nose is made of rubber.

The news sends shock waves through the centres of power. From the heights of success and popularity Mookken falls down to the dungeons of rejection and despair. The great political tamasha begins. The opposition parties are quick to point out that the 'powers that be have connived to make a fool of the people. The President is bombarded with telegrams, phone calls and letters. The same crowd that till yesterday was jostling to get a glimpse of his nose now wants to tear him to pieces. 'Death to the Chief of the Rubber-nosed Worthies! Down with Mookken's reactionary clique! Inquilab Zindabad!' shout the Anti Mookken parties. The newspapers call him 'a clever conman!' He is seen now as 'a political opportunist preying on the gullible public!' We cannot miss the crux of the situation here. Whether true or false, Mookken's nose is a definite noise maker. Whether down and out he is still able to generate the publicity that the parties are seeking.

Being a keen observer of people Basheer is able to give us the correct picture as far as the psychology of the masses is concerned. The crowd is fickle. At one instance it can put a man on a platform and at the next it can pull the same man down without any compunction. Mookken's other secretary, the one who remained loyal to him, is appropriated by the Pro-Mookken party and made to give a counter statement in the press. Basheer is at his burlesquing best when he writes her speech. In a grand tone entirely suited to propaganda she begins:

Comrades and friends! My colleague has distinguished herself with convincing but totally fabricated lies. Her statement is merely a piece of malicious propaganda...She is taking revenge on Mookken for having spurned her advances. . . As the trusted and loyal secretary of Comrade Mookken, I know his nose is natural – as true as my heart. I salute the people who have rallied behind the leadership of Comrade Mookken in this hour of crisis. Comrade Mookken zindabad! People's Revolutionary Party zindabad! Inquilab zindabad!

Now the people are confused. The Anti Mookken party however uses the opportunity to hurl accusations at the government declaring that the fraud is part of

a wider controversy and demand the resignation of the President, the Prime Minister and the entire cabinet.

Amplification is a very effective tool in the hands of a satirist and Basheer uses it aptly in the narrative to present things in a cartoonist fashion. When he writes that ‘tanks rolled towards Mookken’s mansion,’ we are not supposed to take literally. It does however imply that Mookken is arrested and put in jail. We know that at the center of the entire controversy is a poor illiterate unassuming, simple man who has no ambition in life except to maybe eat, sleep and have a good pinch of snuff! Yet as things stand now he has merely become a pawn for the vested interests of the various political parties. Humor gives way to pathos at this stage in the narrative.

The entire exercise of authentication and validation is once again a parody of similar exercises being undertaken for complete non issues in political circles. The communiqué from the President that ‘medical experts from forty-eight countries will examine this nose in order to determine whether it is natural or artificial’ once again sends the people in a tizzy. Despite the President appealing to the people to remain calm, there were riots everywhere. People flock to the capital, raid restaurants, ransack newspaper offices, burn down movie theatres, loot liquor shops and destroy police stations and government installations. In a characteristic style Basheer describes the event. Hysteria is generated, expectations are inflated and the occasion is blown out of proportion. This is an occurrence we are all too familiar with in modern India.

A travesty of various exercises in authentication follows. The medical experts, who have come from forty eight countries, ultimately only pinch and prick the nose in order to see if it is real. A drop of blood confirms the authenticity of the nose and the verdict that it is natural is unanimous. Mookken is back to being popular again and a Mookashri is bestowed on him. [Basheer is barely cloaking the direct comparison he is making to the award of the Padamshri in India.] Ultimately Mookken is nominated to the Parliament and made an MP.

Basheer’s satire does not end here. He now uses Mookken as a spring board to criticize and expose the hollowness behind the great titles that institutes of learning are in the habit of bestowing on totally undeserving people. One prestigious university honours Mookken with a degree of Master of Literature while another goes a step ahead and confers on him a DLitt. The Anti Mookken parties are however undeterred by the verdict of the medical experts and continue to shout anti Mookken slogans.

Where has the voice of sanity gone amidst this entire din? Basheer has only a word of pity for the conscientious intellectuals in the end calling them 'Poor intellectuals.'

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion we can say that 'The World Renowned Nose' is an entertaining story, a humorous satire that makes us laugh alright but at the same time it is a story that wraps a harsh truth about politics, about psychology of people, about society. It is not just a tale about a man with a long nose. Substitute that nose with any other controversial aspect and you have a universal situation. It is a tale about success, betrayal and tragic consequences. It is a tale about ordinary people caught up in extraordinary situations and what it does to them. The incredible or the fantastic becomes the tool for exposing human nature, the means to delve deep into the human psyche. It is a tale that holds up a mirror to each one of us for it is we who make up the society. It is a satire of our times.

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### **SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING**

- Basheer, Vaikom Mohammad, *'Me grandad 'ad an elephant!': Three stories of Muslim Life in South India*, trans. R.E. Asher etc, al., Edinburgh University of Edinburgh Press, 1980 and 'New Delhi: Penguin India, 1992.
- Panja, Sharmishtha ed. *Many Indias Many Literatures : New Critical Essays*, New Delhi, Worldview Publications, 1999.
- Ravindran Vanajam ed., *Vaikom Mohammad Basheer : Short Stories*, New Delhi : Katha, Rupa, 1996.

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# THE HUNT

## Mahasweta Devi

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--Neeta Gupta

### An Analysis

#### Objectives

6. To briefly introduce you to the author and familiarize you with the strong link between her literary and activist concerns.
7. To take you through a critical reading of 'The Hunt' and help you note the major issues in the story.
8. To help you critically assess whether the situation of the tribal people has changed much in post colonial India.
9. To familiarize you with the concept of gender and take you through a playing out of gender reversal in the story.

#### About the Author

Mahasweta Devi was born into a middle class Bengali family on 14 January, 1926. She was the eldest of nine children and was surrounded by a culturally rich environment right from the moment of her birth. Her father Manish Chandra Ghatak was a renowned poet and prose writer while her mother Dharitri Devi was a writer too in her own rights. The extended family consisted of aunts and uncles who had won prominence as artists, journalists, actors and filmmakers. Some of the more familiar names are those of the famous actor and film director Ritwick Ghatak, the equally famous cinematographer Sudhish Ghatak and the renowned sculptor Sankho Chowdhury.

While her family exposed Devi to a rich amalgamation of literary and fine arts it also sensitized her to the plight of those less fortunate in society. Both her parents were social activists working for the uplift of the poor and downtrodden. The women in her family devoted a great part of their time to promote literacy among the poor. Her grandparents made it a point to see that their grandchildren did not wear any expensive clothes but only what the poorest of the poor in the village wore.

Devi picked up her education at various places. Her early schooling was done at the Medinipur Missionary Girls' School. Subsequently she attended Middle School in Shantiniketan and went on to finish her schooling from Beltala Girls' School in Calcutta in the year 1942. Subsequently she attended Asutosh College of Calcutta University (1943-1944) and then returned to Shantiniketan to earn her graduate degree in 1946. The same year she married Bijon Bhattacharya, an actor as well as a playwright. He was also an active member of the Communist Party of India.

Devi worked as a school teacher and then as a clerk for some time but lost her job. It was around this time that she began to turn her energies towards writing, particularly because she desperately needed to augment her income. Bijon was not doing too well and now she even had an infant son at home who needed care and comfort.

Being born into a family of strong literary traditions, writing came easily to Devi. She wrote for 'Sachitra Bharat', a Bengali weekly, under the pen name of Sumitra Devi. Her early writings were light fiction with not much serious twist to it. Her first major work *Jhansir Rani* (1956) however, launched her as a writer to be reckoned with.

The writing of *Jhansir Rani* determined the method of her art. She did not rely only on imagination or creativity. She researched her subject thoroughly, to the extent of going to Bundelkhand, travelling on foot through remote villages and desert lands, collecting whatever material she could find on the brave queen in the form of legends, folk ballads, interviewing people who still remembered the queen and collecting further material from oral history and not just archival data. This researching style came to characterize her writings in later times.

Devi's marriage with Bijon broke up in 1962. She began to live on her own. She finished her master's degree from Calcutta in 1962 and then worked as an English lecturer from 1964-84 at Bijoygarh Jyotish Roy College. This was a small private college catering mostly to the poor refugee population in Calcutta. She continued writing at the same time. Her first novel was followed by other works that brought her critical acclaim. *Amrit Sanchay*, *Andhamalik*, *Hazar Chaurasir Maa* are just to name a few.

### **The Writer as Activist**

Devi's visit to Palamau, a remote and extremely poor district in Bihar, proved to be a turning point in her life. It brought her face to face with the dismal conditions being faced by the indigenous (tribal) people of Palamau. There was no education, no healthcare, no roads, and no means of livelihood. People were reduced to a subhuman existence. It was a vicious combination of 'absentee landlordism, a despoiled environment, debt bondage and state neglect.' Palamau was not unique. In fact Devi calls it 'the mirror of India,' [From 'Palamu is a Mirror of India: an Introduction' by Mahasweta Devi in *Bitter Soil: Stories by Mahasweta Devi* translated by Ipsita Chandra, (Seagull: Calcutta), 2002.]

Her Palamau experience propelled her towards what became the main focus of her subsequent writings. She now concentrated all her literary energy in exposing the dismal living conditions of the tribal people in India, to highlight their social exploitation and in the process she became a champion for their political, social and economic advancement. Her concerns resulted in works like *Aranyer Adhikar* (1977) and *Choti Munda O Tara Tir* (1979) and collections like *Agnigarbha* (1979). *Imaginary Maps*, the collection of three stories which contains 'The Hunt' is also a part of her relentless efforts to expose the condition of the marginalized tribal people in various parts of India.

What is remarkable in Devi's writings is her complete and total identification not only with the major concerns in her writings but also with the oppressed and the marginalized people about whom she is writing. Recounting her experiences to Gayatri Spivak in an interview Devi throws some light on her close ties with the tribal people and their cause: 'When I understood that feeling for the tribals and writing about them was not enough, I started living with them. Tried to solve the problem by seeing everything from his or her point of view. That is how my book about Birsa Munda [*Aranyer Adhikar* – the right of/to the forest] came to be written,' ['Author in Conversation' in *Imaginary Maps*, p xii-xiii]. She actually feels deeply about the people and issues she is writing about. There is therefore a strong connection between her literary writings and her activist endeavours.

In fact Devi has become a major spokesperson for the tribal people. Writing in her Preface to *Imaginary Maps* Gayatri Spivak rightly observes 'It has always fascinated me that although her writing and her activism reflect one another, they are precisely that – "a folding back upon" one another – re-flection in the root sense.' [*Imaginary Maps*, p xxvi]. Devi's creative expression and her activist concerns are not different from one another. Not only has she written regularly about the tribals and their plight in newspapers, journals and magazines she has also been instrumental in the formation of a number of organizations that fight for their right. In Palamau for example she formed the Palamau District Bonded Labor Liberation Organization. When a Lodha killing took

place in Medinipur, Devi formed the Lodha Organization which launched protests. In Purulia, the most neglected and poorest district in West Bengal, Devi formed the Purulia Kheria Sobor Organization which consistently fought for the rights of the tribal people. Devi is thus helping the tribal people not only by creating awareness about their cause through her writings but is carrying on her crusade through more than thirty organizations formed by her that continually work towards the tribal people's uplift.

### **Devi's Style and Method**

Devi's writings are so carefully researched that they can almost be treated as a documentation of facts. Commenting about this aspect of her writing she says: 'I believe in documentation. After reading my work, the reader should face the truth of facts, and feel duly ashamed of the true face of India' (Introduction to *Bitter Soil*, p. vii). What is remarkable in Devi's works is her belief in the capacity for self-emancipation in these marginalized people. In fact she becomes a strong campaigner for their resistance to this exploitation. Through her stories Devi is relentlessly working to spread this consciousness of the necessity for struggle for attainment of dignity and human rights. She has become the champion of this cause as far as the marginalized communities are concerned. She has become their 'Didi' and 'Maa' who hold a beacon of hope for them.

Devi was awarded the Sahitya Academy Prize in 1996 and is also the winner of the prestigious Ramon Magsaysay Award. She continues to work for the oppressed and write about them.

### **The Hunt**

'The Hunt' forms part of a collection published as *Imaginary Maps: Three Stories by Mahasweta Devi* in 1995. The other two stories in the collection are namely 'Douloti the Bountiful' and 'Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha.' All three stories describe a fictional rendition of situations that are very real in the lives of the tribal people. While 'The Hunt' is about a half tribal girl's bold attempt to put a violent end to her personal exploitation as well as to the threat of ecological devastation, 'Douloti' deals with the problem of bonded labour, particularly the women who are exploited endlessly and mercilessly through the system. The heart wrenching image at the end of the story with Douloti's rotting and bleeding body covering the map of India raises many disturbing questions and speaks volumes for what independent India has failed to do for one sixth of its population. In Devi's words "Decolonization has not reached the poor. That is why these things happen. Women are just merchandize, commodities." [*Imaginary Maps*, p xx]. In the third and concluding story 'Pterodactyl' Devi attempts to show 'what has been done to the entire tribal world of India.' As the author says: "If read carefully, 'Pterodactyl' will communicate the agony of the tribals, of marginalized people all over the world," [*Imaginary Maps*, p xxi].

Two of the stories in the above collection are women centric. In fact when we read Devi's other fiction we find that many of her stories revolve around women where she highlights women's subordination, their vulnerability and their extreme exploitation, be it in middle class households, in tribal villages or in brickfields. Yet, she refuses to be labeled a feminist. She proclaims that she writes as a writer and not as a woman and looks at a problem in its entirety and not just at its gender aspect. Her tales are powerful tales of exploitation as well as struggle where a woman is more vulnerable simply because of the physical disadvantage of being a woman. More often than not the women in her stories though intrinsically strong and resilient, are often left with no choice but to succumb to their circumstances. Against this backdrop, 'The Hunt' comes as a breath of fresh air where Mary Oraon, the beautiful half white half tribal girl has the courage and determination to take matters in her own hands and put an end not only to her own oppression but also to a threat to her entire community.

### **What is the story about: Major Issues**

Like any of Devi's works, 'The Hunt' too is directly linked to the author's preoccupation and concerns as an activist who is relentlessly and continuously fighting for the rights of the underprivileged and exploited tribal communities. Consequently 'The Hunt' is not just about Mary Oraon and her sexual exploiter but about many other equally important concerns that have wider ramifications.

While the story is about:

- A revolt against gender oppression.
- One woman's triumph over her vulnerability in a male dominated society.
- Reversal of gender roles as a form of seeking justice to gender inequality and oppression.

It is also about:

- Dispossessed tribal communities and destruction of their environment and tribal traditions
- A celebration of tribal traditions at the same time.
- The exploitation of natural resources that goes on in the name of development.
- The 'internal colonization' that is going on in the name of progress.
- Catastrophic ecological loss.
- Showing the way to counter and combat this oppression through indigenous practices that still provide a fertile ground for myths that can be deployed for the purpose.

The issues and concerns are many and are woven along with Mary's story. What is important is not just what happens to Mary or how she deals with her problem but also what is happening to her land and her people.

### **The Setting**

The story begins with a brief but instructive description of the place in which it is set. Albeit Kuruda is connected by a railway line it is nevertheless declared as abandoned. The billboard at the station announces: 'Kuruda Outstation Abandoned.' Tracing the railway line the narrator describes how the train merely slows down at this station and then climbs the hill bit by bit and descends only to stop at Tohri which is the busiest station in the area. One can make out that it is a coal mining area with surface collieries all around. Tohri is a coal halt. The real business is timber brokering as it is also a Sal growing region.

One can understand why Kuruda has been abandoned. Unlike Tohri which is a coal mining halt, Kuruda is not profitable at all. All of this is set to change however, as the subsequent events of the story unfold. Tehsildar Singh comes in to the picture. Tehsildar is only the first in line of the many contractors and developers who are just waiting to pounce on Kuruda's forest resources. The story reveals how insidiously and subtly in the name of development, plans are made to take away the livelihood of indigenous tribal people whose lives revolve around these forests. The irony is that these unsuspecting people are the ones to provide cheap labor for their own undoing. Once Kuruda's forest reserves are discovered by the outside world it would not take very long to 'develop' an infrastructure for the easy transportation of all the timber that is waiting to be cut. Therefore one can safely assume that Kuruda will not be 'abandoned' for very long. 'Development' will come its way too but it is another matter what it will bring with itself.

### **What Happens in the Story**

The events of the story revolve around Mary Oraon, a half tribal girl who works for the estate owner Mr. Prasad at the Dixon Bungalow. Everything seems to be going smoothly until the day Tehsildar Singh lands in the village, being invited by Banwari Lal, Mr. Prasad's son, for

negotiating a deal regarding the giant Sal trees on Prasad's estate. Not only does he eye the Sal he even begins lusting after Mary the moment he sets eyes on her. Mary is angry and rebuffs his advances without much success. On the day of Jani Parab, the annual hunting festival, Mary ultimately resorts to violence to put an end to the matter by hunting down Tehsildar. Rather than being a passive victim of male sexual aggression she avenges her oppressive plight by killing her assailant.

Having triumphed over her aggressor Mary returns to the group of women and joins them in the celebration which is part of the festival. She feasts and she dances with abandon and then quietly leaves the village for a promise of a better life elsewhere with Jalim, her prospective mate.

### **Thematic Concerns**

As far as Mary's story is concerned there are a number of themes at play. There is *the theme of gender inequality and oppression* where Mary's vulnerability, on account of being a woman is starkly evident. Being a tribal woman she is doubly vulnerable and liable to be exploited just as her mother was many years ago by her white employer. Not much has changed in post colonial India. Bhikni, Mary's mother had been a victim of the white male colonizer who had exploited her physically and sexually. Mary who belongs to post colonial independent India only stops short of becoming a similar victim to Tehsildar who is a representative of the chain of 'internal colonizers' [*Imaginary Maps*, p 205] who have merely replaced the white imperialists.

The theme of gender inequality and oppression is however, countered in Mary's story by the *theme of gender reversal*. In her encounter with Tehsildar she, a woman, takes on the role of the aggressor and Tehsildar, a man and also her potential rapist, becomes the victim. This gender reversal translates into a means of expressing revolt and resistance against oppression and also a means of retribution, of seeking justice. In the annual hunting festival of her community there is a tradition of role reversal every thirteenth year when it is the turn of the women to become the hunters. In the story it is the thirteenth year of the festival and the tradition of role reversal gives Mary the idea and offers her an opportunity as well to become the hunter rather than the prey and hunt down her aggressor. She defies her victim's position by donning the hunter's role. In this context the story has also been seen to be *a celebration of tribal traditions* that afford such opportunities of resistance and protest.

As far as Kuruda's story is concerned the thematic concerns are many and equally disturbing and thought provoking. The village that had been 'abandoned' is only waiting to be discovered by that extended array of personnel who come in the guise of developers, relief workers, lumber contractors, bond masters, government officials, with a promise of economic development integration into the mainstream. Tehsildar Singh is only one of the many who would soon follow. He sizes up the giant Sal trees for the timber they can yield without a single thought to the fact that these trees provide food and cultural stability to the Oraon community. At one stroke decades of slow organic growth can be undone making the land barren and leading to environmental devastation. The tribal people, the original inhabitants of the land whose lives are intrinsically bound with the forest have no say in a decision that would destroy their environment, prove a threat to their traditions and lead to catastrophic ecological loss. Unsuspectingly they even help these 'internal colonizers' by providing them with cheap labour.

The story therefore is not just about Mary, not just about gender issues, but also about a gradual and systemic annihilation of a whole people and their way of life; about illegal deforestation and the environmental disaster that can result from it; about the collusion of landowners and timber merchants in the process they call development; about the injustice of it all! *The theme of 'internal colonization'* is an important theme here. Not much has changed for these tribal people even after independence. In post colonial India the white imperialists have simply been replaced

by the ruthless landowners and crafty merchants and developers who together carry out a systematic destruction of the forests which have been home to these tribal people for centuries. A destruction of environment poses a threat to a whole way of life. It threatens to destroy age old tribal traditions that are closely bound with the land. It is Devi's strong belief that a resistance to this exploitation is essential and is possible as well. In the story we have seen how this resistance manifests itself in the form of a revival of one such tradition. Mary Oraon becomes the vehicle for this resistance and revolt and the hunting festival which is a festival of justice too, becomes her weapon. She hunts down and kills Tehsildar who is her aggressor alright but a threat to the land and its people as well. Devi is obviously suggesting here that indigenous practices such as these myths can still prove to be potent missiles that can be deployed to combat contemporary oppression. The story thus becomes *a celebration of traditions* that are compellingly relevant in contemporary times as well.

### **Mary Oraon**

Mary is modeled on a real character whom the author had seen and heard about on one of her visits to Lapra. She recounts her experience to Spivak:

When I went to Lapra I would see this light skinned girl in a yellow sari worn in the village way, on the back of a big old buffalo, sitting in the most relaxed manner, chewing sugar cane. Maybe chewing popcorn. I see her in Tohri market, bargaining for fruit and other produce, chewing pan, smoking bidis, arguing and always getting the upper hand. Such a personality. Then I learned what she had done on Jani Parab day in order to marry the Muslim boy. . . . And that man was just like a Lakra, a wolf that had been killed. . . . The real point is . . . that it was Jani Parab, the women's hunting festival day. She resurrected the real meaning of the annual hunting festival day by dealing out justice for a crime committed against the entire tribal society.

[From 'Author in Conversation' in *Imaginary Maps*, p xviii]

Mary Oraon, the main protagonist of the story is very different from Devi's early women characters. She is independent, individualistic and bold. She is a woman of remarkable practical efficiency and has strong physical abilities. Single handedly she does the work of twelve people at the Prasad bungalow. She alone keeps the bungalow clean. In addition she pastures their cattle, being a 'most capable cowherd' and also sells custard apple and guava from the Prasads' orchards 'driving terrifically hard bargains' with the wholesale fruit buyers. In return for all this work she takes no wages from Prasadji. The arrangement is for 'board and lodging, clothing and sundries.'

She is an astute business woman as well. On market days she takes the train to Tohri with vegetables from the field. At the market she sits at her own rightful place and is well liked for her intelligence, her outspokenness and her generosity. She is respected by all. With her words and her machete (a weapon she carries with her always) she is able to take good care of herself. Despite taking no wages from Prasadji, she still enjoys a certain measure of financial autonomy resulting from her profitable sales of the estates' produce as well as from the sale of the fruit of the mahua trees which she considers rightfully hers. The understanding is that the right to the mahua fruit belongs to whoever picks it. Mary ferociously defends this right. Devi informs us that 'No villager has been able to touch the fruit even in jest. Mary has instantly raised her machete. This is hers by right. This is why she works so hard for no wages at the Prasad house.'

Mary is beautiful. She looks different and is exceptionally tall. Her light skin is a barrier to young Oraon men. Mrs. Prasad had tried to arrange a match for her with the gardener's son

pointing out the added advantage of being able to stay on the compound if she agrees to the match. Bhikni, Mary's mother is ecstatic but Mary is shrewd enough to see through the ploy. The exchange between the two reveals Mary's analytical mind as well as gives a glimpse of the possibilities that exist for exploitation of the poor people. Replying to her mother she says,

No. Mistress mother has said it to keep her worker captive.

--- She will give shelter.

---- A shack.

----He's a good boy.

----No, living in a shack, eating mush, the man drinking, no soap or oil, no clean clothes. I don't want such a life.

Even in independent India the fact remains that workers can be kept captive if not by force then by guile. Mary knows that and is not ready to bargain her freedom. She is fiercely independent and certainly has a mind of her own. None of the usual run-of-the-mill, ordinary lives for her. She turns down the match. Devi writes: "She is accepted in the village society. The women are her friends; she is the best dancer at the feasts. But that doesn't mean she wants to live their life.' Mary is different and the author traces some of this singularity to her mixed lineage. She has a share of the violent imperialist's blood in her. Many men had wanted to be her lover but Mary has set her boundaries. Just because she is bold, beautiful and different does not mean she is easily available. She immediately lifts her machete against any such advances. With Jalim she had struck a friendship the day he saved her from Ratan Singh, the driver of a timber truck. But even with him the understanding is clear. She has let him approach her only on the promise of a marriage. Marriage has to come first and can take place only after he has saved a hundred rupees. We are told that 'Jalim respects this greatly.'

### **Is Mary's character formed by the circumstances of her birth?**

Mary's independence, her courage, her bold manner, her refusal to take things lying down and her ability to stand up for her rights, is often attributed to her mixed blood. Devi describes for us the circumstances of her birth. She is the illegitimate daughter of a white man and a tribal woman. We are told:

'Once upon a time the whites had timber plantations in Kuruda. They left gradually after independence. Mary's mother looked after the Dixon bungalow and household. Dixon's son came back in 1959 and sold the house, forest, everything else. He put Mary in Bhikni's womb before he left. He went to Australia.'

Mary's mixed blood is often identified as the source of her independence and her power. 'Everyone is afraid of Mary,' writes the author. When she fiercely defends her right to the mahua fruit or insists on marriage with Jalim before anything else, we get narrative comments to the same effect: 'the power of Australian blood' or 'it figures. White blood.' Because of the hybrid status she enjoys a certain measure of freedom and independence that is not available to an ordinary Oraon girl. It is her singularity that allows her autonomy and mobility as well. The next question implied in the narrative is whether this singularity comes in the way of a total acceptance of her by her community.

### **Does Mary belong to the Oraon community?**

Mary Oraon had been fathered by a white man but she has grown up in the midst of the Oraon community. The question however is, how much of an Oraon is she? Is she accepted by the community as one of their own? We know that her half-caste status does allow her independence. Had she been any ordinary Oraon girl she would not have been able to move around so freely, go to Tohri or even take a decision to marry a Muslim man. As Devi writes:

Because she is the illegitimate daughter of a white father the Oraons don't think of her as their blood and do not place the harsh injunctions of their own society upon her. She would have rebelled if they had. She is unhappy that they don't. In her inmost heart there is somewhere a longing to be part of the Oraons. She would have been very glad, if, when she was thirteen or fourteen, some brave Oraon lad had pulled her into marriage.

Mary longs to find her roots in the Oraon community. The author writes how she 'sits at any Oraon house in the village, fries wheat cakes on clay stove, eats with everyone.' Despite her efforts she is unable to find a complete acceptance. The fact remains that she is different. The difference begins and is apparent in her physical looks. Being 'tall, flat featured with light copper skin' she looks beautiful. When she is teased by men about marrying one of them she turns around and asks; 'Why aren't you tall and white like me?' In return she is told: 'You are a white man's daughter.'

She tries her best to belong. All this while she knows she will marry Jalim. At the same time she also knows that 'if she had resembled any Oraon girl – if her father had been Somra or Budhna or Mangla Oraon – the Oraons would not have let this marriage happen.' She is unable to find a complete acceptance. The message of rejection that one sees in her glance is probably a reflection of the sense of rejection she feels herself.

She differs from any member of the Oraon community not only in her physical looks, her bold manner and independent thinking but also in her ability to see through things. In addition she has the courage to reveal the truth. She is able to recognize the threat that Tehsildar poses to the area and its people. She tries to persuade the estate owner not to give in saying, 'The bastard tricked you. He took all the profit.' She tries to persuade the Kuruda elders as well not to provide him cheap labour: 'Twelve annas and eight annas! No porter carries a gentleman's case for this price.' Her protests and warnings however, are not heeded. Both Prasadji and the village elders express their helplessness in the matter. Mary who is facing a personal threat of sexual exploitation from the Tehsildar decides to take matters in her own hands.

### **The Hunting Festival**

Mary Oraon, though a half caste, nevertheless revitalizes one of the Oraon community's age old traditions – the hunting festival. Each year on the day of the festival the men of the tribe would go into the forest to hunt and then dance and feast in the evening. Every thirteenth year it is the turn of the women to go out and hunt. Every thirteenth year the gender roles are reversed. Men stay at home while the women go out and hunt with a freedom and abandon that is rare in their lives. The forest however is not what it had once been. The encroachers have left little in it. Devi writes: 'Once there were animals in the forest, life was wild, the hunt game had meaning. Now the forest is empty, life wasted and drained, the hunt game meaningless. Only the day's joy is real.'

Ironically it is Mary the half-caste, who puts life back into the festival by hunting down the biggest beast and eliminating the threat to herself and her people. While on her way home from the felling she is accosted by Tehsildar one day. Struggling to free herself she is able to spring out of his grasp. As she stands looking at him she observes that 'Tehsildar did not have his dark glasses on. Long sideburns, long hair, polyester trousers, pointed shoes, a dark red shin on his back. Against the background of the spring songs, Mary thought he was an animal. A-n-i-mal. The syllables beat on her mind. Suddenly Mary smiled.' From what happens subsequently we can safely assume that it at this particular moment that the idea of hunting her predator strikes Mary. The hunting festival is very near. It is the thirteenth year and according to the tradition it is the women's turn to hunt. 'What better opportunity to hunt down a 'beast?' She lures Tehsildar to the forest on the day of the hunt and finally kills him. There is a deep sense of satisfaction in

her after the killing. Devi describes it in ironic terms saying that she looks as if she had been 'infinitely satisfied in a sexual embrace.' Mary returns to the group and dances and eats with great abandon. This makes Budhni comment: 'Look how she's eating! As if she has made the biggest kill.' Her words resonate with a deep symbolic meaning. Mary has in fact killed the biggest 'beast' - the beast that posed a threat to an entire people and their way of life.

### **Gender Considerations**

In hunting down Tehsildar Mary Oraon reverses the gender roles in 'The Hunt' in more ways than one. She changes the expected and almost inevitable outcome of a situation that could have merely reinforced women's powerlessness in a male dominated world. Mary however is effecting a reversal in gender terms in not just this one narrow sense. As a general rule the term 'gender' is used in the social sciences to describe 'socially constructed categories based on sex.' Gender refers to a set of qualities and behaviors expected from a female or male by society. Gender roles are learned and can be affected by factors such as class, race, education or economics. In patriarchal societies women have been victimized, oppressed and put in a state of subjectivity on the basis of sex. Their experience of powerlessness however is shared by all who are similarly discriminated against on the basis of class, race, education, economics etc. irrespective of biological anatomy. Since gender is a social construct rather than a biological one, by corollary such discriminated sections of society also became gendered subjects raising similar expectations and facing similar representations.

Theoretically Mary is a gendered subject belonging to a section of society that is discriminated against, is poor and backward and has no access to education. Thus, even before we think of her as a woman all the markers for gendering her character already exist. She, as any other member of her tribe, is the subaltern, the suppressed subject. She may be able to fend for herself amidst her own people because of their innate respect for women and because of her fierce character but when the mainstream impinges upon her world in the shape of Tehsildar a feeling of powerlessness that comes with the knowledge of belonging to the weaker section of society and not just the weaker sex, knocks at her strong exterior. Her act of becoming the aggressor rather than the victim is what leads to a reversal in gender roles in the story in more ways than one.

In her act of resistance and defiance therefore, Mary Oraon gives a voice to an entire people who have faced centuries of subjugation from external as well as internal colonizers. She is the subaltern "speaking." Hers is the voice of resistance emphatically saying "No more!" Her act is symbolic. According to Spivak this voice of resistance makes Mary an organic intellectual. She explains:

When the subaltern "speaks" in order to be heard and gets into the structure of responsible (responding and being responded to) resistance, he or she is on the way to becoming an organic intellectual. . . . Mary Oraon in 'The Hunt' is one of those figures.

*[Imaginary Maps, pp xxvi-xxvii.]*

Mary's position is an ambivalent one. While commenting about her killing of Tehsildar the author has emphasized Mary's revitalization of a collective custom yet the narrative constantly underscores her singularity that sets her apart from rest of the community. Mary is not a true member of the tribe. She might have infused new life into an age old tradition and used it to combat contemporary oppression yet she doesn't fully belong. Her singularity has been emphasized by the author throughout the narrative. There is 'no possibility of collectivity for her' [*Imaginary Maps*, p. 201]. Her position therefore is an ambivalent one. Because of her singularity her protest can never acquire the status of the exemplary. Her revenge is an individual's revenge even though the method of it is strongly linked to a collective custom. While we make these observations we must remember that the story is based on a real character

and on an incident that actually took place. It therefore does not take away from the force of it as a definite act of resistance put up by the subaltern subject on behalf of the entire community.

The sad irony is that Mary knows she alone will have to take responsibility for having taken action against a collective threat. The ending shows her walking away from Kuruda, along the railway line, to Jalim and to lands beyond. Devi's implied message here seems to be for the marginalized people to bond as one. To transform an individual protest into a collective one or else Kuruda will again face the fate of the 'abandoned' land – abandoned this time by its original inhabitants. More Tehsildars will come, more Prasads will sell the trees, more forests will be destroyed and there may not always be a Mary to take decisive action.

### **Metaphorical Overtones and Tehsildar**

Mary's hunt has obvious metaphorical overtones. The parallel between Tehsildar's physical appearance and that of an animal is drawn with a purpose. No doubt it is his physical likeness that gives Mary the idea of 'hunting him down on the day of the hunting festival. But more important than the physical resemblance is Mary's recognition of the 'beast' that is within him.

Tehsildar is the beast, the animal who threatens Mary with violation and her people with destruction. He is the beast because he is the encroacher as well as the oppressor. A beast is a threat to life and people like Tehsildar are a threat to an entire way of life. As mentioned before he is just one of the many faces of the 'internal colonizers' who have replaced the white imperialists in post colonial India and continue to oppress the indigenous people. With their noble sounding schemes of development and integration they entice the poor unsuspecting people who fail to see that they are threatening to destroy their habitat, take away their livelihood and ultimately wipe them off from the face of this earth. For people whose lives are closely bound to the land any ecological changes pose a very potent threat. In Devi's own words:

Tehsildar represents the mainstream. He is a contractor, the entire administration is behind him, because this illegal deforestation, which continues all over India, is done with great skill, and always the tribals are condemned. Once a tribal told me, "I need five rupees a day to buy rice. Ask me to fell a tree, I'll do it unwillingly, but I'll do it. Ask me to chop off a head, I'll do it, because I need five rupees at the end of the day." So that the hands that fell the tree are not the hands responsible for the deforestation all over India.'

*[Imaginary Maps, p xxviii]*

In 'The Hunt' we see exactly the same thing happening. For a meager daily wage Tehsildar is able to get cheap local labour:

Oraon and Munda men and women came from six villages Kuruda, Murhai, Seeho, Thapari, Dhuma, Chinadoha. Unbelievable. Money at home. Others will fell the trees, Twelve annas daily for men, eight annas for women for trimming branches and carrying the pieced timber to the trucks. And a tiffin of cornmeal in the afternoon. Unbelievable! Salt and cayenne with the meal.

Tehsildar bribes the village elders with country liquor and they agree to bring the men and women. The Sal that Tehsildar buys for a mere fifteen rupees he will sell at maybe ten times the price in the cities. So the story goes in India from village to village from region to region. Devi expounds:

Big money is involved in the furniture that you see in Delhi or Hyderabad, or Calcutta. The local political worthies, local police, local administration is bribed. The railways cooperate by carrying this illegally felled timber. Illegal sawmills come up everywhere. There are bosses in the cities felling the sandalwood in Karnataka. All over the world governments protecting the environment is nonsense. Thus through Mary Oraon I have narrated events that are true of India today.

### The Hunt as a Just Act

It is ironically apt that the annual hunting festival is also a festival of Justice. Devi describes how each year of the festival after the hunt and the feast were over ‘the elders would bring offenders to justice.’ Mary, in her act of killing Tehsildar has not only revitalized the idea of killing a ‘beast’ but has also infused new life into its judiciary aspect. It is not the justice of the law courts but the justice of the land and its people. In killing Tehsildar Mary is resisting not only her sexual oppressor but also combating a very potent threat to her environment, the people and their traditions. In the story Devi has ingeniously put one of these traditions to use in this act of justice. She is suggesting that indigenous practices are a viable alternative. Such myths can still be brought into play to defend against present day oppression. Mary’s ‘hunt’ of the ‘beast’ is a just act in the eyes of the land. She feels no fear, no remorse. She dances and she feasts but then takes the road that would take her to Jalim. As she walks in the starlit night we get a narrative comment that leaves nothing in doubt. Devi writes:

Mary is not afraid, she fears no animal as she walks, watching the railway line in the dark by starlight. Today all the mundane blood-conditioned fears of the wild quadruped are gone because *she has killed the biggest beast*.

We find no condemnation of the act in the narrative voice. In fact it seems to be in agreement with Mary’s ‘killing of the beast.’ Knowing Devi’s sympathy for the tribal people and her unstinting support for their cause one is not surprised. Commenting on the killing of Tehsildar in ‘The Hunt’, Devi says:

People say that in the story I have gone too much for bloodshed, but, I think as far as the tribals or the oppressed are concerned, violence is justified. When the system fails in --- justice, violence is justified. . . . When the system fails an individual has a right to take to violence or any other means to get justice. The individual cannot go on suffering in silence.

[ *Imaginary Maps*, p xviii]

In the same interview Devi has admitted that ‘every event narrated within that story is true. What Mary did that day had been done in that area again and again.’ She explains further: ‘Among the tribal, insulting or raping a woman is the greatest crime. Rape is unknown to them. Women have a place of honour in tribal society.’ It is therefore understandable that when this honour is attacked or is under threat and the system is of no help then a person is left with no choice but to take matters in one’s own hands. In such a situation Devi sees no harm in an individual resorting to violence to combat that threat. In this context it is worth remembering that one of the causes of the great Santhal revolt of 1855-56 was the raping of tribal women.

There is no doubt about the fact that Devi is a writer and an activist at the same time. Through her writings she is relentlessly exposing the true state of independent India. She is questioning that idea of nationhood where one sixth of its population is forced to live outside the idea and is not given an inclusive status. Blatant and large scale exploitation keeps the writer continually angry. What is the way out? Through stories like ‘The Hunt’ Devi is showing the tribal people the way to emancipation. There is a word of warning implicit in the narrative for the rest of the world. Her own admission is: ‘My experience keeps me perpetually angry and makes me ruthlessly unforgiving towards the exploiters or the exploiting system.’ A little further she observes: ‘I believe in anger, in justified violence,’ [*Bitter Soil*, p ix]. This anger, this justified violence shows its face in one story after another pointing to the struggle of people who are marginalized, discriminated against and ruthlessly exploited in their own country by their own

countrymen. 'The Hunt' is just one of many such stories exposing the ugly underbelly of independent, decolonized India.

### **Some Additional Information**

#### **Mahasweta Devi on India's Denotified Tribes**

March 2002: I have been going through the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" and questioning myself, which article is really true for India from articles 1-30? None. In India, the society is caste and class divided. Casteism is not the only curse. Indian society is thoroughly indifferent to the word "tribe." Then comes the ultimate truth as it exists. For India's millions of deprived ones living either below the poverty line, or on the fringe of it, the word "human rights" is non-existent. Right to have a living, proper housing, drinking water, education, electricity, health facilities, communication, right over the land, they are denied everything. And they are the people whose poverty is really a big capital for the Country's ruling powers. Their poverty, depravity of their lives, the non-development of their areas form this capital. Showing this, the ruling powers make big projects and get money. Naturally nothing is ever done. If they were lifted over the poverty line, they would not depend upon the people they elect. They know that the pre-election promises are a hoax. Yet they cast votes. Not voting is considered an extremist attitude, in India.

Whatever I say here, is born of three decades of day-to-day experience of India's poor. And, amongst them, India's tribals share a worse fate. Theirs is a faceless existence. They are in India from ancient times, for thousands of years, yet the mainstream India has continually refused to recognise them. In the tribal society there is no caste division, no dowry system, divorce and widow remarriage is socially sanctioned. They are, after centuries of oppression and neglect, still so civilized! Yet we have simply refused to recognise their worth, have made them bonded slaves in the unorganised sectors, have evicted them from land wherever we have founded industries, or built dams.

Having been denied fundamental human rights, they have joined the floating population of the other poor who follow the contractors and go anywhere for a pittance. The mighty tribal culture, their fantastic dances, music, painting and wood cuttings are lifted by middlemen for a handful of coins and sold at high prices at home and abroad. The artisans receive next to nothing.

In Indian history they are seldom mentioned. So many mighty tribal peasant rebellions against the British in the 18th and 19th centuries, never got a mention in the history of the Indian Freedom Struggle. The leaders of the nation, like Gandhi, Puley or Ambedkar seldom mentioned the tribals whose very existence was threatened under mainstream onslaught.

And, to the caste hierarchy, the tribals were, and are, still untouchables. The Central and state governments make special budgets for their development. Such schemes are made by people who know next to nothing about the tribals. One instance, KALAHANDI of Orissa. Famine and starvation death among Kalahandi tribals are quite regular, yet Kalahandi is fertile, grows regular crops. Of course the tribal land has been usurped by non-tribals. During famine the tribals, government will say, are supplied with rice and wheat. Yet, no one ever made any effort to know the truth about this disjunction between a good harvest and starvation deaths of the tribals. For the Kalahandi tribals like many other tribal groups, the staple food is not rice or wheat, but according to government jargon "lesser food grains" like "Marwa, Kurthi, Kodo" etc. Tribal land gone, they cannot grow what they eat, so they starve. The "KORKU" tribe of Dt. Amravati of Maharashtra, are a forest tribe. They were food-gatherers. The rich teak forest, their home, has been depleted. Plenty has been written about them. Many good organisations and persons are sending them processed and unprocessed food in mountains. The Korkus do not touch such food. They scour food from the vanishing jungles. This tribe is shrinking in size, losing weight and 2/3

years ago a bureaucrat summarised the Korku-question in one sentence, "This tribe is congenitally unfit to survive."

Take the Korku as the representative of Indian tribals, and the bureaucrat as Indian mainstream. The gulf is unbridgeable. And think of the big industries in pre and post-independence India. In each case there was large scale tribal land eviction and the tribals received neither land, nor money in exchange. From the time of the Tata Iron & Steel factory in British India, down to Narmada dams, the tribals are distant spectators. Their role is to see how their land is making India's wealth.

Yet, the Indian tribes constitute 8% of India's population, according to 1991 census. This too is misleading, as the last listing of tribal groups was done in 1976. Anthropological Survey insisted that there are 635 tribes in India. Yet Govt. of India recognised only 426 as tribes. 209 tribes were, and still are left out. If the total population of 635 tribes was counted, the percentage would go up.

In India, the largest democracy, this goes on.

(Sourced from an article on 'India Together' that appeared in *Budhan*, the newsletter of the DNT-RAG.)

### **Postcolonial**

Postcolonial studies, a type of cultural studies, refers more broadly to the study of cultural groups, practices, and discourses—including but not limited to literary discourses—in the colonized world. The term postcolonial is usually used broadly to refer to the study of works written at any point after colonization first occurred in a given country, although it is sometimes used more specifically to refer to the analysis of texts and other cultural discourses that emerged after the end of the colonial period (after the success of the liberation and independence movements). Among feminist critics, the postcolonial perspective has inspired an attempt to recover whole cultures of women heretofore ignored or marginalized—women who speak not only from colonized places but also from the colonizing places to which many of them fled.

Postcolonial criticism is a type of cultural criticism. It usually involves the analysis of literary texts produced in countries and cultures that have come under the control of European colonial powers at some point in their history. Alternatively, it can refer to the analysis of texts written about colonized places by writers hailing from the colonizing culture. In *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said, a pioneer of postcolonial criticism and studies, focused on the way in which the colonizing First World has invented false images and myths of the Third (postcolonial) World—stereotypical images and myths that have conveniently justified Western exploitation and domination of Eastern and Middle Eastern cultures and peoples. In the essay "Postcolonial Criticism" (1992), Homi K. Bhabha has shown how certain cultures (mis)represent other cultures, thereby extending their political and social domination in the modern world order.

Postcolonial criticism has been influenced by Marxist thought, by the work of Michel Foucault (whose theories about the power of discourses have influenced the new historicism), and by deconstruction, which has challenged not only hierarchical, binary oppositions such as West/East and North/South but also the notions of superiority associated with the first term of each opposition.

[*The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*, by Ross Muffin and Supriya M. Ray, Bedford Books, 1998].

### **What Is Gender?**

The concept of "gender" has not been well defined and is not well understood. The definition of gender has even been the subject of exhaustive debate, including at a special United Nations session in connection with the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. Gender is often confused with sex. However, sex generally refers to biology and anatomy. People are said to be of the male sex or the female sex, as determined by three sets of characteristics: external sex organs, internal sex organs, and secondary sexual development at puberty. The word sex is also used to mean sexual intercourse or activity. By contrast, gender refers to a set of qualities and behaviors expected from a female or male by society. Gender roles are learned and can be affected by factors such as education or economics. They vary widely within and among cultures. While an individual's sex does not change, gender roles are socially determined and can evolve over time. Gender roles and expectations are often identified as factors hindering the equal rights and status of women with adverse consequences that affect life, family, socioeconomic status, and health. For this reason, gender, like sexuality, is an important element of family planning and reproductive health services.

(Sourced from *Engenderhealth.com*)

#### Suggestions for further reading

- Devi, Mahasweta, *Imaginary Maps: Three Stories by Mahasweta Devi*, translated and introduced by Gayatri Spivak, (London & New York: Routledge), 1995.
- ----- *Bitter Soil*, trans. Ipsita Chanda, (Calcutta: Seagull), 2002.
- ----- *Breast Stories*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Calcutta: Seagull), 2002.
- ----- *The Outcast: Four Stories*. Trans. Sarmishtha Datta Gupta. (Calcutta: Seagull, 2002
- Bardhan, Kalpana, *Of Women, Outcasts, Peasants, and Rebels*, Berkeley: University of California Press,
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakraborty. *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. (New York: Routledge), 1987.
- Sen, Nivedita and Nikhil Yadav. ed. *Mahasweta Devi: An Anthology of Recent Criticism*. New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2008.

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# THE WORLD-RENOWNED NOSE

Vaikom Muhammad Basheer

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--Neeta Gupta

## An Analysis

### Objectives

1. To introduce you to the author and familiarize you briefly with the Malayalam literary scene.
2. To introduce you to the genre of Satire and acquaint you with various aspects of satirical writing.
3. To take you through a critical reading of 'The World Renowned Nose' and help you note the major issues in the story and its satirical features.
4. To help you critically assess the story and note the interplay of humor and pathos in it.
5. To facilitate you in noting the underlying message of the story.

### About the Author

Basheer was born on January 20, 1908 at a small village in Vaikom in Kerala. He was the eldest of six children of Kaji Abdu Rahiman, a prosperous timber merchant, and Kunchachumma. He attended a primary Malayalam School in his village for some time but because his parents were slightly progressive in their attitude, he was sent next to the Vaikom English School. He continued to learn Arabic from a Muslim Tutor at home.

Basheer was at an impressionable age when Gandhiji came to visit Vaikom in March 1924. He ran away from home to participate in the freedom struggle and reached Calicut which was the hub of nationalist activities in Kerala and took part in the Salt Satyagrah on the Calicut beaches. His arrest was inevitable and along with the other freedom fighters he too was incarcerated and sent to the Cannanore Central Jail.

Basheer's experiences at the jail were painful and tortuous. He was subjected to a number of atrocities which in turn wrought a dramatic change in him. From one extreme he went to another. Abandoning the Gandhian doctrines of Ahimsa he became a revolutionary and made Sardar Bhagat Singh, Raj Guru and Sukhdev his role models. Needless to say, once again the police came into action. Basheer, along with his other mates, went under-ground in order to evade arrest.

For the next seven years he travelled all over India, reaching as far as the shores of Arabia. In all his years of wandering he had to resort to the use of various disguises in order to avoid recognition. At times he posed as a beggar, at other times as a palmist, an astrologer. He worked as a magician's assistant, as a private tutor and also at a tea shop. In addition to these few he took up many other odd jobs during his various sojourns.

Basheer came under Police surveillance once again due to his criticism of the Dewan of Travancore. The weekly *Pauranadam*, which he had started with a purpose of finding a platform for his satirical writings, was banned and he was put in the Kollam Kasba Police Station lock-up. Basheer's experiences at this prison featured in many of his short stories like "*Tiger*", "*Itiyan Panikker*" and "*Mathilukal*" (*Walls*). He even wrote stories on request from the prisoners who

were sick of reading the *Ramayana* and the *Bible*. A hilarious love story "*Prema Lekhanam*" was the outcome of such a request.

In many ways Basheer's experiences as a freedom fighter penetrated his writings. Once India gained independence however, Basheer withdrew from active politics and chose not to hark back to the past but to look forward. Thus we find that there is no bitterness in his novels and stories written after independence. Nor is there an attempt to include an account of or any comments on the past oppression in pre-independence India. Post-independence however Basheer was disheartened to find things not going the way he expected them to. Being a politically conscious and aware writer he tried to show the mirror to society through his satirical writings.

### **Basheer the Writer**

Basheer began by writing stories for a paper called *Jayakesari*. His first Story "*Ente Thankam*" (*My thankness*) was published in this paper sometime between 1937 and 1941. This story had an immediate impact on the Malayalam literary scene as it broke away from the traditional concepts of romantic fiction. Basheer's heroine was not a slim, fair, beautiful, maiden but a dark complexioned hunchback. He marked his difference from others in this departure from tradition. His later works proved the point further when not only were his subjects and themes different but their treatment too was markedly different from the Malayalam literary conventions.

Basheer's career as a writer and journalist witnessed a boost when he moved to Madras. He wrote extensively for the weekly *Jayakevlam*. When he returned to Ernakulam he opened a tiny book store which began as a Circle Book House but was later renamed Basheer's Book Stall. His columns "*The True and the False*" appeared regularly in *Narmada*, a paper run by Raghavan Nair. In Basheer's literary pursuits, M.P. Paul, a teacher and literary critic, proved to be his guide and mentor. Paul urged him to devote more time to his writing after reviewing his novel *Balyakalasakhi* (*Childhood Friend*), that had appeared in 1944.

### **Basheer's Style**

It was in early 1930s, that the Progressive Writer's Movement made its impact on Malayalam Literature. Writers wrote consciously about socialist themes, about poverty, unemployment and hunger. Basheer too wrote on these subjects but drew upon his personal experiences of sordidness and poverty. He had seen it all at first hand yet he chose to be objective rather than sentimental. In fact, his picaresque life provided him with ample material for his creative work. As M.N. Vijayan puts it "Politics and Prison, asceticism, pick pocketing, homosexuality, all were grist to his mill". (From "Introduction" in Vanajam Ravindran ed. *Vaikom Mohammad Basheer: Short Stories*). So varied were his experiences that no two stories of his shared any similarities. He forged his own style and his ignorance about literary conventions became a reason for his uniqueness. In his own words "agonizing experiences and a pen" were all the material he had when he ventured into the literary world. The conventions of Sanskritised Malayalam were challenged by his colloquial style and the unconventional subjects. The rogues, the dimwits, the prostitutes, the eunuchs, the pickpockets and the wicked as well as the innocent all made an appearance in his works and all were treated with the same ironic humour and subjected to the same satirical gaze of the first person narrator called "the humble historian" by Basheer himself. His seminal work "*Sabdangal*" (*Voices*) which appeared in 1947 was almost a microcosm of the surrounding world and dealt with issues like poverty, unemployment, death and destruction. His three novellas for which he is well known, *Balyakalasakhi*, *N'te Uppooppakkoru* *Anadarnu* and

*Pathummayute Adu* - depicted the life of the Kerala Muslims. But his writings are not focused on any particular community. In fact, it is the human community which interests him, particularly the issues that are of concern to the present generation. Thus he could sensitively express the despair and anger of a modern man in "*The Invaluable Moment*" and "*An Evening Prayer*" as well as express his concern for the environment in a story like "*The Rightful Inheritors of the Earth*".

Basheer passed away on July 5, 1994, leaving behind his wife Fabi, daughter Shahina and son Anees. He also left behind his works that continue to amaze by the sheer variety contained in them and also the manner in which he 'transformed the biographical into the historical, the transient into the perennial and the trivial into the sublime.' (M.N. Vijayan). Forging a style which was the exigency of his subjects and themes, he introduced the Malayalam readers to a new way of looking at things. His racy humour, pungent satire and tendency to debunk rhetoric, all were refreshingly different from the convention-ridden works of his contemporaries. Basheer drew upon his everyday experiences and yet could delineate equally well the sublime and the infernal. As M.N. Vijayan observes 'whether it be the crook or the nitwit, the wicked or the innocent, the "I" of his tales gazes at "god's Plenty" spread out before him and presents this to us, distilled in the alembic of his rich humour.' For Basheer, life provided a model for art, whatever he wrote and whoever he wrote about, compassion and acceptance remained the key to his humour. It was seldom malicious. The Sahitya Akademi honoured him for his contribution to literature in 1970 and he was awarded the Padma Shree in 1982.

### **Introduction to the Story**

"The World Renowned Nose" was published as *Vishvavikhyat Mookken* in 1954 in an anthology by the same name. It is a characteristically satiric tale that is marked by humour as well as pathos. In this tale Basheer takes us through a story about a simple man who experiences both the zenith as well as the nadir of his fortunes all because of his nose which suddenly grows to a disproportionate length in his twenty-fourth year. We are told that 'within a month its tip was level with his navel.' It is an aberration, a freak happening. The rest of the story deals with the events that come about subsequent to this occurrence. It goes without saying that we are not to interpret the tale too literally.

- The sense of the teller and the tale is created in the opening paragraph itself where the first person narrator makes his entrance and declares that he would now recount a stunning tale.
- The sense of history being recorded is also created at the outset for Basheer categorically says that he is now going to record the history of that controversial nose.
- The logical and rational reader has to set aside his credulity in order to fully enjoy this tale where irony, satire and caricature all combine to make us laugh as well as squirm in our comfortable positions.
- With its brilliant satire the tale exposes the farce behind the political scene in post colonial modern India.
- The tale is a stringent though humorous satire on the psychology of the crowds and the inanity of the masses.

Basheer's emphasis is not so much on the nose as it is on how society reacts to it. The thematic focus of the story is therefore on the psychology of the masses and also on the idiocy of the crowds that can at one instance put a man on a pedestal and worship him and at another pull him

down and trample him all for the same reason. Irony, satire, sarcasm, caricature, humor, pathos are the tools wielded skillfully by the writer to expose the folly, the stupidity of the masses and give a parodic representation of polity at the same time.

### **The Title**

The title of the story clearly states that this particular narrative is going to be about a person's nose – a simple and essential feature of the human anatomy. The nose under consideration however is 'world renowned' – indicating that due to some reason this simple feature, in a particular case, has achieved considerable fame. The title smacks of exaggeration and immediately makes us aware that the story we are about to read is probably going to be a satire.

### **What is Satire?**

Satire is a particular kind of writing that is aimed at criticizing something for the sake of improving it. It employs a lot of literary devices such as irony, sarcasm, parody, burlesque, humor, caricature etc for the purpose. Given below is a short explanation of the term that has been sourced from *Wikipedia*.

Satire is often strictly defined as a literary genre or form; although, in practice, it is also found in the graphic and performing arts. In satire, human or individual vices, follies, abuses, or shortcomings are held up to censure by means of ridicule, derision, burlesque, irony, or other methods, ideally with the intent to bring about improvement. Although satire is usually meant to be funny, the purpose of satire is not primarily humour in itself so much as an attack on something of which the author strongly disapproves, using the weapon of wit.

A very common, almost defining feature of satire is its strong vein of irony or sarcasm, but parody, burlesque, exaggeration, juxtaposition, comparison, analogy, and double entendre are all frequently used in satirical speech and writing. The essential point, however, is that "in satire, irony is militant." This "militant irony" (or sarcasm) often professes to approve (or at least accept as natural) the very things the satirist actually wishes to attack.

[From *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia on the Net* at wikipedia.com]

In Basheer's story the tone for the entire narrative is set in the title itself. The first line of the story maintains the tone and introduces us to the first person narrator who brings us a stunning piece of news that a nose has become the subject of heated debates and arguments among intellectuals. The narrator then quite pompously states that in the following pages he is going to 'record' the 'true history' of that nose.

### **Why history?**

In his entire writing career Basheer wrote a number of stories using a new literary device – that of historical writing. The first person narrator who narrates all these stories even introduces himself as 'the humble historian.' The difference however from actual historical writing is that while these stories are consciously written as histories and employ the whole textual apparatus of historical writing, yet the aim is to debunk and undermine this narrativization of histories as well as undercut the rhetoric that often accompanies it. The aim is not to narrate actual histories but to parody the structuring of these historical narratives. What we find in these stories therefore, is a parodic representation of polity. The same is achieved by the deft use of a few rhetorical devices where the choice of subject and theme along with the tone in which the narrative is presented,

which in turn employs the terminology of political discourse - all together create the desired effect of burlesque at its best. There are basically the following three rhetorical devices at play here:-

- First of all, the choice of subject is ingenious. Basheer selects ordinary people as his protagonists and then shows extraordinary things happening to them.
- Having chosen a banal theme and puny subject, Basheer then proceeds to narrate the event in a grand inflated tone, using rhetoric drawn from the discourses of national and international politics, particularly the Marxist discourse which was extremely popular at the time in Kerala. So we find words and phrases like "reactionary", "foreign regime" and "comrade-in-arms", "Politically conscious", "bourgeois" and so on, liberally sprinkled throughout the narrative.
- The third rhetorical device is a conscious attempt at writing history. Thus we have the whole paraphernalia of historical writing put to use here and made evident at once in the manner in which the first person narrator declares that he is writing history. Not only that, he proceeds to make it very clear that he is writing this piece of narrative for "the benefit of the students of history". In keeping with the textual implements of any historical writing "the humble historian" includes foot notes and also cross references to other "histories". He alludes to and makes comparisons with historical events in the past. He draws parallels between his hero and other great men in history. There is also an explanation given of certain terms and at times this elucidation may use an analogy as we find happening in our story when Basheer explains the word 'appropriation.' This is exactly how academic historiography works, entering into a process of validation and authentication. This is how histories are written. The method is fool proof but the irony lies in the fact that this method is being applied to a subject and event which is of no historical interest whatsoever. The whole regalia of historical writing are at once debunked and deflated.
- The undercutting of the discourse of political analysis runs parallel to the debunking of historical writing. When the grand inflated style of political discourse is applied to insignificant themes and ordinary subjects, it serves to expose the emptiness of political rhetoric rather than just the triviality of the subject and theme. The constant process of inflation and deflation is carried on throughout the narrative and the mock-grandiose tone creates humour because of its burlesque. It also creates satire because of the implied criticism of the rhetoric driven historical and political discourses.

'The World Renowned Nose' is a brilliant example of the entire process at work.

## **A Critical Summary**

### **The Beginning**

The satirical tone that has entered the narrative with the first line of the story continues unabated. Entirely in keeping with the traditions of historical writing, the first person narrator decides to begin from the beginning, in the twenty-fourth year of 'our hero' when the momentous event happened. As explained above, the entire exercise is done in a tongue-in-cheek manner. The 'historian' is taking a dig at historians and historical writing when he draws a parallel with histories and mentions with quite a straight face that if you 'care to look into the annals of history . . . you will find something remarkable about the twenty-fourth year in the lives of all great men.' The undercutting of the process of historical writing is already under way. The irony

and the sarcasm underlying such an observation is a jab at history, historical writing and historical personages.

### **The Background to the Event**

In keeping with the demands of a historical narrative, the narrator gives us some background to the event and to the one person at the centre of that event. Mookken, our protagonist, is a humble, illiterate man not particularly known for his intelligence. His kitchen is his world and he is not particularly bothered about what happens outside it. Mookken's daily routine has nothing special about it. He cooks eats, takes a good pinch of snuff, sleeps, wakes up and cooks again. His mother comes and collects his wages and brings him his favourite snuff. Day in and day out he continues to live out this mundane routine and is quite content with his lot.

“And then it happened” – announces the narrator quite dramatically, making the readers sit up and take notice and ask ‘what happened?’”

Something happened that changed Mookken's life for ever. An event over which he had no control and which plunged him first into the depths of despair and then took him to the heights of his fantasy, bringing him money success, fame, importance and all that he never even had dreamed of.

What happened was that Mookken's nose started to grow all of a sudden. It soon ‘extended past his mouth and down his chin in no time. Within a month it was level with his navel.’ While it grew to this enormous length it still continued to perform its basic functions. It could still breathe, take in snuff, and distinguish one smell from another. In other words, it behaved like a perfectly normal nose.

At this point we need to remember that the first requirement from any rational or logical reader is that the events in the story cannot be interpreted literally. The fantastic here has become the vehicle for bringing out the humour as well as the pathos in the ordinary. Exaggeration is a major tool in the hands of a satirist. Basheer being a master craftsman of satire uses it to the hilt and looks at the human scene before him through the magnifying glass. The device of caricature too has come into play here. Mookken's nose has been deliberately exaggerated to create an effect that is grotesque as well as comic.

### **Subsequent Events**

The immediate outcome of Mookken's nasal aberration is that he begins to attract attention. People throng to get a glimpse of his nose. ‘Photographers, reporters, T.V. crews . . . it was a roaring sea of humanity that laid seize on the house’ writes Basheer. The tragic consequence of the swelling crowds is that Mookken gets thrown out of his job.

The device of inflation once again comes in to play here. Basheer uses big words to express his opinion calling it an “act of gross injustice.” The expectation that ‘unions, ‘philanthropists’ or ‘socially conscious intellectuals and philosophers’ would come forward to fight on behalf of Mookken is itself misplaced. But Basheer is just warming up to the great political farce that his tale is ultimately going to shape up as.

While showing us the curiosity of the masses Basheer the satirist lets us have a glimpse of a harsh societal truth here. The multitude or the masses are driven by a bandwagon mentality. They do not care to look beyond the spectacle nor do they have the intelligence or sensitivity to feel the pathos of the situation. They forget that Mookken is one of them and not a ‘starving animal on exhibition.’ People are not bothered whether he is hungry or poor. All they want is to

sneak a look at the extraordinary nose. Humor at this point in the narrative subtly and obliquely makes way for pathos.

Thoroughly disgusted with the huge sea of humanity Mookken asks his mother to close the doors on them so he can have some peace. This however proves to be a turning point in Mookken's life. Being denied a free look the crowds now offer to pay to get a glimpse of his extraordinary nose. Fortune now smiles on Mookken and his mother. Being denied a view the crowd now offers to pay for a glimpse of the famous nose. In the wake of its growing popularity Mookken's nose brings him name, fame and lots of money. The underlying irony however is that Mookken might have unwittingly used the situation to his advantage but nevertheless he has ended up becoming something of an exhibit even if for a price.

### **A Satire on the Psychology of the Masses**

Basheer's observation that the 'mob is a stupid lot' is an overarching comment at this point in the story considering that the entire narrative is a brilliant satire on the psychology of the masses and the complete idiocy of the crowds. In a mock serious tone Basheer informs us that the nondescript, illiterate, unpretentious cook became a millionaire in six year's time and moved from his humble hut to a mansion. He acted in three films. Nine biographies were written on him along with a film on his life. In addition six renowned poets wrote encomiums on him.

A discomfort begins to creep into the humour of the situation. We need to ask ourselves a few disturbing questions here. The mob that was willing to pay for a glimpse of Mookken's nose may be stupid but what of the writers, the filmmakers, the intellectuals, who join the bandwagon? These are the people who are thought to be the enlightened lot. If they too are behaving in a manner similar to the hundreds who want just one look at Mookken's nose then Basheer is surely sweeping them all into one group. In a crowd all distinctions between uninformed and enlightened get erased. The mob is driven by just one mentality and that is a collective mentality of the crowd. Reason, rationality, logic are the first casualties in such a situation. If the masses are swayed in one direction then they will all move in that direction together. But so fickle is human nature that it takes only a slight spark for the crowd to sway from one extreme to the other. The crowds make Mookken a celebrity. All this while we must not forget that Mookken's only claim to greatness is the sheer size of his nose. Nothing else! In a tone laced with sarcasm and humor Basheer asks if 'a universally acclaimed nose, long and beautiful, reaching down to the navel is not a sign of greatness then what is?' It goes without saying that the opposite is implied. The irony is aggressive. The satirist is pretending to agree.

A delightful parody of the psychology of the masses follows next. Mookken, the simple illiterate man suddenly finds himself scaling heights of greatness that go beyond his imagination. His opinion is sought in everything. From new generation jets to the miraculous success in bringing a dead patient back to life going on to the conquest of the highest peak in the world. Matters have reached such a state that if Mookken does not have an opinion on the matter then the matter is of no consequence. It would be helpful to recall at this point that the man is illiterate and his only claim to greatness is his abnormal nose. Does such an abnormality equip him with the right kind of intelligence that can attach some worth to his opinion on such matters? Obviously not! Basheer is having a quiet laugh here at all of us who put such people on a pedestal and then worship them. The foolishness of the reporters who eagerly jot down Mookken's words and the stupidity of the people who wait equally eagerly to read them – all are burlesqued. It is a perfect parody of the masses!

If fame and recognition come conspiracies cannot be far behind. This is the rule of the game and the same happens with Mookken. Realizing that Mookken's nose is a confirmed noise maker and attention grabber, various people are in a race to appropriate it, lay a claim to it or be associated with it.

'If you have read enough of history, you will know there is nothing very original about appropriation,' writes Basheer. Entirely in keeping with the tradition of historical writing, Basheer gives us an explanation of the word 'appropriation.' 'Let me illustrate' he says and moves on to expound on the word 'appropriation' by drawing an analogy with a coconut grove:

You plant a few coconut saplings on a plot of uncultivated land. Fence it. Water the plants everyday. Years pass. The saplings grow into tall handsome trees, heavy with bunches of large coconuts. Anybody who sees the grove is tempted and tries to grab it by hook or by crook. This is appropriation.

In very simple words, using a simple example, Basheer successfully lays bare a historical truth. Grabbing by hook or by crook has been going on in history for a long time now. In fact the British conquest of India was itself 'appropriation' as have been other such conquests all over the world. What to talk of nations and conquests, appropriation happens in relatively small things in countless steps of our lives. One can locate numerous examples in the lives of ordinary people as well. If a child does well at school teachers would be vying with each other to take the credit. If a person excels in his field of work or interest once again you would find many people wanting to call him their protégé. Take the example of haldi or neem. Now that their beneficial effects are scientifically confirmed many countries want to patent their products even though their medicinal use has been a part of ancient wisdom in India. And so the story of appropriation goes on.

Basheer, the historian steers our response by commenting that 'the entire history of human society is a history of appropriations.' The tradition of historical writing comes under the scanner here once again. A historian has to be objective and needs to stick to facts. He must not express his opinion about what ever he is recording. More often than not however, we find historical narratives replete with an underlying commentary that is constantly guiding our responses and preventing us from seeing things objectively. Basheer chips away at the mammoth apparatus of historical writing presenting here a parodic debunking of historical explanations as he proceeds to explain 'appropriation'.

### **The Tale a Satire about Modern India**

There may be humor in what Basheer is trying to show but there is truth as well. Mookken with his extraordinary nose is a crowd puller and a prospective [has the confirmed potential for being a noise maker] as well. His nose is invariably the subject of conversations everywhere. It is therefore inevitable that people would strive to get a share of the attention. What follows is a brilliant expose of modern India bringing first the government and then the political parties under its critical gambit.

At first it is the government that wants a share of this popularity. Maintaining a mock serious tone Basheer describes how the government confers a title and a gold medal on Mookken at a special award ceremony. Surely an elected government is always in search of allies and what better way to ally an already famous citizen than to confer a title on him? The scathing irony lies in the fact that Mookken's worth is being measured only by a unique feature of his anatomy towards which he himself has never contributed nor does he have any control. The conferring of

the award speaks volumes for like ceremonies that are held every other day, some of which being totally meaningless and worthless. Now that the country has climbed out of the clutches of the colonizers and has established itself as an independent nation having an elected government it has the freedom to constitute and bestow awards. The problem arises when these awards are conferred on unmeritorious people. They cease to have a meaning then. We as citizens of modern India are aware that critical discernment is not always the criteria for judging the worth of a contender. At times other considerations come in which dominate and lead to a choice that is inappropriate and misplaced. This is not to say that it does not happen in other countries or by other governments. But two wrongs do not make a right so what is being satirized here is the hollowness of such ceremonies irrespective of where they are held. Such is the universality of Basheer.

### **A Brilliant Political Farce**

After the government it is the turn of the political parties who go into frenzy in trying to outmaneuver each other to persuade Mookken to join. How would the political parties gain? One wonders. It is not as though Mookken possesses political wisdom but he does possess a controversial long nose about which everybody is talking. So the parties want to use it for political propaganda. Very soon there is a political flurry with parties racing against each other only to make Mookken a member.

Being the brilliant political satirist that he is Basheer exposes the real purpose behind the political parties' attention to Mookken. They are not interested in his political views or ideals. His merit lies in him being a constant source of publicity. Whichever party he joins is sure to stay always in the news. He is a sure bet for a hype. Whether the publicity is good or bad is of no consideration. Whether the subjects of discussion are intelligent or sane it hardly matters. What matters is to stay in the news and Mookken's nose is a guarantee for that.

### **Basheer's personal Views**

Basheer having taken part in the independence movement and participated in the freedom struggle was a politically aware writer. He was fully conscious of the socio-cultural necessities for any party to prosper. The great Indian democracy as we know it today is lauded the world over. But increasingly with each passing phase we notice how the political game is being played on non issues by many parties. Basheer uses political catchwords and phrases to parody the Indian political scene. The communists were very active in Kerala and Basheer got branded as Comrade Basheer himself. 'Comrade Mookken', 'people's revolution' 'bourgeois reactionary' 'Inquilab Zindabad', 'People's revolutionary Party Zindabad,' are all used to debunk the dominant political discourse. Basheer was critical of the way things had shaped up after independence. Principles and ideals were often being compromised for the self vested interests of parties. It had become a wrangle for power. Basheer was a revolutionary in pre-independence and had fought with all his might for a free India. After independence he joined the Congress Party only because he thought his presence would include a Muslim representation in the party.

Whatever his personal views may be we have to admit that Basheer has given us here a true picture of what has come to be popularly known as 'the great Indian tamasha.' Popular actors and actresses are roped in by political parties simply because they are crowd pullers. Political parties fighting over potential newsmakers are a common occurrence. We have seen sudden revivals of certain parties happening only because of a controversy generated within. This controversy may relate to either a party member or about some sensational issue that the party rakes up which is able to stir the interest of the multitudes. Issues that are of national interest take

a backseat. In showing these parties fighting over Mookken's nose Basheer is using the technique of parody or burlesque to drive home the point.

### **The Conspiracy**

It is a societal truth that whatever is popular is bound to lead at first to controversies and then to conspiracies. Mookken's tale which till now has been a tale of success is about to turn into a tale of betrayal and tragic controversy. A storm is generated by one of Mookken's secretaries who forced by one of the warring parties gives a damaging statement. She declares that Mookken is 'the worst bourgeois reactionary of our times' is an 'appalling fraud' and his nose is made of rubber.

The news sends shock waves through the centres of power. From the heights of success and popularity Mookken falls down to the dungeons of rejection and despair. The great political tamasha begins. The opposition parties are quick to point out that the 'powers that be have connived to make a fool of the people. The President is bombarded with telegrams, phone calls and letters. The same crowd that till yesterday was jostling to get a glimpse of his nose now wants to tear him to pieces. 'Death to the Chief of the Rubber-nosed Worthies! Down with Mookken's reactionary clique! Inquilab Zindabad!' shout the Anti Mookken parties. The newspapers call him 'a clever conman!' He is seen now as 'a political opportunist preying on the gullible public!' We cannot miss the crux of the situation here. Whether true or false, Mookken's nose is a definite noise maker. Whether down and out he is still able to generate the publicity that the parties are seeking.

Being a keen observer of people Basheer is able to give us the correct picture as far as the psychology of the masses is concerned. The crowd is fickle. At one instance it can put a man on a platform and at the next it can pull the same man down without any compunction. Mookken's other secretary, the one who remained loyal to him, is appropriated by the Pro-Mookken party and made to give a counter statement in the press. Basheer is at his burlesquing best when he writes her speech. In a grand tone entirely suited to propaganda she begins:

Comrades and friends! My colleague has distinguished herself with convincing but totally fabricated lies. Her statement is merely a piece of malicious propaganda...She is taking revenge on Mookken for having spurned her advances. . . As the trusted and loyal secretary of Comrade Mookken, I know his nose is natural – as true as my heart. I salute the people who have rallied behind the leadership of Comrade Mookken in this hour of crisis. Comrade Mookken zindabad! People's Revolutionary Party zindabad! Inquilab zindabad!

Now the people are confused. The Anti Mookken party however uses the opportunity to hurl accusations at the government declaring that the fraud is part of a wider controversy and demand the resignation of the President, the Prime Minister and the entire cabinet.

Amplification is a very effective tool in the hands of a satirist and Basheer uses it aptly in the narrative to present things in a cartoonist fashion. When he writes that 'tanks rolled towards Mookken's mansion,' we are not supposed to take literally. It does however imply that Mookken is arrested and put in jail. We know that at the center of the entire controversy is a poor illiterate unassuming, simple man who has no ambition in life except to maybe eat, sleep and have a good pinch of snuff! Yet as things stand now he has merely become a pawn for the vested interests of the various political parties. Humor gives way to pathos at this stage in the narrative.

The entire exercise of authentication and validation is once again a parody of similar exercises being undertaken for complete non issues in political circles. The communiqué from the President that ‘medical experts from forty-eight countries will examine this nose in order to determine whether it is natural or artificial’ once again sends the people in a tizzy. Despite the President appealing to the people to remain calm, there were riots everywhere. People flock to the capital, raid restaurants, ransack newspaper offices, burn down movie theatres, loot liquor shops and destroy police stations and government installations. In a characteristic style Basheer describes the event. Hysteria is generated, expectations are inflated and the occasion is blown out of proportion. This is an occurrence we are all too familiar with in modern India.

A travesty of various exercises in authentication follows. The medical experts, who have come from forty eight countries, ultimately only pinch and prick the nose in order to see if it is real. A drop of blood confirms the authenticity of the nose and the verdict that it is natural is unanimous. Mookken is back to being popular again and a Mookashri is bestowed on him. [Basheer is barely cloaking the direct comparison he is making to the award of the Padamshri in India.] Ultimately Mookken is nominated to the Parliament and made an MP.

Basheer’s satire does not end here. He now uses Mookken as a spring board to criticize and expose the hollowness behind the great titles that institutes of learning are in the habit of bestowing on totally undeserving people. One prestigious university honours Mookken with a degree of Master of Literature while another goes a step ahead and confers on him a DLitt. The Anti Mookken parties are however undeterred by the verdict of the medical experts and continue to shout anti Mookken slogans.

Where has the voice of sanity gone amidst this entire din? Basheer has only a word of pity for the conscientious intellectuals in the end calling them ‘Poor intellectuals.’

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion we can say that ‘The World Renowned Nose’ is an entertaining story, a humorous satire that makes us laugh alright but at the same time it is a story that wraps a harsh truth about politics, about psychology of people, about society. It is not just a tale about a man with a long nose. Substitute that nose with any other controversial aspect and you have a universal situation. It is a tale about success, betrayal and tragic consequences. It is a tale about ordinary people caught up in extraordinary situations and what it does to them. The incredible or the fantastic becomes the tool for exposing human nature, the means to delve deep into the human psyche. It is a tale that holds up a mirror to each one of us for it is we who make up the society. It is a satire of our times.

## **SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING**

- Basheer, Vaikom Mohammad, *‘Me grandad ‘ad an elephant!’: Three stories of Muslim Life in South India*, trans. R.E. Asher etc, al., Edinburgh University of Edinburgh Press, 1980 and ‘New Delhi: Penguin India, 1992.
- Panja, Sharmishtha ed. *Many Indias Many Literatures : New Critical Essays*, New Delhi, Worldview Publications, 1999.
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