CHAPTER 3

Communities Lost and Found:

Re-Reading Basheer

If there is a law that all Muslims in India should leave for Pakistan, I have found myself three names. I will accept one of those. They are the following: Vaikkom Mammada Bhattacharyar, V.M.B. Namboothirippad, Va. Mu.Ba. Panikkar. (Vaikom Muhammad Basheer, Nerum Nunayum)¹

In his milestone work, Imagined Communities, Benedict Anderson (1983) draws a relation of causality between novels and the nation form. Anderson claims that novel at once institutes a life-world within the work which is marked by the mundane – of everyday people and institutions producing a simultaneity for the reader with the world of the novel, and with

¹"Nerum Nunayum" (Truth and Lie) was the name of a column by Basheer in Jayakeralam, published from Madras. The column was in question and answer format, to which readers would send questions and Basheer would give witty answers to each. This was in 1948 before Basheer would find relative economic stability, which would happen only a few years later. The column was compiled into a book and was published by DC Books in 1969. For the quotation, see Basheer (2009a: 27-28)
other readers who would also be reading at the same time. This temporal simultaneity is also accompanied by a spatial familiarization such that there is a community formed, a territorially bound community of action. What Anderson might have overlooked was the very necessity of the act of reading for the rest to ensue—the performative aspect of community formation. Nation is not a given, but is constantly produced, re-presented. The question of nation is far from settled, especially in the postcolonial context.

Homi Bhabha (2000) finds in the nation-form, borrowing from Fanon, “an occult instability.” This instability is caused by the antagonism at the heart of the nation form, which is that the people of the nation is at the same time the nation as well as the reference point in whose name the nation acts. That is, the nation-form presents us with an ambivalence of representation because the relation of the nation towards its people is at the same time that of pedagogy and performance. On the one hand the nation has to be imbibed in an accumulative fashion, and on the other it has to repeat itself in performances. The novel becomes a site of this twin endeavours of “writing the nation” (Bhabha, 2000: 297).

Timothy Brennan (2000) too has critiqued Anderson’s easy alliance of novel and nationalism. Drawing on Bakhtin’s theory of novel as the site of heteroglossia and dialogism (Bakhtin, 1981) where the latter argues the novel to possess different and opposing voices by virtue of the different characters in them; and building it up and rectifying it with Benjamin’s theory of the struggle between oral and print literature in the modern world (Benjamin, 1969), Brennan (2000) points out that the modern novel, especially those from the Third World, are characterised by a heteroglossia from not just within the nation, but also from the imperial metropolis. That being the case, the novel can in fact destabilise the nation rather than give it the discursive strength.
The necessary nature of the link between nation and literature in the third world was put forward by Fredric Jameson in his controversial essay “Third World Literature in an Age of Multinational Capitalism” (1986), where he argues that literatures from nations who had experienced colonial rule are allegories of the nation. His detractors (Ahmad, 1987; Schwarz, 1989) have insisted on the failure of metanarratives that would confine the heterogeneous conditions from Asia to Latin America in a single explanation. Participating in this debate, Madhava Prasad (1992) makes two pertinent points. First, the communal nature of Third World literature is the work of theory itself. Theory does not explain a world otherwise obtainable in reality, it creates frames through which the object of study is made intelligible. Thus the question of empirical evidence cannot be the starting point of the debate. Secondly, a theorist has to occupy a position “produced by the theory and elaborated at the same time as it is occupied” (Prasad, 1992: 77; emphasis in original). The theorist of the Third World literature cannot proceed according to readymade theories, but should point out the particularity that is the Third World, in other words produce it, even as it theorizes it. Prasad argues that the particularity of the Third World literature should be located in the counter-nationalist characteristic of the nationalisms, produced through a process of countering a foreign force and producing itself as a nation due to external pressure. Thus the national frame of reference should be attributed to the historical conditions in which the Third World nationalism is caught in a relation of comparison and competition both inside the nation and internationally.

This chapter and the next is an exploration of the minor readings of the nation through literature. As has already been stated, minor here refers to of being characterised by a position that is divergent of the mainstream relation to the same situation. To explore minor reading of the nation is to convey the sense in which the nation was performed in the
space of the novel, or simply a literary work, which did not easily tally with the positions obtained in the specific field of literature. Even as we investigate the minor reading, we will simultaneously be discovering a cosmopolitanism which allowed the author to imagine a newer world.

Vaikom Muhammad Basheer (1908-1994) is one of the greatest and most translated Malayalam writers of the twentieth century. His writings are known for its simplicity and wit and have been read as humorous yet realistic representation of Muslim life of the mid-twentieth century. Basheer is without doubt the most successful of the writers the Muslim community of Kerala has produced. As a writer who has received several major state and national awards, and whose writings have found a place in school textbooks, Basheer has been elevated into the domain of the canonical culture. Basheer has also been read as a figure of that strand in Muslim writing which is touted as nationalist and 'progressive'.

In this chapter, I shall explore some selected works from Basheer’s prolific oeuvre. It would be my endeavour to read in Basheer’s characteristically witty self-deprecation and communitarian satire, a sample of which can be seen in the epigraph, as a performance of a critique of nationalism from within the grounds of nationalism itself. In the first part of the chapter I briefly sketch out the importance of realism – the major programmatic force in literature when Basheer started his career – to delineate in the subsequent section Basheer’s subversion of that ethos, and the implications for a minor rewriting of nation one can draw from these.
The Subject of Realism

In his *Studies in European Realism* (1950) Georg Lukács identifies the task of realism as the adequate representation of the complete human personality at the cusp of the subjective and the objective. One could see in Lukács's study three connected but distinct moves. The first of this is to identify what is a realist literature. The second, which proceeds from this, is to identify what makes a realist writer, and the third is to present a methodology adequate to studying realist literature. Presently I am concerned only with his first two concerns.

"The central aesthetic problem of realism is the adequate presentation of the complete human personality" writes Lukács (1950: 7). This complete human personality is the "type" – where "all the humanly and socially essential determinants are present in their highest level of development" (1950: 6). Such literatures can "fructifyingly educate the people and transform public opinion" (1950: 17-18). The task of the realist literature is to throw light on types, and steer away from a photographic recording or a representation of non-recurring abstractions. In other words, realist literature needs a writer who can accurately portray not just the surface attributes and appearances of his society but also the subterranean forces at work that constitute the present as well as lay the foundation for future structures. Needless to say then, the realist writer is also a writer of acute insight. This insight in itself is not exhausted by a personal faculty, but is determined by the evolution of society, though not automatically. The question is therefore of aptitude. The great realist writer, of which Balzac and Tolstoy are examples for Lukács, is the one, who, regardless of his personal sympathies, is truthful to record reality even as it contradicts one's own position. However, precisely due to this contradiction between the writer's personal views and his honest
recordings, the reality beyond the sympathies come to be expressed through the characters. It is the being and the fate of the characters that reveal to us the tectonic shifts of the age. One should note here that the 'types' are not to be understood as stereotypes – this is as much of a non-recurrent abstraction as any. Rather, even while belonging to different classes and with different interests, characters can share certain world views due to the "unity of the social evolutionary process" (43), while on the other hand, different characters belonging to the same class do have differences between them too, because the characters are "never simply and never directly" "determined by the totality of the socially decisive forces" (1950: 53).

The greatness of a realist writer then is to allow the characters to be in their natural plane of evolution, not circumscribed by chance happenings, but only accelerated by them (as in the death in Romeo and Juliet, an example of a perceptive play provided by Lukács):

A great realist such as Balzac, if the intrinsic artistic development of situations and characters he has created comes into conflict with his most cherished prejudices or even his most sacred convictions, will, without an instant’s hesitation, set aside these his own prejudices and convictions and describe what he really sees, not what he would prefer to see. This ruthlessness towards their own subjective world-picture is the hall-mark of all great realists... The characters created by the great realists, once conceived in the vision of their creator, live an independent life of their own: their comings and goings, their development, their destiny is dictated by the inner dialectic of their social and individual existence. No writer is a true realist – or even a truly good writer, if he can direct the evolution of his own characters at will.

(Lukács, 1950: 11)
Decades later, in Europe which was no longer the same, but had wilted by the great war and withered by depression, the question was not about the efficacy of depicting the reality of contemporary existence as a programmatic exercise, but only of the efficacy of the specific method of realist novels. Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht, the western Marxists in the age of fascism, have been against the Lukácsian idea of realism, but not against realism per se. Their point has been to say that the realism of the nineteenth century, as seen in Balzac, is not adequate or appropriate to the twentieth century (Morris, 2003). It was in this context that the alienation effect of Brecht sought to raise awareness in the audience as to what their real condition of existence was.

In her study on Realism, Pam Morris (2003) mentions how realism continues to be important in the contemporary context, more than a century after its advent. Realism is also about imagining possible worlds, rather than just depicting the already existing ones. In this context she draws on Jürgen Habermas, who, in his The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity (1987) studies intersubjective communication as a process in which the participants align themselves in order to render more spaces of mutual intelligibility. The process of communication here is thus not a communication of statesquo but that of an active world-making. Realist fiction, in the process of reading, is also about unveiling such a world, a world of possibilities which the readers will incline themselves to. In other words, realist fiction is a performative exercise of cosmopolitanism. We have seen in the last chapter how the neo-Kantian cosmopolitanism stresses on moral constructivism and generative politics to shift meanings of existing terms such that people who are not yet covered by rights become their subjects. Realism promises this politics of reiteration in the field of literature!
Pam Morris is here not putting forward a novel view. The performative aspect of realism has been acknowledged right at its inception in India as a nation building exercise. Shifting away from the embellishment of the existing traditions of literature, realist fiction served several purposes at the same time. First of all it gave a new mode of expression to a very new urban experience (Mukherjee, 1985: 6). Secondly, it was a declaration of the coming of age of Indian nationalism. Writing realist novel was a means of establishing that Indians too can afford scientific observation of the empirical world. Thus at the first meeting of All India Progressive Writers' Association (AIPWA) held in 1936, Premchand, the doyen of Urdu-Hindi literature and the first president of the organization, exhorted, “In earlier times we might well have been impressed by fairy tales, ghost stories and accounts of star-crossed lovers, but those have little interest to us anymore...In order to produce an impression in literature it is necessary for it to be a mirror on life’s truths” (quoted in Anjaria, 2012: 1).

Realism was the manifestation of moment of arrival in the specific field of literary production.

However, realism was also, to reiterate a point we mentioned already, a world-building exercise. It was deployed not just to record the empirical conditions, but also to align the conditions in a particular way. The idea was not always that life was so and so, but that life can be so and so. O. Chandu Menon, in his introduction to Indulekha (1888), wrote:

Twenty years hence there may be found hundreds of Indulekhas in Malabar who would be able to choose their husbands for pure and sweet love. My narrative of the love and courtship of Madhavan is intended to show to the young ladies of Malabar how happy they can be if they can have the freedom to choose their partners. (quoted in Mukherjee, 1985: 8; emphasis mine)
The emphasis on realist literature as a record not of empirical reality but as fidelity to the times in the making has been a point central to Marxist debates towards the mid-twentieth century. Priyamvada Gopal (2005) attributes the rise of realism in the 1930s to the perception that the time has come in which radical endeavours would be possible.

Meenakshi Mukerjee (1985), in her study of Indian novels in the nineteenth century, observes that there were three dominant strands, often intertwined, in the Indian novels of the second half of the nineteenth century. "The first strand consists of the novels of purpose which utilized this new literary form for social reform and missionary enterprise. The second is an inclusive category where the apparently opposed tendencies of historical and supernatural fiction merge, the common denominator being the creation of an ethos remote in time. The third strand attempted to render contemporary Indian society realistically in fiction..." (Mukherjee, 1985:16). Mukherjee's central concern is to investigate the local idioms in the genre which was an inheritance of the nineteenth century English education. According to her, the English realist fiction would even appear fantastic considering the remove at which Indian life was, and it was especially in the arena of relationships between opposite sexes that the contradictions played out. This meant two tendencies, one, that English realist fiction did not necessarily give rise to realist fictions in form, and two, when it gave rise to it, it often had to be oriented towards the difficulties of the Indian contemporary life and was often pessimistic, Indulekha being a rare example of it being otherwise. Ulka Anjaria (2012), on the other hand, treads a Brechtian line when she says that realist fiction in India is to be read for its ability to express the contradictions in Indian life, and hence might upset several parameters of realism.
The programmatic nature of realism in the postcolonial situation found its arena of operation in undertaking a bid of pedagogy. In the postcolonial nation where the nation had to be created and performed for the masses who thus had to be initiated into it, the subject of realism is the reformer. The reformist-realist fiction was a mode of engagement with the minorities, which were hypervisible, as opposed to the invisible majority (Poduval, 2010).

In Malayalam literature, realism, in both its role as recording and realigning, was represented by K.P. Karuppan (1885-1938), Edasseri Govindan Nair (1906-74), Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai (1912-1999), Kesava Dev (1904-83), Ponkunnam Varkey (1910-2004), et al among Basheer’s contemporaries. Thakazhi’s 1947 novel *Thottiyude Makan* (*Scavenger’s Son*, English Translation by RE Asher, in 1975) was a record of life under the caste system as well as an exhortation to change. Another example of a realist writing, this time a poem and dealing with the gender question is Vayalar Ramavarma’s (1928-75) “Aayisha” written in the 1950s. Here the subject of reform is the Muslim community which marries its daughters off at their tender age, and who, after being sexually used by their husbands are necessarily sent away to the streets to lead a life of prostitution.

To end the section on realism with Ayisha seems apt. One, because Ayisha is also the name of one of the central characters in one of Basheer’s most important novel. Two, in his career, as I argue henceforth, Basheer was also reacting to realist conventions of representing the Muslim community, three, Basheer also had questions regarding the closed nature and the particular framing of the reform question. The question of the subject of realism will stay with us throughout this chapter.
The Minor Basheer

Born in 1908, at Vayalalil, near Vaikom, in south Kerala which was a part of the princely state of Travancore, Basheer, would grow up to be the towering literary personality of Kerala. Between his birth and this initial fame, which came in 1944 with the publication of his first novel Balyakalasakhi, there was a gestatory period of having touched Gandhi when the latter had come for Vaikom Satyagraha, of nine long years of wandering from Vaikom to Bombay, Sindh, Lahore and Karachi to the shores of Arabia (the latest as a ship employee), having been part of the Salt Satyagraha in Kerala, of having served several terms in various jails as part of the struggle for Indian independence, of starting a clandestine armed urban guerrilla (which had the record of drawing up lists of people to kill but not killing anyone – the high point of activity was when, unknown to Basheer, the members threw acid in the local post office at night and destroyed the letters) and a newspaper (Ujjivanam) as its propaganda wing, of poverty, hunger and short stories to ward off their ultimate perils.

Ormayude Arakal [Cells of memory] is a recollection mostly of those years of anonymity, each memory prodded on by one of those grouped around him. Basheer had by now authored works which established his status of a living legend. His house, now in Beypore near Calicut in Malabar, was a hub of students, artists, literati, fans, spiritual followers, journalists, and random itinerants.

Basheer’s career would tower in the following years. His books were to be translated into some 16 languages, including English and French. Beginning from M.P.Paul Prize for Ntupppakkoranandarnnu (1951), he would be awarded fellowships from Sahitya Akademi and Kerala Sahitya Akademi. The Indian Government honoured him with Padma Sri in
1982. His death on the 5th of July, 1994 could not halt his literary career. Three of his books were published posthumously. Add to that the anecdotes on Basheer as said by Basheer written later by those who knew him. He was soon called “the writer who writes after death” (Tharuvana, 2013: n.a.).

To read this figure, the hyperreal Basheer, within the gridwork of ‘minor’ would then seem to be debilitating not just to the vast literary output of his, indeed the man himself. Yet this is precisely what I intend to do in this chapter, for as I show, such a re-reading yields rich results to understand the internal fissures of nationalism and creative ways of asserting claim on the politic. In what follows is an example of how the empty signifier of a homeland acquired, if not a positive verity, at least an oppositional conjecture.

Let me also add right at the outset that Basheer’s ‘minority’ status is not presented here as a sociological fact. That would be contradictory to the spirit of this study. Rather, minor here denotes a position at once within the field of literary production and simultaneously within the field of discursive performance. In his study of the minority question in Europe and India, Aamir Mufti (2007) has observed that the formation of Israel was a moment of the majoritarian resolution to the minority question (90). The minority in Mufti, as well as here, refers to a paradigm which is outside – as in an exception of the field – the nationalist one, “the very disruption and disaggregation of the categories of identity (Mufti, 2007: 7). The nationalist paradigm operates within a system of simultaneous

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2 Hans Kohn, on the other hand, argues that modern nationalism has borrowed three elements from the Judeo-Christian tradition – “the idea of a chosen people, the emphasis on a common stock of memory of the past and of hopes for the future, and finally, national messianism” (Kohn, 1965: 11). Of these, the last factor indicates the idea of being an outsider which is then mobilized to form a nation of one’s own, for example, the Zionist movement for Israel. It is immediately clear that this idea of messianism is not what is meant in Mufti or in this
equivalence and difference. Postcolonial nationalism is maintained as the localised version of a global phenomenon, a global form with a local content (Chatterjee, 1986). At this higher plane each nation is assimilated to the same logic, a logic which deems Zionism as the resolution for the Jewish question, thereby assimilating the particularist Jew at another level. Nationalism thus operates within the broader paradigm of capitalist equivalence in which each commodity is different in terms of its value (national content), but also equivalent with reference to a universal form (the state form).

_Balyakalasakhi_ [Childhood Friend] was Basheer's first novel to be published after he had decided on writing to be his career, after the early youth spent in poetry, and then a stint of short stories. Basheer was by then known for his skills among a few in the literati, especially the respected critic M. P. Paul who remained a lifelong mentor for Basheer, and a few other friends. Basheer's first story to come out was "Ente Thankam" [My Thankam], published during his years in Eranakulam. It was in Eranakulam that Basheer suffered injuries to his leg thus putting an end to his job as a representative of a sports goods firm, a job that he came back with after nine years of his self-imposed exile. "Ente Thankam", Basheer's first story, was based on an unknown woman, a dark woman whom Basheer could see through his windows on her way to collecting water. This first attempt was itself a sign of Basheer's iconoclasm in a literary world which told the stories of 'worthier' lives (Ashraf, 1999: 45). After this story, Basheer had written a few more stories, and his years in Kollam prison - where he was put for his political participation in the struggles against Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Aiyer, the Divan of Travancore - were especially productive.
Balyakalasakhi was written much before, during Basheer’s life in exile, in Calcutta, but went through many rewritings, more than twenty at the least, before it was finally published, immediately after Basheer’s release from Kollam prison, in 1944. It was then that Basheer decided to be a writer for life. It was his first novel to be published. Balyakalasakhi is supposed to have been first written in English, and rewritten in Malayalam ten years later (Manalil, 1998). Although this short novel is today considered a masterpiece in modern Malayalam literature, and even hailed as the major work to appear in that language after O.Chandu Menon’s Indulekha, the initial reaction to the book was mixed in the literary circles. The book opened to criticism by some of the major literary critics of the time. Kuttikrishnan Marar identified in the novel, in his piece written in 1945 and published in Mathrubhunti, a degeneration of the narrative technique after the initial few chapters, and attributes to Balyakalasakhi the propensity to join the bandwagon of blaming the rich for everything that is wrong with the world (Neelarmadam, 1998). M. Krishnan Nair, who enjoyed a long career of literary criticism until his death in 2006, in his column published in 1958 in Kaumudi weekly, accused Basheer’s work to be inspired by Victoria, a novel published in 1898 by the Norwegian author Knut Hamsun. Basheer denied the charges and stated his not having read Hamsun (Asher, 1998). Later, in 1992, “notwithstanding [his] earlier comments,” Nair stated the novel to be a pre-eminent piece in Malayalam literature (Neelarmadam, 1998). In the years after Nair’s accusation, the novel was translated to English by R.E. Asher (and published by Edinburgh University in 1980), and in the meanwhile Victoria was translated to Malayalam and was published as a series in Chandrika.

3 Later included in the collection of essays called Kaiivilakku, published by Current Books in 1965. pp.65-68

4 All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.
weekly. R.E. Asher himself defended Basheer and *Balyakalasakhi* comparing *Victoria* with its alleged copy and stressing on the singularity of the latter (Asher, 1998, 1999).

*Balyakalasakhi* was the entry of not just a new writer to the world of Malayalam fiction, it was also the entry of a different dialect, different characters, and a whole new universe. Basheer recollects how, after he had submitted the manuscript to Viswanatha Press, and the first edition come out, he discovered to his fury that the Muslim dialect has been replaced by “pure Sanskritic language”. Basheer’s attributes this “correction” to the generally held condescension that Muslims do not know the proper language, and hence deserves correction. The retention of the dialect was the result of Basheer’s insistence and a show of violent aggression, as Basheer himself notes (Basheer, 1998). K.E.N. observes that the downside of the reformist zeal of Malayalam literature in the early twentieth century has been its flirtation with Sanskrit, at a high cost to the democratization of the literary space (K.E.N., 2000). In such an atmosphere, the book was deemed unworthy of publication in the first ever platform it was read out – “Sahiti Sakhyam”, a forum for literature in Kottayam. To those who found obscenity in circumcision (Majeed’s circumcision is an important episode in the novel), M.P. Paul replied:

“It is better that those who faint by the sight of blood abstain from reading this novel. Those who find dignity in the dialect and social situation of Namboodiris and other uppercastes might not find Basheer’s biriyani and

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5 This argument itself is however at the cost of alternate literary traditions in Kerala among communities other than Hindu and their specific relation to Kerala modernity. It has been generally observed how the hegemonic literary historiographies in Kerala exclude Muslim and Christian traditions (Kumar, 2010). Literary traditions of Muslims, either in Malayalam itself or in Arabi-Malayalam cannot be subsumed under this tendency to Sanskritisation. For an example of the relation between the Mappila song tradition and reformation, see Vallikkunnu (2008).
chicken very exciting. But they better remember this: literature is not the monopoly of upper caste haves. It can be possessed by anyone.” (Ashraf, 1999: 87)

M.P. Paul, who also wrote a foreword to the novel when it was first published, is himself torn between the particularity and universality of the work. Paul insists that the merit of the work is not of its being a Muslim story written by a Muslim, that is, an essentialist and experiential representation. At the same time, the very Muslim character of it is presented as a merit – as an attempt in which the Malayalam literary tradition, so long poor due to this exclusion of Muslims, have now found a way to “enter the heart” of that community. He terms the novel as a means “to establish hearty relations with a considerable population living in our midst” (Paul, 2009: 10-11). Basheer himself has stated his entry into the Malayalam literary tradition as a means of ending the long Muslim silence. Basheer was uncomfortable by the fact that in all the stories he read, the Muslim characters, if any, were always villains. Basheer wanted to show the world that Muslims too had virtues in them (Basheer, 1994: 1574). Sukumar Azhikode has characterised Basheer’s work as a simultaneous turn away from the exaggerations of an earlier period as well as a departure from realist and social traditions that held sway with Basheer’s contemporaries (Azhikode, 1998).6

Realism, as a mode of narrative fiction, was an attempt of derivative nationalism, in which the ability to record without embellishments was seen to be a moment of arrival of the

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6 Other critics on Basheer too have noted if not his anti-realist position, at least the impossibility of terming Basheer as a properly realist writer. P. Meerakutty identifies Basheer’s works as spreading across a diversity of literary styles – stream of consciousness, naturalism, psychological realism, fantasy, etc (Meerakutty, 1998: 16-7). Perumbadavam Sridharan too is of Azhikode’s opinion that Basheer kept away from the realist path that was adopted by his contemporaries (Sridharan, 2009: 23). Asher too shares the opinion (1999: 34, 69).
Indian nation in the world of representations. Realism was about establishing the objective eye hitherto available only to the Europeans. A turn away from this mainstream tradition along with Basheer’s assertion of a particular—communal-specific—position of enunciation makes this work a deterritorialized attempt in the majority language, attempting at a communal-subjective hold on the symbolic, the field of cultural production. What we have here, in Deleuzian terms, is minority literature, characterized by an “impossibility of not writing” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983: 16).\(^7\)

\(^7\) However, I am not sure if the other characteristic of minority literature in Deleuzian terms, that of being rare talent, can be applied to the Muslim literature in Kerala. C.N. Ahmed Moulavi and K.K. Abdul Kareem, in their encyclopaedic work on “the glorious Mappila literary tradition” claims that Muslims have published many novels in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, some of which he names—*Alauddin, Qamarssaman, Shamsussaman, Amir Hansa*, etc. They also named *Subaida, Sainaba, and Qidrnabiykkanda Nabeesa* as examples of Arabi-Malayalam novels (Arabi-Malayalam: Malayalam written in Arabic script, supposedly older than the Malayalam script) (Ahmed Maulavi, C.N. and K.K. Muhammad Abdul Kareem, 1978: 51).

However, going by their claim that the first Malayalam novel was by a Mappila, and was the translation of *Chaar Darvesh* from Persian which was translated to Malayalam some six years before Chandumenon’s *Indulekha* (1889), one has to assume that what the claim effectively means is the availability of prose literature among Mappilas rather than novels per se, *Chaar Darvesh* being a late thirteenth century Arabian Night-style narrative by Aamir Khusro. The fate of these works is unknown and unfortunately not discussed.

While *Indulekha* itself is not considered the first Malayalam novel (Appu Nedungadi’s *Kundalatha* [1887] is usually accorded that honour, though it continues to be a matter of debate, the other contenders to the post being Mrs. Collins’s *Ghataka Vadham*, Archdeacon Koshy’s *Pulikelikunchu*) literary historiography in Kerala is the site of identitarian contention which took on “aesthetic, moral, and linguistic preferences” (Kumar, 2010: 49)
Reading the 'Reform' Novels

Reformist fiction provided the natural inhabitation for the realist mode. This mode was characterised by a scopic drive, one which would not be very far from the elation expressed by many of having found a new room to look into, the interior of the Muslim house.

However, how far was Basheer a party to this act of voyeurism?

Basheer has authored three novels which are popularly known as his Muslim novels. These are Balyakalasakhi [Childhood Friend], Nuppappakoranandarunn [My Granddad had an Elephant], and Pathummayude Aadu [Pathumma's Goat]. These three novels were translated by R.E. Asher and published by Edinburgh University in 1980. This collection, called Me Grandad 'ad an Elephant were taken up by UNESCO as representatives of Muslim lives. This section is dedicated to a reading of these novels to delineate what I call, following Derrida, the difficulty (in Derrida, an aporia) of mourning. Rather than mourning the individual, my effort is here to read in these novels, a difficulty of mourning principles of community formation that preceded the nation form itself.

\[8\] The exact translation of the title Nuppappakoranandarunn has been a matter of some contention. Some translators have translated the title as "Your Grandad had an elephant". Part of the confusion seems to stem from the marginal and ambiguous status of "inte". First of all, this possessive pronoun is not standard Malayalam, and is primarily associated with Muslim dialect, though it is shared by other communities too. Secondly, inte alternates between 'mine' and 'yours' in various geographical locations, "mine" in south Malabar and "yours" in north Malabar, for example. I have here translated the title as "My Granddad had an Elephant" following the popularity of R.E. Asher's translation of the novel which is titled, so as to emphasise its marginal status, Me Granddad 'ad an Elephant, though it is my opinion that the correct translation would indeed be "Your Grandad had an Elephant" and would then be what the protagonist's mother tells her, as substantiated by some information in the story, the least of which is that the granddad of the protagonist is called Ana Makkar, the "Elephant Makkar" and that the protagonist often refers to herself as the dearest daughter of Elephant Makkar. For a discussion on translation debates around the novel, see Asher (1999: 121-30)
Let us start with *Balyakalasakhi*. First the story: Majeed and Suhra, two neighbourhood kids, aged eleven and nine respectively, start loving each other. Majeed is the son of the richest person in the village, while Suhra’s family tries hard to make the ends meet. They go to school together, sit as close to each other as possible. Suhra is good at studies, Majeed isn’t. Years pass by. Suhra’s father dies. Majeed is unsuccessful in convincing his rich father to educate Suhra too, she being a neighbour. Majeed himself is thrown out of the house in some time. Years pass by. Majeed, who had remained incommunicado so far, returns home. Situation at home has changed beyond recognition. His father has lost all his wealth and is now in debt. Even the house is mortgaged. Suhra is married. And Majeed himself has not earned anything so far, except for the years of experience wandering with different people, doing several tasks to keep himself alive. Majeed is depressed by the turn of events. But Suhra comes to meet him. Soon they are back to the memories of their old days. But poverty forces Majeed to go to a city one thousand five hundred miles away from home, on his mother’s insistence that she had heard that the city has wealthy Muslims who will look after their own. Majeed however doesn’t feel like begging. He finds a job for himself in the city with a decent salary, and he could send hundred rupees home a month. But soon tragedy strikes as Majeed loses a leg in an accident. This leads to his losing the job too. Even while Majeed keeps his family uninformed of this tragedy, he soon learns from his mother’s letter that the house has been confiscated; and that Suhra is dead. The novels ends with Majeed asking himself what might have Suhra been trying to tell him, which she was, when he was about to leave home for the city.

A major part of *Balyakalasakhi* is autobiographical – the exile from home, the wandering with *sufis* and saints, the many jobs as clerk and as restaurant worker, as a
comrade and as a believer in many religions; the affluence of the family before exile, the poverty on return, all these are leaves taken from Basheer's own life. However, my attempt here would be to read *Childhood Companion* as a symptom of the Muslim imagination of the nation that it found itself in.

It has been pointed out by Karasseri (1998) and Azhikode (1998) that *Balyakalasakhi* signals Basheer's caution of religion being an effective rallying point. Though autobiographical notes suggest that the novel was written after a vision the author had when he was in Calcutta where the dead Suhra, who was his childhood friend, appeared to him informing him of her own death (Ashraf, 1999), Karsseri's observation carries weight in the

9 It is interesting to note in this context that in real life the accident which cost Basheer his job and also the functionality of one of his limbs for a while occur not in Calcutta or in any other cities where he had wandered in his long nine years of exile, but Eranakulam, where he had returned to after his wanderings. This then prompts us to enquire into the imagination of city space itself in Basheer. One could see both in *Balyakalasakhi* and in *Subdangal*, two stories in which city is almost a character, that city is presented as a space of difficulties, of uncomfortable truths of modernity—the space of unbridled desperation. "There are only five millionaires in this city. Otherwise, it is six and a half lac people of varying fortunes. All of them live. In between some of them die too. What Majeed has lost is just half a limb. There are those who have lost both their legs. The ones who have lost both their hands, both their eyes...even they live. In life there is happiness and sadness; in life there are the greater ones and the lesser ones too. One could actually laugh thinking of such things, one can cry too. Shouldn't care too much—Majeed decided. He should strive for comfort and security. After all, that is his responsibility." There are no baubles of modernity here, there is no cityscape of emancipation. All that we have is a debilitating thought of the vast pettiness of a city, the struggle of the city. There is only the final handicap, the final death of the loved one. This city is tragic. The available explanation for this representation of the space of city as one of destitution and desolation is to see in them the Gandhian celebration of the rural. Dilip Menon (2006) in his study of subaltern novels from Kerala has argued that they traverse a different space other than the national—their journeys are on the mythical and the colonial landscape. I argue that rather than a consensus of the realist tradition, the Muslim novels always had to contend with the national form thrust upon them. Their journeys were from the mythical to the national, the city being the space where it was constituted through a crystallisation of identities. City space here is not the other of rural where real India is seen, but the space of identity itself. According to E.V.Ramakrishnan, the city experience in *Balyakalasakhi* is Basheer's demonstration of the unviability of the idea of community in the context of modern society (2010:138). One wonders if community could not rather be the very wound that city drives deep in to you.
light of developments then happening in Malabar, where Basheer had been active as a Congress volunteer. Dilip Menon (1994) has dubbed this period as the time of “becoming a Hindu and a Muslim”. Many changes propelled this identity formation – the erosion of the rural shrine based worship in which each community had a part to play, the increase in the urban floating population, the formation of exclusive identities around urban shrines, the rise of a Tiyya elite, the assertion of a Hindu identity by a section of younger Tiyyas, and the conflicting trade interests between Mappilas and Tiyyas. Not to forget was the fact that unlike the metropole, individual as the basic political entity did not exist in British India. Community was considered to be the minimum unit in terms of governance. Communal riots soon broke out between Muslims and Tiyyas or Hindus–Tellicherry in 1915 centered around a Tiyya festival; 1921 in Malabar when the anti-British riots soon were construed by some sections as Muslim atrocity on Hindus and had repercussions all over India with even Gandhi calling the Mappilas “mad”; 1936 in Cannanore again on a Tiyya festival... State soon became the arbiter in religious festivals, and each festival became a matter of law and order. It is also the time that Madras Presidency witnesses the emergence of Muslim organizations. All Travancore Youth Muslim Association was founded in Travancore in 1924. Muslim Majlis was established in Malabar in 1930. The Muslim League won all the Muslim majority provinces in the election to the Madras Presidency.

_Ntuppuppakkoranandarnnu_ was to follow, in 1951. Controversies did not spare Basheer at the publication of _Ntuppuppakkoranandarnnu_ either. Basheer writes with characteristic humour on the reception it received. First it received a 500 rupees award from the Congress Government of the Madras Presidency, then the Communists dubbed it anti-Communist. Then, when Kerala state was formed and Communists came to power, the Minister for Education, Joseph Mundasseri, who was also Basheer’s friend, prescribed it as a
non-detailed book for schools. By then the novel was already acclaimed and was translated into some fourteen languages. The sales were not bad either. So, when faced with the reality that a non-detailed prescription would require lowering of prices and royalty, Basheer opposed the idea; but finally gave in to his friend. Then the Congress, the Muslim League, the Catholics, the Praja Socialist Party (all of these parties were in the Opposition) – all of them opposed the book citing various reasons.

I learn from the newspapers that the Opposition has made me a member of the Communist party. Style! I learn that the Opposition says I will get a sum of four lac rupees through this book. Well, why do I need all that money? After discussing with the publishers let them be given what was spent by them. Do leave a fifty thousand for me. The opposition may take the remaining three and something lacs. I request the Communist government of Kerala to kindly distribute that money in this fashion. Let the Opposition prosper! Stinking politics!! (Basheer, 2009b: 11)

Both Ntuppuppa and Balyakalasakhi have often been termed as reformist novels.
M.N.Karasseri (1998) reads the latter as an instance of internal reform in the Muslim community (also Srisharan, 2009; Meerakutty, 1998). He compares Majeed’s mother to Ayisha’s mother and states that the former, through her resilience and belief in fate, is a figure who lives in the present as opposed to the latter in whose nostalgia and vanity one can read a figure stuck in the past (96). Similarly, Ntuppuppa... has been projected by Basheer himself as a mission “to project the glory of the bygone days of Islam and at the same time to point out the failure of present-day Muslims to adjust to the modern life because of this mythical past. Every beggar and every butcher even now claims that he is a direct descendant
of Akbar the Great. The elephant is the symbol of that obvious past” (Basheer, 1980: x). R.E. Asher, Basheer's translator, also sees the reformist zeal, though he observes it to be tangential to the story (Asher, 1999: 47). E.V. Ramakrishnan has called, with regard to this novel, “a native informer for the national elite” (2010: 147) whose subsequent realization of the impossibility of representing community through the novel form with its collusion to nation led him to write Pathummayude Aadu where his introduction to his own madness allows him to cross the super-generic boundaries (150).

The novel is crafted as a bildungsroman, featuring Kunjupathumma. She is the only daughter of Vattan Adima and Kunjutachumma, a well off family. The family wields enormous economic resources and is well placed in the community with their hold on activities connected to the mosque. In relation to religion, Vattan Adima even acts as the arbiter of truth. Kunjupattununa grows older with the myth of an elephant, a tusker that her mother's father owned. She is told by her mother that the black mole on her cheek is the proof of her belonging to the great lineage of someone owning the elephant, and hence she is different from all other Kunjupattummas in the world.

This world of economic and social security is lost as Vattan Adima loses a court case against his sisters and is forced to vacate. All they were left with was a hut in a far off place, away from the known people. As the family stability worsens and fights between the spouses become common affair for the people to joke about, Kunjupattumma is exploring her surroundings. She soon meets Nisar Ahmed, the city-bred poet, though he remains anonymous to her. Soon Kunjupattumma befriends his sister Ayisha, without knowing it to be his sister.
The new family from the city has enormous impact on the family and especially on Kunjupattumma, first as a shock, and then as objects of desire. Ayisha wears bodice under her clothes, flowers in her head, knows how to read and write Malayalam, all of which was earlier forbidden to Kunjupattumma, for they were supposed to be the markers of *kaaffirs*, the infidels, and a Muslim was always supposed to show his/her distinction from a *kaaffir*. All the more shocking, this family, consisting of Zainul Abid, a college professor, the father, his wife, Ayisha the daughter, and Nisar Ahmed her elder brother, all of whose names themselves were so alien to Kunjupattumma, claimed that they were the true Muslims. The family then sets about reforming Kunjupattumma's household, which starts with building a toilet for the house and ends with Nisar Ahmed marrying Kunjupattumma.

It was not the Kunjupattumma who went in that came back. She had on a slip and a bodice. She wore a blouse and a green sari. Her hair was beautifully done and had flowers in it. Her head was covered with one end of the sari. In addition to all that she was wearing a pair of slippers. She was made to walk a hundred times back and forth in the room, so that she would know how to walk properly, before she went back. (Basheer, 1980: 117-8; Asher's translation)

**Basheer and the Impossibility of Mourning**

Priyamvada Gopal (2005) has shown with reference to the early members of the Progressive Writers' Association, most of who were Muslim, that the reform turned inwards, towards their own community, as a means of breaking the binary of colonial oppressor/native
oppressed and instead to focus on the myriad agencies of oppression in the colony. Basheer can be said to belong to this trend. However, my effort in this section would be to show that rather than being an easy narrative on the need to reform in the Muslim community or as a warning against communalism, Basheer’s narration is also marked by an undercurrent of the difficulties of passing from one symbolic order to the other. Satish Poduval (2002) has argued, borrowing David Lloyd’s (1994) terminologies, that the *Ntuppuppa*, rather than being an anthropological account of Muslim life in India, is also an instance of “minority discourse” (Poduval, 2002: 269).10 My effort, as mentioned earlier, is to read in Basheer not just a minority discourse, but also a minority cosmopolitanism, a new imagining of possible formations grounded in the blindspot of the nationalist paradigm.

It is my opinion here that the question then still comes down to a question of realism, and if Basheer was in fidelity to this genre closely allied with a reformist agenda. How did Basheer undermine formally the realist structure, and what could it be saying of the project of modernity in Kerala for the Muslim community?

Both *Balyakalasakhi* and *Ntuppuppa* are of isomorphic structural features. Both of them proceed in cycles of two and then followed by an incomplete third cycle which connects to the very beginning of the respective novel. First there is the short separation between Majeed and Suhra, as Majeed gets circumcised and Suhra’s ear piercing ceremony is also underway. That episode ends with them kissing each other and the narrator for the first

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10 David Lloyd’s makes a distinction between “ethnic culture” and “minority discourse” – ethnic culture is turned centripetally towards “its internal differences, complexities and debates, as well as to its own traditions or histories, projects and imaginings” whereas minority culture is articulated along “the lines of its confrontation with a dominant state formation which threatens to destroy it by direct violence or assimilation...[It] at once registers the loss, actual and potential, and offers the means to a critique of the dominant culture precisely in terms of its own internal logic...[It] forms in the problematic space of assimilation and the residues it throws up” (Lloyd, 1994, quoted in Poduval, 2002: 269).
time proclaiming that they were in love. Next we have Majeed joining school while Suhra couldn’t do the same, and then the exile from home, forcing an even greater period of separation, which ends with Majeed coming back, and his mother, in principle, agreeing that it would be a good thing if Majeed marries Suhra, though she is quite apprehensive of the public castigation that will follow. This is followed by separation again, as Majeed, unwilling to let those back home know of the tragic turn around in his career — a lost leg and job — comes to know of Suhra’s death through a letter from his mother. Majeed relapses into his last memories of Suhra. What was it that Suhra wanted to tell him at the moment of his departure from home?

The novel thus ends with a question. There is no resolution to the novel. The question echoes, haunts. It requests us to go back, it requires it. Go back to memories. Repeat the story, find out what it could have been. The narration acquires its reticent hysteria here, incessant interrogation of one’s own place in what has happened. The unbridgeable gap of desire propels the author to go back in circles, in cycles of impossible fillings to this last one question confronted by the narrator. The author gives way to the narrator and the authorial resolution is kept in suspension. It is then a logical extension from this moment of hysteria to the very first sentence of the novel: “Though Suhra and Majeed had been friends since childhood, what was peculiar about their friendship was that they were sworn enemies before they were friends” (Basheer, 2009b: 13). One needs infinite remembrance here, an infinite and cyclical remembrance. Time takes on epic dimensions in Basheer’s novel.

In Nuppuppa, again, the novel proceeds in a cyclical manner. The novel has three parts; the first, from the introduction to Kunjupattumma and their secure and bounded existence to their exile from the familiar world; the second, from the starting of life in the
new neighbourhood and life conditions to the marriage between Kunjupattumma and Nisar Ahmed; and the third, the incident of the children making fun of the memory of elephant ending with the paragraph:

Kunjupattumma asked again. She looked at Kunjupattumma, standing gorgeous. She thought of the able Nisar Ahmed. They have just stepped into the bright future by the grace of God. The Lord, Master of the Universes, Rabbul Aalameen, will set everything right. History is definitely history...In the end umma, tearful and stammering, said, ‘They s-s-say your uppuppa’s...huge elephant...was an elephant ant!...an elephant ant!’ (Asher’s translation with my modification; Basheer, 1980: 119)

A quick reading of the first part gives an impression that it is not just an introduction to Kunjupattumma’s life, but also to the shared beliefs of Muslim life. There are detailed descriptions about the creation of the world, the original disobedience of Satan, and the end of the world. These descriptions, I argue, is more important than just an indulgence in exoticisation, or a programme to educate the readers of the closed world of Muslims. Rather, this is the very structure in which the novel is framed, a frame rendered invisible by the frame of modernisation and nation building.

Let us take the first section and look for correspondences: the elephant precedes the arrival of Kunjupattumma on earth and is symbolised by the mole on her cheek, the elephant being the reason for her distinction; the Prophet is prefigured by the creation of his light
which precedes his corporeal existence\textsuperscript{11}, this very pre-existence certifying his eminence.

The disobedience is narrated through the incident of a boy who crops his hair against religious sanctions and is punished; and the final destruction of the world, symbolised by the exit of the family from the world of their familiarities, their turn to deprivation and insignificance, and more importantly, the exit of Kunjupattumma from the closed spaces to the open fields. But here is the interesting twist, in the paragraph following their exit from the house:

\begin{quote}
Nothing has happened to the world. But...their past, present and future are all shattered. Yet...the river and the sands lie glittering in the moonlight...people are bathing in the water....On the sand some are sitting together and enjoying the fun of gossip....nothing has happened to the world. But Vattan Adima's and his wife's and his daughter's life seemed shattered.

Nothing has happened to the world. (Basheer, 1980: 31)
\end{quote}

Let us then take a detour to the explanation on the end of the world given by Basheer in the novel.

\begin{quote}
One day this world will be destroyed. There are some signs by which one can know about it in advance. Kunjupattumma will go into this in detail...Those of low estate will rise. Those of high estate will go down. Evil will prevail. Faith in God will fade. Religions will disappear. Parents will not be obeyed. Teachers will not be respected. Old people will be mocked. Women will lose
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{11} The translators overlook the fact that "olivu" is just the light and not the body itself. See Basheer (1980: 61). The reference here is to a popular belief, first propounded by the sufi mystic ibn A'ra\textsuperscript{i} (1165-1240) that Muhammad was the first creation, and what was created then was the light of Prophet.
modesty and shame. Nobody will have respect for anyone. Love will disappear. Jealousy will increase. There will be terrible wars... Even then the world will not be destroyed. Only Allah can destroy it. Very many years before qiyamat, men will fall into the confused state of forgetfulness... Then one day, as soon as the sun is up, while men are in the midst of getting ready for their daily work, the people of the world will hear a long protracted sound.
(Basheer, 1980: 65)

And a few paragraphs later:

Everything will perish. Not a trace of the heavens or the earth will remain... Like this millions of ages will pass during which God alone will be... Again he will create the world. There will be sun, moon and stars. He will raise all souls to life again. Then punishment, salvation... Kunjupattumma will recite all this in detail. She knows all of it by heart. (Basheer, 1980: 66)

Indeed, the apocalypse is followed by the resurrection. This is what allows the story to continue in its cycle of creation, disobedience and apocalypse. Now let us take the second portion. The arrival in the new world corresponds to creation; the disobedience is narrated through a whole lot of incidents—the fight between the spouses, the refusal of Kunjupattumma's mother to pray, indeed her fading belief in God, the low estate of the once influential family, the desirability of those activities which they earlier considered below them...; and the apocalypse is the marriage itself, the destruction of all known ways of life, the conquest by the regime of slips and bodice and flowers.

But what exactly is the potential of a recreation? Where is the absolute negativity that will allow this dialectic to freeze and then take a rebirth? Wherein lies the possibility of a paused
time and the potential of redemption? Where exactly is the suspension of movement in a
homogenous empty time of the conquerors and the replacement of it by the incessant
repetition of a beginning *ex nihilo* in which the past itself is restricted towards a redemptive
future? Here we come back to the first paragraph of the novel:

It all seems to have happened countless thousands years ago. For, isn’t
childhood a long way off? Since then many things have happened.

Kunjupattumma can recollect it all only as some kind of a joke. Raw, green
life. These are of course eternal, irresolvable mysteries. Nothing is really in
one’s grasp, is it? What does one do? One feels like heaving sobs; and also to
laugh one’s heart out. Isn’t laughter better than weeping? So recollect and
smile. (Basheer, 1980: 53; translation modified by Poduval, 2010: 366)

It is my argument that these novels are far from being simple projects at reformation.
Rather, their cyclical nature points to the trauma of a loss and simultaneous irony of the
difficulty to mourn. History is definitely history! It is the invention of "certain" (in both its
meanings, selective and claiming as true) histories that nation states projects itself into the
past, gains its essence. While history seeks for itself the knowledge of what is known, the
claim of memory is its communitarian nature, its shared valency. History is that which
validates the question “What is the proof?” The advent of history is the advent of
rationality/modernity. But even rationality hides beyond its facade certain unquestioned
beliefs, the kernel which drives it forward. The story of the Prophet’s light, of the gilled fish,
stays questioned, in the very modern spirit. But there is another myth that lies unquestioned
in the story—the myth of the elephant. What exactly is the veracity of this elephant other than
narratives. But this unquestioned myth is crucial exactly because it is the very identity of
Kunjupattumma. It is the mole, with its link to the ancestral glory that separates her from all other Kunjupattummas in the world. It is indeed the hidden myth behind the very history. The moment of arriving at the alienated space is also the moment of arrival of new possibilities of memory. "History is definitely History" will then speak volumes of the perpetuation of identity even when the subject makes a desperate attempt to move from the primary identification of the community to the secondary identification of the nation. Instead of reading the final words of Kunjupattumma’s mother as the farcical second death of the elephant, it would then force us to read it as exactly that point of frozen time where all past significations resurface in an attempt of redemption. This empty space of signification where the verifiable elephant of the myth is cast in a temporary limbo between the old and the new generation is also the moment which allows the narration of the story in its cycles. It is this moment which engenders the possibility of alternate identifications. The characteristic trait of minority cosmopolitanism, as we have discussed it, is in evidence here, in the

12 Kalpena Narayanan reads in the tearful and stammering Kunjutachumma the tears of joy rather than anguish. According to him there are very few instances in Malayalam in which the joy of transition is recorded as it is in Nuppuppa (30). He reasons this joy to be due to the assurance which comes with modernity that "history is definitely history" (Narayanan, 2013). One wonders then if modernity is also about preserving grandeur in museums and mocking them in folklore. Such a contradiction, not always unwelcome, owes more to the resistance of the folk, of which Kunjutachumma is preeminent figure, than of the devises of modernity. But here it is the folk memory which is the subject of ridicule, and it is "the new generation" (the title of the last chapter is "The New Generation is Talking"), the time which has come and is to persist, who is the ridiculer.

13 Meenakshi Mukherjee (1985) notes that since it was in the sphere of love and courtship that Indian reality stood in stark contrast to the reality of the English novels available then, the Indian realist tradition have often deployed women protagonists mainly to signal the unfinished project of individual autonomy in India. While the fate of the women protagonist hardly sway to her desires, O.Chandumenon’s Indulekha from Malayalam is a rare realist novel which "combines individual fulfilment, social sanction and material benefit" (71). Seen in this light, Kunjutachumma’s final bereavement even as individual fulfilment and material benefit is finally accrued from the marriage at the end could again be seen as the remainder of this unfinished, indeed impossible, project.
interpellation of the modern subject and the very novel, through its insistence on a reiteration of memories, as its blindspot, the place which resists being interpellated.

K.M. Sherrif’s study focussing on the translation of *Ntuppuppa* by Asher is alert to the rich cultural context in which the various signifiers, seemingly innocuous in the translation, operate to marshal historical memory as well the fractures within Kerala’s modernity. According to Sherrif, Kunhupaathamuma’s is the dialogic voice in the novel in what is otherwise a sterile register of standard Malayalam (Sherrif, 2005: 34).\(^\text{14}\) The concern, other than the accuracy of translation, which occupies Sherrif is whether Basheer can be called, borrowing the lexicon of James Clifford, an “indigenous ethnographer”, one who undermines the duality between the colonial ethnographer and the native informer. Sherrif answers in the negative, because Basheer seems to have imbibed many of the prejudices of the mainstream culture about his own marginal culture. However, what comes through in Sherrif’s study is a question of how much of an empirical observer was Basheer – questions like ‘did the educated take dowry?’, ‘did or did not Kunhupaathamuma get educated in a Madrasa where she would have heard some of the reformist talk on hygiene already?’ A possible answer to the question of veracity of Basheer’s observations or the prejudices involved in his language is provided by Poduval (2010) who prefers to see in Basheer’s language a mimicry of the mainstream culture and a display of the disjunct between one’s life-world and the dialect of literature, an alley the minor literature is forced to. Poduval finds in the stutter and silence the inability to account for the loss that is no longer knowable.

My effort in pointing out the isomorphic cyclical structure of the two novels has been to point out a decisive way in which the impossibility of mourning has been presented in

\(^{14}\) Though it privileges Nisar’s and Ayisha’s point of view, according to Ramakrishnan (2010: 146)
Basheer. Derrida has pointed out the aporia of mourning. It is the failed mourning, a mourning which refuses to bury the dead, that is also the successful mourning. It is here that the alterity of the other is maintained (Derrida, 1989). In Basheer we come across this failure to mourn – a sense of being only partially affected, a reluctance to narrow the world to one's own tragedy. Freud, in his “Mourning and Melancholia” (1971 [1921]) says that the inability to let go off the lost object in mourning, the condition of which is called melancholia, leads to the incorporation of the lost object within oneself, such that an other starts to reside in the self. Derrida too is pointing out the failure of mourning as an ethical attitude in which the Otherness of the Other is preserved. In the circular characteristic of the Basheer novel, with its shift of the position of enunciation, from the narrator to the character and then circularly to the narrator again progresses such that the narrator as he makes a come-back already lodges within him the melancholy of the lost object, lost not to the narrator but to the character. In other words, the circularity in Basheer's fiction is an indication of the survival of a lost element itself, such that the subject of reform lodges deep within it an element of grief for what was lost but also continues to live. It is this incorporation of a foreign element which translates the particular voice of the character to the universalist authorial voice. The grief of the character turns itself into the memory of the author who prefers to smile rather than grieve over all those memories which has now become his thanks to the Other within himself. Beyond the level of the individual narrative, this is also a feature of Basheerian world, the return of the irreducible. On hearing the news of Suhra's death:

Majeed sat stunned for a while.

As if everything has gone silent.

The university is (was?) empty.
No! ... Nothing has happened to the universe. The city is milling. Sun is bright. There is wind. Just that Majeed was wet with the cold steam rising up through the follicles of his skin. Everything was orphaned. Has life lost its meaning? Gracious Lord of the universe! (Basheer, 2009b: 86-7)

E.V. Ramakrishnan (2010) reads the void at the end of Balyakalasakhi, the inability to know what Suhra had wanted to say, as the silence of minority within the formal framework of novels (140). One could also read in the circularity of the form an attempt to bypass this formal rigidity such that the silent minority, if minority be a position of markedness, can then be easily transported to the beginning of the novel where Majeed’s and Suhra’s friendship is marked by the particularity of their being sworn enemies first.¹⁵

The inability to mourn can be seen in Ntuppuppa too. On having to leave their house which has so far been the centre of their resplendent universe and prominent social status, Kunjupathumman along with her parents leaves the village in the dark of night. A similar sentence can be seen in Pathummayude Aadu too. This novel was also the last of Basheer’s novels. It came out in 1959. The novel is also noted for its self-declared autobiographical nature, as Basheer notes in his introduction. Though the novel did not release into much critical acclaim, with those like Asher (1999) even unsure if it would count as Basheer’s better works¹⁶, the novel is known for other reasons. For one, it is supposed to be the only work which has not been subjected to subsequent modifications by the author. Secondly, and

¹⁵ The novel begins by stating how the friendship of Majeed and Suhra is different from other friendships because before they were friends, they were sworn enemies.

¹⁶ Asher notes that this is the only novel that Basheer introduces as a comedy. However this is hardly a reason for the seriousness of the work to be discounted.
what is quite celebrated about it, is the fact that it was written in a mental hospital when Basheer was undergoing treatment. Basheer’s introduction makes an inventory of his daily routine and we are not spared of the details of medication either. Narrating the harrowing experience of madness knocking at his door, Basheer writes:

By then the sun had burnt itself out. There was no sound – neither of men, or of cars, or of birds. The world is (was?) silent. Earth alone stood. By then they had inserted the funnel (with medicines) to the left nostril too. The medicine was poured in. Phooo!! the well known blow. Blunkosdum!! And so has the world perished. Everything has ended. Only the primeval eternal darkness! (Basheer, 2009c: 16)

It is perhaps in order to stress this other layer of dis-identification that Basheer has made many changes to the initial text of Ntuppuppa. Basheer’s perseverance with re-reading his own works, not to mention studies and speeches on him by others, is legendary. It is often opined that Balyakalasakhi was subject to more than 20 times of rewriting. It is also interesting that Basheer did not limit himself to changes in the pre-publication stages, but indulged in them even when the novels were going into successive editions. Asher has listed out the many changes that Basheer has made to the text of Ntuppuppa after the former’s English translation of the three Muslim novels came out in 1980. It is interesting to note that Basheer has made the text more introspective of the Islamic traditions themselves. Below I provide a few examples of such changes. The translation is by Asher. The sentences in italics were added in 1982 or later, and are translated by me. The text is taken from Basheer (2008a):

This was before the creation of the world. the story that has been handed down goes like this: before all other living beings Allah created the light of Muhammad Nabi. Where is the source of this knowledge? It is not in Qur’an. No one had asked the mullahs. They believe what they hear. (Basheer, 1980: 61)

During his last days, in accordance with the commandment of God Almighty, Ali threw his sword into the ocean. It cut the necks of all the fish. That is why a cut is seen on either side of the gullet of all fish. It is from that day that fish has become ‘halal’ to the Muslims and so can be lawfully eaten. So weren’t there fish with gills before Caliph Ali? It is said that God asked him to throw the sword. But does God speak? May be it is a myth. What is true and what is a lie? Kunjupattumma doesn’t know. (Basheer, 1980: 18)
Basheer presents us with an ambiguity of identifications, as if the narrator is unable to decide, or is caught in eternal bind between the individual and the universe itself. The refusal to die makes its presence in the repetitions of many life cycles. M.P. Paul (2009) suggests the tendency towards life in Basheer’s *Balyakalasakhi*. He observes in Basheer the dislodging of death as the ultimate tragedy — “there is more in life of pain and suffering than death” (2009: 7). This dislodging reminds one of the Brechtian hero as delineated by Walter Benjamin.

After discerning the non-tragic character of epic theatre, Benjamin likens the heroes of the Brechtian theatre to the water which shapes the rock over centuries rather than the rock itself (Benjamin, 1998). The similarity between the Brechtian and Basheerian protagonists is, I argue, much more than coincidence. Rather it is a testament to the times of being confronted with a much superior force which dislodged the earlier ways of life. For Brecht and Benjamin, that threat was symbolized by the rise of fascism, for Basheer the new force was imaginary of nation-state as it dislodged the earlier certainties and brought forth a new ordering which commanded one on one’s right place. Basheer, however, did affirm the new community, but brought in a twist to the tired formulas of nation formation, as we shall see in the next section.

At the very end of the novel, Basheer adds some very crucial sentences in 1992:

Kunjupattumma asked again. *She looked at Kunjupattumma, standing gorgeous. She thought of the able Nisar Ahmed. They have just stepped into the bright future by the grace of God. The Lord, Master of the Universes, Rabbul Aalameen, will set everything right. History is definitely history...* In the end umma, tearful and stammering, said, ‘They s-s-say your uppuppa’s...huge elephant...was an elephant ant!...an elephant ant!’ (Basheer, 1980: 119)

17 But Fascism and attendant misfortunes of Europe were not far from Basheer’s immediate vicinity either. M.N. Vijayan remembers his years of staying in the same lodge as Basheer, in 1945, as the time in which Eranakulam, being a port town, was getting empty because of the probability of an attack (Vijayan, 2013).
IV

The Blindspots of Realism

In the dawn of the Nehruvian era, at the height of the nationalist euphoria, with the statist bureaucracy in place for more than a decade and the Republic enacting the final cut on the umbilical cord that connected India to the British Parliament, Basheer set himself up as the chronicler of intersecting events and people. Proclaiming these to be the “true history” and claiming to offer hitherto unknown facts behind incidents that shaped a place that is simply called “The Place” (or, Sthalam, in Malayalam), Basheer’s Mucheettukalikkarante Makal (1951), Sthalathe Pradhana Divyan (1953), Anavariyum Ponkurishum (1953) and “Ettukali Mammoonju” (published in the short story collection Oru Bhagyad Gitayum Kure Mulakalum in 1967) enact not just a parody of historical narration and construction of a national past, but is also an interesting inversion of the national present. This section of the chapter is a discussion on the “Stahalam Narratives”, as these chronicles are referred to, to delineate in them a subversion of the politics of concession and consensus, and a restaging of the national public. It is not my intention here to recount the incidents of the various chronicles. Nevertheless, when required, I shall provide the relevant facts. What follows in this discussion takes these narratives as a whole rather than analysing the narratives one by one. The incidents referred to therefore are chosen across the narratives.

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There are however, even if rarely, reference to the Place as Kaduvakuzhi or Chattankeri Mana. But ‘Sthalam’ remains the most frequent throughout.
Populating the Popular

Sthalam narratives revolve around a bunch of characters at a remove from the genteel precincts of the ideal citizenry – Thorappan Anthru, Driver Pappunni, Anavari Raman Nair, Ponkurishu Thoma, Mandan Muthappa, Undakkan Anthru, Ettukaali Mammoonju, Veerapandiyapandaram, Sainaba, Miss Lachi Pandaram, et al traverse a world of theft and honour, thrift and philanthropy, all at the same time. Thorappan Anthru and Driver Papunni are the absent centres of this universe. Known and revered for their skills in the art of robbery and vandalism and absent mostly due to their exile or in Basheer-esque “undergrounding” themselves, they often provide the hypervisible moral compass of this world. Anavari Raman Nair owes his epithet “Anavari” (The Elephant Grabber), now his official name as in the “books of the Police Station and the kitabs of the jail” (2009d: 19), to an incident in which he was availed of his skills to abduct an elephant; Thoma becomes “Ponkurishu” Thoma (The Golden Cross Thoma) after his stealing the impressing golden cross from a Church outside ‘The Place’ for humanitarian purposes, for after all, the Lord who was crucified on a wooden cross can do without a golden one. “Mandan” Muthappa (Muthappa the idiot), the pickpocket and Ettukaali Mammoonju (Spider Mammoonju), called so thanks his scrawny features, prominent limbs and the long whiskers spread out to both sides to rustle with the bodies of the female passers-by (2012), both assume themselves to be the disciples of Anavari and Ponkurishu (2009d). Ottakkannan Pokkar (Pokkar the One-eyed) is the card sharper of the Place whose place of business is the weekly bazaar and towards the uninterrupted exercise of which a rupee is proceeded to the local police station (2008b). The Police Station has two policemen, whom the narrator describes as the “agents of the foreign government”, “reactionaries”, “war-mongers” (epithets that are most repeated throughout the narratives”) are the crucial outsiders against whom every once in a while the
"progressive", "peace-loving" (repeated as frequently as the foreignness of the police) inhabitants of The Place rise up in revolt with the objective of pickling the noses of these "foreign agents". Veerapandyapadaram is the snake charmer and Miss Lechi, his beautiful daughter chronicles to have developed a feeling for Ponkurishu (2011). Sainaba, "the most prominent of the beauties of The Place" (2008b: 13) is the daughter of the card sharper and herself not a novice in the art of stealing, as was found out by Mandan Muthappa to his dismay (2008b). The Place draws its ideological sustenance and morale from the memory of the martyrdom of Karumban Chennan, whose talent to be invisible as he strikes houses for burglary is attributed to his skill in stealing foetus out of pregnant women and melting them for their fat and applying it on himself before his escapade. The memory of his martyrdom at the end of a long chase by "the reactionary foreign government and the war-mongering foreigners" is immortalized by his dagger, now a relic in the history of The Place.

His dagger is now in the possession of Thorappan Avaraan. The inhabitants of The Place could not preserve Karumban Chennan’s body in the service of the people of The Place or their foreign sympathisers as a source of eternal inspiration to Revolution. The foreign reactionary government draconically buried it at an undisclosed location. (2011: 37-8)

Basheer’s language, as can be observed from the quote above, parodies the language of the world historical movement, the literary commonplace of an ambience consciously embedding itself in the concerns of the class struggle. The careful disposal, distribution and juxtaposition of epithets – reactionary versus progressive, war-mongering versus peace-loving – often slips into ecstatic incantations of abuse, letting loose at once the full weight of
a parody towards the arbitrariness of not just epithets considered to denote and describe the world-spirit but also of the arbitrariness of significations themselves:

'Coward! War-monger!' Anavari continued, brushing off the soil, 'you donkey-skinned, run away! You reactionary puppet of a lout!' (2011:18)

It is in these frenzies of cross-cutting registers that Basheer's Place comes alive. Basheer pleads to be taken seriously as the chronicler. He assures us repeatedly of the factuality of the incidents he is narrating. Through such devices as the footnotes, and through such conceits as "evidence", "confession", etc., Basheer's discursive technique is at once an attack on the nationalist history with its gallery of saints, heroes and conquests. The universe is strewn with a vocabulary indebted to the world wars and revolutions: the puppet governments, the allegation of war-mongerings, Lenin's embalmed body, all jostle in the grand revolutionary imagination of the people whose revolutionary uprising aims to pickle the noses of the policemen. "Comrades" and "sympathisers" lend themselves unto this moral environs. If the imaginary of the world historical movement in its communist inflections seem to be one coordinate of the Basheerian mimicry, its other coordinate is provided by the peculiar realization of Indian nationalism. The luminaries of The Place are not just notable for their distribution across the communal spectrum, but the inhabitants of The Place are primarily denoted by their religion-caste affiliations.

But Ponkurishu Thoma did not present himself at the People's Court. He was discussing some inter-political affairs with Kochuthressia. So the People decided that the Christians of The Place be punished. Beat up those bony Christians who pass! As the matter stand, the Court was composed of many Nairs and many Nambudiris, with a few Varriers and Marars. There was not
even a whiff of the Musalman or Ezhava, Tiyya, Ullada, Mukkava or Pulaya.

When the decision of the Court was known, the fat Christians gave their
verdict against the Court...

Ezhavas, Tiyya, Ullada, Mukkava, Paraya and others split into two. One
group joined the Nairs. The others joined the Christians... The Muslim almost
fought within themselves. Finally the Nairs, Nambudiris, Varriers, marars,
Ezhavas, Tiyyas, Pulayas, Parayas, Ulladas, Mukkuvas, Christians and
Musalmans decided - they will have a massive all-out fight. Anyone can beat

The obsessive reiteration of the different castes and communities that make up “the people”,
irritant to a discourse of nationalism and Revolution cast in the moulds of binaries of insider-
outsider or progressive-reactionary are instances of not just the rupture of the category of
people with the aim of uncovering the real agents of power, they also parody the communal-
consensual politics of paternalism that was built into the nationalist motto of “Unity in
Diversity”20. The choice of “mussalman” is a gesture towards the governmental language,
characterised as it is with the Hindi/Urdu inflection of the Indian Union rather than the plain
Malayalam/Arabic “Muslim”. The two policemen in this parody are representatives of the
foreign powers against whom the category of the people, here the people of “The Place” is
constituted. In the absence of these policemen, the category splits itself into communities,
the splintered nature of which such spectacles as “People’s Court” fail to conceal.

20 Basheer’s “Swarnamothiram” [The Golden Ring] is an extreme example of this variety where the characters
are identified only by their castes.
Citizenship as Impersonation: The Sthalam Narratives

Sumita S. Chakravarty (2012) argues that while in the western traditions Realism is considered to be the other of Impersonation, that is of disguised identity, and is about depicting the social conditions of not just how it is but also how it should be, the Indian realist tradition is also at the same time an act of Impersonation, claiming to be the nation itself. The realist tradition in India performed the crucial function of translating the need for and the reality of capitalist development and the attendant social dilemmas into the space of representation, such that the ironies of national life could be virtually resolved.\(^{21}\) I have adopted the term impersonation from her, but in order to show how this crucial pedagogic and performative function was overturned by Basheer at various levels – at the level of representation, and at the level of motivation. I argue that Basheer overturned the realist representation of the world of novels favouring the mode of epics, retained the function of representation to imagine a nation space, and was motivated not by the need for a constitution of a positive entity but by the desire for the constitution of a positive non-entity.

The unavailability of the category of “the people”, in its particular trajectory in India, has led to the constitution of the citizen as the citizen-pedagogue. The cleaving of the nation into the realm of rights and the realm of claims also implied a continuous process of induction of newer population into people, educating them in citizenship. Literature and films in postcolonial India have, for example, been shown to be lodging within them a pedagogic function in which voyeuristic pleasures have been jettisoned at least partially for

\(^{21}\) Chakravarty however assumes a universal hegemony in India of Hindu textual traditions to which the realist traditions have to correspond to, to smoothen the serrated edges of modern transition.
direct addressal of the “masses”. The last leg of the independence struggle in India is marked by insistence on two classes of people, one which teaches and the other which is taught (Chatterjee, 1986). We thus have two binaries with two inclusions and two exclusions. On the one hand, in the binary of the native versus foreign, the native is privileged. On the other hand, the native is further split into the citizen and the mass in which the citizen is privileged. The citizen is supposed to be an embodiment of the state while also constituting the nation. It is this interiority of the state that is made unavailable by conflating both the state and the nationalist cause to “the foreign agents.” The organizational terrain that is consequently obtained upset the deep structures of the nationalist literature in which the hierarchy of the terms are clearly established. The result of the nation-colonial conflation results in the absence of the contrary. The rogue element, the only available polity, is characterized by an inherent difficulty, that of assuming the position of the state. This inability is at once the result of two absences, the absence of the state as well as the absence of a people as is dreamed by the state.

It is in the disavowal of binaries that The Place achieves its crucial subterfuge in its function as the terrain of community-formation. Indeed the Sthalam narratives have even been called representation of primitive communism by some Malayalam critics (Meerakutty, 1998: 25, 28). Except as serving in their function as the crucial constitutive exception, the two policemen do not present us with any positive programme. Their function in The Place is reduced being the discursive counterpoint. The picaresque protagonists of The Place are not posited against a similar sociological category. Nor is there the existence of a parallel society. Rather, the picaresque constitute the people, whose discursive opposition, the policemen, then crucially subsumes two different registers, that of the State and Nation. The

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presence of the rogue elements as the protagonists of the story is not an attempt at imagining
an alternate form of nationalism, rather it is the disavowal of nationalist model itself. The
policemen are at the same time representatives of the foreign power as well as the discursive
counterpoint with reference to which the category of the people is constituted. A negation of
this fantasy does not lend itself into constituting a new imaginary, rather it is the dissolution
of the imaginary itself. The foreign power is at once also the guarantor of the people. The
policemen are the state and the nation fused into one. The consequent subjective destitution
then requires us to imagine the community newly.

Towards the end of Sthalathe Pradhana Divyan, when the people of The Place decide
to attack the Police Station; the policemen abandon the station which is then occupied by
‘The People’. Anavari Raman Nair makes himself the Head Constable and Ponkurishu is the
new constable. The policemen are apprehended on their way to “underground” themselves
by Kochuthressia and are, much to the Policemen’s disbelief, arrested by her and led to the
Police station where they are imprisoned.

Constable Ponkurishu Thoma locked up the two old Police reactionaries.

Head Constable Anavari said:

“Hey Ettukaali! Ask Mandan Muthappa to serve the masters two tea!”

Then he looked at this humble chronicler: “Ask him to make it three.”

“Yes Sir”

Constable Ponkurishu acknowledging Kochuthressia, said, “Hey

Ettukaali, six tea. Two for those in the lock up.”

“Yes Sir”
"Hey, Constable Ponkurishu! Are you the Head or me? Ettukaali, go, and get six tea." (2011: 95)

The inability to transform is glaring here. From settling for nickname in calling ‘Ettukaali’ (‘spider’ – his name being Mammoonju) to the rash nature of the ego clash between the Constable and the Head Constable, the assumption in one moment of their new-found stations as ‘Masters’ to the immediate blurring of boundaries between those locked up and those outside (so contrary to the imagined relations of mind-games and pressure tactics identified with Police Stations), the rogues are found to be blatantly unfitting in their new robes. This inability to assume the new identity leaves us with a crucial absence – the contrary of the rogue. While the contradictory of the rogue would be, in a Greimas square, “non-rogue”, the absence of the contrary, the absent term that can be common-sensically called as the opposite of rogue (in the sense akin to ‘woman’ being opposite of ‘man’)? throws open the challenge of imagining newer ways of organization, or what is, within the terms of our thesis, referred to as cosmopolitanism.

The arrival of two sants, one Muslim and one Hindu, in The Place, in SPD is occasioned by the turn towards what is seen as the project of modernity – towards health and education.

The Holy Saints assumed the leadership of The Place. They submitted before the people some revolutionary programmes.

?An easy way of explaining contrary and contradictory: “old” is the contrary of “young”, while the contradictory of “young” would be “not-young”. Thus while the contrary of “young” has a positive entity, the contradictory is actually a generative term in which there is a wider range of positions available. For Greimas Square, see Greimas (1987)
The stink of the bazaar should be brought down. Goat, cow, buffalo, pig, dog, duck, bull, rabbit, hen etcetera should not be reared in the houses. Fish – raw, dry, rotten – should not be kept in the house forever. Intestines, blood, bones, etcetera should be buried afar. Rotten leather should not be kept in the house either. Every house should have a minimum of one toilet. Every community should toilet-train their young ones. (Men and Women) should take bath at least once a week.

If the men and women do not adhere to this programme, the Holy Saints will punch their nose in. (2011: 63-4)

The detailed instructions insinuating the high sounding nationalist programme is undercut by the silliness of the punitive. The sublime paternal authority that is the Citizen-State turns into the obscene figure of a bully. The Holy Saints are juxtaposed with the filth and the stink, their holiness descending into the unruly. The Basheerian parody however reserves its subterfuge for a later moment – the two saints are, and were always by the knowledge and blessing of the people of The Place, the thieves Thorappan Avaran and Driver Pappunni! The citizen project is transformed into an orchestrated attempt at impersonation, that of disguising thieves who are on the run. The crucial subversion here is in the register of hegemony itself. The detailed direction towards modernity is effective not because of its association with the enlightened – rather enlightenment itself is a project of collusion in crime. The crucial absence of the citizen figure is supplanted by the rogue reproducing itself in disguise without assuming their subject positions. Rather than effecting a divide between the rational citizen and the pathological subject of emotion and passion (and implied criminality), citizenship itself is seen as in the active connivance of the pathological. If the
unruly crowd is the counterpoint of the citizen constructed in the former’s bid to control and discipline, the two saints are akin to the dream within the dream which is then the short circuit to the nationalist reality – that the universal rationality is at once caught up with on the one hand recourse to idolatry, and on the other, plain bullying.

The Narrative Function

The full force of the Basheerian subterfuge is to be appreciated when the peculiar function of the chronicler himself is recognized. The narrator makes entries into these chronicles as the repository of information armed with the verifiability of proofs and authority of conversations he has had with the parties to the incidents.

Let me tell you the moral of the story, which I have called “The Card Sharper’s Daughter” right now. But it is generally not very amenable for the well-beings. Generally speaking, daughters, whatever their age be, should be murdered.

Oh no, do not be provoked by my statement! Please do not hold this opinion to be mine. I am innocent. (2008b: 11)

This humble historian will now record presently the history of Thoma before he was honoured by the epithet “Ponkurishu” [Golden Cross]. (2009d: 19)

What to do now? Whom shall I ask? I decided to get out and indulge myself in the affairs of the world. There was no omen. But is it a good thing to set out without a good omen? (2011: 88)
The humble historian of *The Place* presents himself at once the authority of his tale but also a character who is as much affected by the developments around him as any other. Particularly in *SPD*, the excess knowledge in him, the knowledge of the future, is employed as the page-turner, as chapters end with such invocations as “So do you know who was approaching?” (2011: 62). Inspite of his authority, he also presents himself as the distant chronicler, the one to whom the moral of the story cannot be attributed. The detachment is then presented as the movement of history itself, in which his contribution is void. In his comparative study of the epic and the novel, M.M.Bakhtin fashions the term “epic distance” to characterise what separates the contemporary reader from the epic. The epic is always presented as the revered past of whose descent the contemporary reader claim. They are supposed to be based on a national epic tradition. The epics also belong to another time, not just in their divergence of ideological standpoints or location, but also that each point in the epic is equidistant from the contemporary reader. The linearity of time is substituted by the circularity of time, such that the author of the epic may begin and end anywhere, totally indifferent to a narrative closure. The characters lack interiority and are just functions of the plot (Bakhtin, 1981).

While the chronicles of The Place chronicle the great events that shaped the place and lend consistency to its internal order, the very act of chronicling with the simultaneous presence of the chronicler upsets the time frame of the narration. Are we witnessing history being made? Or is it the contemporary? It is in this temporal limbo that the events unfold themselves. But crucially, across the years in which the chronicles were published, the events nevertheless are presented as equidistant, which has helped its current publishers, DC Books based in Kottayam, to add additional footnotes that refer to the other books in the series, obscuring the time lag in the actual production of these chronicles. Rather than being
an epic past or an active present, this equidistance is rather the equidistance of the narrator itself. By being a part of the narration himself, the narrator does not just open his role as the disinterested and distant historian to interrogation, he also presents the plot with a crisis that the absent citizen-figure, the one subverted in subterfuge, is reclaimed by the long arm of discourse in the figure of the narrator. The narrator can be the counterpoint to the irrationality of the objects of the study. Basheer himself then can occupy the role of the citizen. In such a schema, the narrator can be said to belong to a zone of invisibility, a metalanaguage that will then order the relationship between the various discourses available within the story. This crucial classical realist textual function is also an ordering of the world (MacCabe, 1974).

The ambiguity in which the role of the narrator is suspended in time and space can be seen to solve this rather unpleasant hitch in this ecstatic-yet-indifferent (indifferent as in indifferent towards beginning and end, as in Bakhtin, 1981) narration of a parodic epic. The temporal limbo does not just erect the wall of separation between the linear time of the reader and the in-betweenness of Basheerian fiction. Rather, by the narrator himself being present in the narration, it displaces the narrator himself at an epic distance. The narrator is a co-inhabitant of the in-between time and simultaneously of the present. His temporal ambiguity is also his unattainability.

The Basheerian subterfuge here in this particular exercise where the narrator is present as well as closed off is an extension of the project of citizenship-as-impersonation. The narrator, rather than faced for blessing, is interrogated for proofs, that which he is unable to produce except by being an embodied present in the other-time. The narrator has no entry to the thoughts of any of the actors. Rather, the chronicle is a narration of incidents with no interiority. The eye of the narrator is severely limited. Rather than transmitting knowledge
from a higher realm, a knowledge that only the protagonist is privy to, the narrator of the chronicle is devoid of any fetishist value. His sources are to be located and recounted. This seemingly rational order is the formal inversion of the postcolonial deployment of aura in the service of making a people, as in the mode of direct addressal.

Udaya Kumar, in his study of Basheer’s works, has pointed out this closing off of the narrator in the unreachable time as a crucial technique in Basheer’s role as not just a passive witness to the history, but also as an active testifier (Kumar, 2005). The testimony, when reduced to the actions, point out “the insufficiency of polity as a site of foundational meanings” (317). The lack of interiority of the characters, their lives merely represented through their actions, do not just lend an air of grotesque in which their paper-thin presences appear to be ‘making history’, it also performs another crucial function – the “possibility of community founded on performative elements” (324). Udaya Kumar’s wider observation is that Basheerian works points to a primal space (like the deserts in Sabdangal[1947]) and a primordial time (“the beginning of time” in Ntuppuppaakku... for example) of creatureliness that cannot be subsumed under interpellation. Basheer’s engagement with partial objects can be seen to demonstrate this lingering in a pre-linguistic state. The pre-linguistic embodiment of the ember of life in which men are created beyond the linearity of history, their etching in a primordial memory, requires the flashing in of other sublime spaces, like the deserts. These spaces and times, alien to the discursive violence of identities, is an experiment in counterformations (Kumar, 2005). It is my argument that rather than treat the Basheerian obsession with partial objects, one would rather see these objects not as the disjointed elements in the life-world of the pre-linguistic state, but as objects suffused with enjoyment, as sinthome, objects which linger outside the structure of differences that constitute meanings. In these objects one can then discern the excess of pure signification, those signifiers which point
nowhere but to themselves. These are signifiers in a mythic time, signifiers of another linguistic system lost to the rationality of the postcolonial space. In its enunciation they point to, in fact inaugurate, a new space. The elephant is such a signifier, pointing to a mythic past whose present has never been, but at the same time inaugurate the present in its own impossibility. Basheerian cosmopolitanism can be seen to lie, in Stahalam narratives as well as in Ntupppuppa and the other novels discussed here, in these performances of the impossibilities of integration – and hence the difficulty to mourn – at one hand, and the inaugural gestures of another imagination of community, on the other.

Style and the Coming Community

The insistence on performativity and the disavowal of an inner plenitude can be seen to be a modality of imagining communities when the minority – understood here not in numerical terms but as circumscribed by an alien structure – is confronted by the tension between integration and separatism. In his study of the discursive slippage of the ‘Jewish Question’ into the postcolonial, Aamir Mufti has shown how in the eighteenth century when the Jews were at once accused for being particular (because they follow certain rituals which obstruct their equal partnership in the public space and therefore not amenable to universalism) and cosmopolitan (because they belong to a supranational entity and therefore not amenable to national belonging), the Jewish intellectual Moses Mendelssohn enacted an upturning of the familiar sides of the argument by insisting on the action-centeredness in Mosaic Law (Mufti, 2007). If Enlightenment was understood to be a project of de-fetishization, Mendelssohn’s presentation of the Mosaic Law as not a religion of revealed truth but rather a natural religion, one that is in accordance with reason, which concerns itself with actions and not with thoughts was a strategy which lodged Judaism at the very core of the Enlightenment
project (61). Mendelssohn crucially introduced a third term too, one that would resolve the tension between the fetishization involved in the hieroglyphs of the pre-modern and the abstraction of the alphabet. This third term is Judaism's ceremonial law, which by focussing on actions, could imagine a community based on actions, and thus “checks the opposed tendencies to myth and to atomism” (62). In the language of our thesis, Mendelssohn's introduction of this third term could be said as the act of imagination (or, the politics of civility), that of carving out of an identity between the opposed processes of totalization and absolute deterritorialization (Balibar, 2002).

Contrary to the situation faced by Mendelssohn, the historical juncture at which Basheer finds himself is not one which threatens to disintegrate into abstraction. Rather, Indian nationalism had acquired a positive content, on the one hand, that of a newly defined cultural identity which borrowed liberally from a Hindu tradition fashioned under the gaze of the colonialists, and on the other hand, that of abstract citizenship which had in turn fetishized itself as the identity of a small nationalist elite whose function it would be to educate and discipline the masses. The lack of a principle of organization of the actions in The Place, its randomness, its riotous pomposity in its paper-thinness, is therefore an inversion of the problematic in which nation-state-ism was conceived of. Rather than becoming an abstraction, the citizen was itself the result of another zone of actions, a zone in which personal relations offered simultaneity of actions and communal identification – just like how Anavari Raman Nair is at times just Anavari and at other times the Nair. This communal identification, rather than being demonstrated in cultural practices or spaces of inhabitation (of puja and mosque, for example), is a speech act, one which inaugurates it at the moment of enunciation. The citizenship here is not an effacement of its cultural location, but a loud identification with it which also affords a relation of equivalence. The minor here
is non-existent not because he ceases to be the particular, but because it is only the particular which exists.

The Basheerian citizen here is Original in its particularity, to take recourse to Gilles Deleuze’s terms in his study of Melville’s Bartleby (Deleuze, 1997). Deleuze draws a distinction between three terms, the particular, the general and the Original. While the Particular is determined by its milieu, its situatedness as well as the dynamics of its various actants, and hence do retain some particularity in them; the General is characterised by its abstraction or equivalence (82-3). The Basheerian citizen of dissimulation is free at once of the inflection of cultural nationalism (the particular ‘nation’ in the nation-state) but at the same time do not inhabit a position that can afford the universality (that of state and governance). What we see is an Original formation, one that insists on extracting resources rather than deploying them. The absence of a model to copy gives rise to a peculiar condition in which the particular, in the absence of the universal model, proximates the universal, bringing to suspension the hierarchy assumed. It is this lack of hierarchy which then enables the imagination of a new community.24

That is when the saints thought: shouldn’t the Place have a school? After all, education is a good affair.

“I shall be the first teacher,” Muzhayan Nanu came forward. So he shall be the Headmaster.

“And,” one of the saints asked, “how many more do you want?”

“Just one more person,” said the other saint.

24 However, unlike Deleuze, we might want to stop ourselves from calling it a community of brothers. Rather, what unites the community is its lack of a uniting principle other than being located in a no-space.
“My wife too is of immense scholarship,” Muzhayan Nanu informed. That graceful lady is known by the name of Yashoda-the-lame.

“Enough,” said the first saint. “Now we need a school.”

The who’s who of the Place came forward.

The rich man Kunnathazhatha Kutyali donated the Chennan ground for the school. Stones and lime for the school came from Kariyil Pathrosu Mappila. These things were carried from the bazaar to the ground three quarter of a mile away under the leadership of the saints by Anavari, Ponkurishu, Muthappa the idiot, Pokkar the one-eyed, Pachu the drunkard, Ettukali Mammonju, the two reactionary policemen, Kochuthressia, and Lechi. The people were shouting *Inquilabs* throughout.

“School Zindabad!”

“Kunnathozham (Kuttyali) Zindabad!”

“Kariyil (Pathrose) Zindabad!”

But no one raised any slogans for Kochu Narayanan Namboodirippad of Chathankerimana or Chandanatharayil Vasu Kaimal. After their labour, when the people were treating themselves to the gruel offered by Pathrose Mappila, Chandanatharayil Vasu Kaimal walked right into the midst of the people and announced,

“If someone could offer wood and palm leaves, I can take care of everything else needed for the school.”
Then one of the saints shouted, “Chandanathara Vasu kaimal Zindabad.”

(2011: 65-6)25

What we have here is a community of actions, one that is not abstracted to just being a sign among many, nor is it filled with an interiority that will give it essence. Or, as Deleuze puts it:

Originals are beings of Primary Nature, but they are inseparable from the world or from secondary nature, where they exert their effect: they reveal its emptiness, the imperfection of its laws, the mediocrity of particular creatures...the world as masquerade...(1997: 83)

The community here, operating in that realm of absence which nationalism desperately tries to fill in with an essence projected into past, is the community of dead father. The Law, one which requires adopting a subject position, of subjectivization, looms in a limbo because of the unavailability of the symbolic. The peculiar position of the narrator in the Sthalam narratives, one which we have previously sought to position within the coordinates of Bakhtian epic, can be translated into the Deleuzian world as the availability of the eccentric whose task is to fabulate. In Rancière’s exposition of Deleuzian politics in poetics, the

25 Is this not just a case of the oft-repeated prescription “Do not ask what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country”? No. What is missing in the Basheerian universe is the subject of this enunciation. There is simply no agency which demand the sacrifice. This lack of demand is a consequence of the particular formation of this community itself, one which does not have desire due to its lack of interiority, and one in which need is primarily a dissimulation. Udaya Kumar’s observation of the Sthalam being akin to a plaster work on an immense primordial space and time (Kumar, 2005) can also be taken to mean this strangeness of being itself, one whose needs are just masquerades to hide its own surplus, the space outside the Law.
eccentric is defined as “not just embodiments of literary production, they are mythic characters who destroy the community of fathers, the world of models and copies” (Rancière, 2004: 159). In order to break away from a world of fathers and to depict a world that insists on a new community, one has to break away from the mimetic model of the world in which literature is a copy of a world, and that of symbolism, where literature is taken to mean something. To do this, Deleuze effects style as the molar feature that will hold together the molecular elements of the narrative. Style is then a metonymy and is embodied in the correspondence between the lead character and the form of the story. In other words, the deterritorialization, or the self-minoritization of literature is effected in Deleuze’s analysis by a fusion of the form and content, which Rancière calls “fabulation” (158). When analysed through this paradigm, the function of the Basheerian narrator is, though not the central character, in destabilising the temporal coordinates of the narrative, to move away from what is called Bildungsbürgerum, or the becoming-citizen narrative, to a narrative which would thematize the masquerade itself, in the absence/annihilation of ideals. The function of the style is to effect within the literary a coming community. The indifference towards the opening and closing of the narrative, which in the study of epic is attributed to the fact of the story being popularly known, in the chronicle becomes a aesthetic-political device to move away from a mimetic model with the availability of the writer outside, to a fusing of the writer and the written.

The ultimate Enlightenment, the freeing oneself of all fetishism of aura and authority is ultimately the negation of the aura of the citizen-narrator himself. If the function of a realist fiction is to lodge within the reader the rational structures of the Law of the Father, the very ecstasy of Basheerian language with its displacement and profanation of registers replaces for the realist reader a reader caught in uncertainties of discourse and plot.
The Basheerian style of the *Sthalam* narratives invites us to think beyond the success or defeat of the different discordant discourses within a text. It is, on the other hand, a questioning of that point of judgement itself. Its strength is in its distanciation, in its abstinence to perform through its style a position to look from. The narrator and the narrated fuse and repel. It is the inability to be subsumed that characterises this politics. It is the confusion, for example, in the number of teas to be served in the Police Station (*Sthalathe Pradhana Divyan*, 2011) that qualifies this new imagination. It is towards this new organization, founded on actions of the paper-thin quality, one which upsets the binaries of the deep structures of postcolonial nationalism, one in which the unruly is not the self-evident contrary of citizenship, but in which the latter is unhitched from the holy and the ideal that The Place assumes a cosmopolitan character.

V

Basheer’s *Ormayude Arakal* (1973) [Basheer, 2013] is an exposition of his views on religion and politics. Its exaltation of Gandhi vis-à-vis the eradication of untouchability, dignity of labour and even of the need to lead virtuous lives can make the contemporary reader squirm, taking into account the absence of Ambedkar in his imagination as well as the conformism of his opinion to the hegemony of the nationalist discourse. This book of recollections follows the familiar pattern of the novels we have discussed such that the beginning of the memories is not from his own birth or of family background but of the birth of the world from the endless void. The book ends too in a similar fashion, contemplating the death of the world, thus reiterating a familiar trope in Basheer in which the narrator is indistinguishable from the
universe. This universe is not a universe of exception of the transcendent God. Rather, as we saw from the examples in the first section, this universe is caught in a web of immanence.

Basheer’s views on Islam in this book are also his bold assertion of his Muslim identity. For most of his views on Islam Basheer depends on views more consistent with presenting it as a life system in which the distinctions of religion/politics/culture does not inhere. For this he depends on articles written from the West (2013: 112). However, Basheer’s introduction of Islam in the beginning, which is direct as opposed to the reported speech used towards the end of the book, equates Islam’s antiquity with the antiquity of the universe (2013: 20). Basheer’s Islam does not have an outside, which is why he refuses the need for conversion from any religion to any religion (107). While arguing for Islam as the religion of not just peace but also of education, enlightenment and gender equality, Basheer also castigates the event of Partition. Basheer is sure that if the Prophet Muhammad was alive at the time of Partition, the Prophet would have never let it happen. Basheer’s turn towards religiosity is not often well remarked upon. Basheer’s had written a short story titled “Ana haq” in 1945 [2009e]. The story was a historical on the sufi Mansoor Al-Hallaj who was derided, hunted and finally executed for his claim of “ana-al-haq” – “I am truth” – by the religious establishment. Forty years later (1983 – first DC Books edition of the story) when the story appeared, Basheer had added a note at the end of the story:

N.B. This was written by me forty years ago. I believe that man being a creation among many of God’s, it is wrong on his part to claim ana-al-haq or aham brahmasmi. This history of Mansoor I have written is not right either. Please consider this a fantasy: Ana-al-Haq. (Basheer, 2009e: 50)
Commenting on this note, Sukumar Azhikode writes in 1998:

Can a work of art be changed according to the changing beliefs of the artist? The writer has no right to change a story written forty six years ago based on a peculiar vision and character at a different time when he finds his determination, character and situation altered. It is not the Basheer of then who has confessed now. It is not the Basheer who confessed who was the author of "Anal Haq". Just because he says that the story is not right and that it is a fantasy does not mean that the readers will accept it so. (Azhikode, 1998: 19)

What Azhikode misses here, to one's puzzlement, is the very last word of the note itself—"ana-al-haq"! Far from being a confession, it is rather the guffaw of condescension at the self-declared arbiters of beliefs. Basheer has once again with characteristic reticence performed an irony. It is this feminine character of writing, one which sides itself with immanence, declares itself to be the truth, for it being the carrier of truth itself, impossible to posit for itself a closed world, that lets Basheer to mount a critique of nationalism. Read in this context, Basheer's opposition to Pakistan should be read not as a pain in the separation of "one people", but rather in the act of separation itself, in that it posits exception—Pakistan—on which subsequent nationalism will be built, just like how the binary of pedagogue/masses was a relation of constitutive exception where the nation could be imagined, as it were in reformist zeal, only by positing the unruly as its antagonists. Basheer's idea of homeland is to be read in conjunction with this feminine idea of God, the Sufi idea of immanence, where the subjective and the truth dualism is substituted by the unity
of Truth within the self, the point of which is to will out the exceptions all notions of belongings will have to engender to retain its cohesion.

In our next chapter we look at quite a different person, CH Muhammad Koya, who would again deploy Islam in imaging the nation, but in quite different ways.