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Masculine Voices in Vaikom Muhammad Basheer's *Pattumma's Goat*

Dr. Radhika K. S
Assistant Professor, Department of English, Sree Kerala Varma College, Thrissur, Kerala, India
Email: radhikanamboodiri@yahoo.com
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Abstract

Mikhail Bakhtin, the twentieth century Russian critic has elaborated upon the multi-voiced nature of the novelistic genre. Starting with an analysis of Dostoevsky's novels, Bakhtin has stated that Dosoevsky's novels are polyphonic and all novels are polyphonic in nature. This paper is an attempt to analyse the masculine voices in the novel *Pattumma's Goat* written by the renowned Malayalam writer, Vaikom Muhammed Basheer. *Pattumma's Goat* narrates the unmarried protagonist's experience with a group of women in his family. Though the novel seems to talk about women and their struggle for survival, there are underlying voices that echo the perspective of men. Revolving around the pregnancy, delivery and milking of a goat, the novel portrays how women use their intelligence to make a living and how men are sometimes silent spectators. There are very few male characters in the novel *Pattumma's Goat*. But the narrator, the eldest son of the family, has his observations regarding the women of his family including his mother. The paper focuses on the masculine voices in a novel which is filled with the lives of women and feminine wisdom and how masculine voices are intertwined with feminine voices.

Key words: Polyphony, multi-voicedness, masculine, feminine, family.

One of the most influential twentieth century critic is Mikhail Bakhtin who revolutionized literary theory and criticism with his in depth observations. Bakhtin's deep interest in the novelistic genre leads him to the study of Fyodor Dostoevsky, one of the great writers of fiction in world literature. His seminal work *Problems of Dostoevksy's Poetics* (1929) contains his important observations regarding Dostoevsky's fiction. The significant feature of Dostoevsky's fiction, he says is '*multi-voicedness*' or polyphony- the merging of different voices (Bakhtin, 279).

Later critics like Chris Murray also agrees with Bakhtin's assumption that polyphony is the distinguishing feature of novels in general. He says, "While Bakhtin initially argued that polyphony belonged to Dostoevskii's novels alone, he later changed his position and

acknowledged the establishment of polyphony throughout world literature" (Murray, 75). David Patterson too says, that"… polyphony is not a characteristic of Dostoevsky's novels alone, … No, it is a feature of the evolving novel itself, as Bakhtin indicates in "The Problem of Text in Linguistics, Philol-ogy, and Other Humanistic Sciences"'(135). Thus, polyphony is proved to be an inherent characteristic of novelistic genre. This paper is an attempt to analyse masculine voices in the novel *Pattumma's Goat* (1959) by Vaikom Muhammed Basheer.

John Beynon says that masculinity "is always interpolated by cultural, historical and geographical location" (1). The definition of masculinity differs from place to place and it is defined in relation with femininity. R.W. Connell's explanation on masculinity goes like this. "'Masculinity' does not exist except in contrast with 'femininity'. A culture which does not treat women and men as bearers of polarized character types, at least in principle, does not have a concept of masculinity…"(68). In almost all cultures in the world, man and woman are considered as unequal entities and gender roles are distributed accordingly.

The narrator's futile attempt to assert his masculine identity, the absence of a woman/partner in his life and his inability to find out the intelligent woman are the factors which influence the masculine voice in *Pattumma's Goat* (1959). The narrator, Basheer is the eldest and unmarried son who has come back from a long journey to stay with his family and he gives a first person account of the incidents that took place in his house. The narrator reveals his identity through the instance where the goat eats the copies of his works *Balyakalasakhi* (1944) and *Shabdangal* (1947) and also with an incident where the family members approach him for the money he has received as royalty (p. 135). The first person narrator Basheer finds his voice among the multiplicity of feminine voices.

The narrator's identity as a bachelor determines his voice and many times the absence of a woman results in the side lining of his voice. The narrator's voice encounters with the voices of women in the house, in various matters including the goat's pregnancy. Regarding the goat's pregnancy, the narrator makes an observation which is proved to be wrong later. The narrator says, "Women are the authorities on such matters. This I admit. Nevertheless... with regard to pregnancy, the women had in this case made a big mistake! I felt indescribably jubilant, because this goat that stood before me was not in kid. Its belly had gone in" (*Goat*, 161). Though he tries to boast of his knowledge regarding pregnancy and child bearing, the women defeats him by proving that he is talking about Aanumma's goat not about Pattumma's goat. His voice is ignored because of his ignorance on matters pertaining to women.

After the delivery, he shows his anxiety regarding the wellbeing of the kid and shares it with the womenfolk. When they say that they have kept the kid under a basket, he gets angry:

> 'Anumma, won't it feel suffocated? Would you put any of your own children under a basket like this?'
>
> I asked"
>
> 'Then what do you want us to do with it?' There was an answer on these lines. I don't know who said it. I lay there quietly. There was no point in my saying anything in the midst of these child-bearers. When I was not there, they would get together and laugh about it. In the first place, I had never married. Then it was better not to talk on a subject I knew nothing about. I covered myself with the sheet, closed my eyes and just lay there. (*Goat*, 175)

He accepts the fact that his suggestions are ignored because he is a bachelor and decides to remain silent on matters like pregnancy and child bearing.

Throughout the novel he tries to assert his masculine identity in one way or the other, though it turns to be futile most of the time. Being the eldest male member of the family, he is supposed to have some power in his home which he hardly enjoys. When he gets angry, he shouts at the womenfolk. He writes: "I include all the women in my abuse. Especially the wives of my younger brothers. When I raise my voice like that, the house is quiet. So I sit there" (164). But this silence is momentary and they continue with their noisy life sooner or later. Along with that these shouting prove to be pointless as these women together with their husbands and *umma* continue to exploit Basheer.

The dominance of patriarchy in the family is questioned by exposing the narrator's failure in resisting the exploitation. The women in the family interact with the narrator in a unique way that is they exploit him in all the ways possible. His *umma* is not represented as an embodiment of love and affection, but a hardworking housewife who takes care of her family. She not only demands money from him but also takes clothes from his bag. Whenever Basheer asks for the reason for excessive expenditure, *umma* silences him stating the fact that he is unmarried. His sisters Pattumma and Anumma approach him for ornaments and other accessories and all these acts of exploitation is justified by *umma* saying that " You're a single person with only one stomach to think of" (*Goat*, 143).

Not only his family members but also women from the neighbourhood demand money from him saying that he has drunk milk from their breasts. "There was another justification: it seemed I had drunk milk from this Nangeli's breasts! [I have drunk a lot of women's milk, to judge from what umma and the others say.]" (*Goat* 165). Basheer's *umma* makes him believe that he has drunk milk from the breasts of so many women. Drinking milk from a woman's breasts makes a man obliged to her throughout his life, like a son. The narrator is obliged not only to his *umma* but also to many women.

The voice of a son gets prominence in the story when the speaker shares his experience of drinking milk from the breasts of many women. This action, metaphorically, stands for the experience he has in his life. He does not make it a fact to be ashamed of; but admits that he experiences the whole universe when he sucked those breasts. M.N. Vijayan says that here Basheer is asking many questions by admitting that he has drunk milk from the breasts of many women. He asks whether his mother's language is his mother tongue, whether his mother's breasts are the breasts that represent the world. He also adds that he has drunk milk from the breasts of Nangeli and many other Hindu, Christian and Muslim mothers. Thus, the breasts from which Basheer drank milk represent the whole universe. It is through drinking from the breast that a child understands the world. It is his first experience of imbibing the whole world. In Hindu mythology Krishna does so (*Goat*, 38). In this context, it is the presence of woman that determines depth of experience he has in life whether it is his mother or his partner. Though Basheer lacks a female partner, he gets enough chance to experience the world with the help of mother figures.

In spite of the continuous exploitation, he keeps on asserting his masculine identity and this is evidenced by his reaction to Laila's behaviour. He is unable to tolerate the little Laila calling Abi a 'stupid twit': "For a male person to be called a stupid twit. And that, too, by a girl!" (*Goat*, 141). He scolds Laila for her disrespect towards Abi. This reaction can be viewed as an indication of his demand for the respect from women. John Beynon says, "Men are not born with masculinity as part of their genetic make-up; rather it is something into which they are acculturated and which is composed of social codes of behaviour which they learn to reproduce in culturally appropriate ways" (2). On the one hand, by asking a girl to respect boys

the narrator expresses his yearning for the recognition of women which he never gets. At the same time he shows how family acts as a perfect space where the conditioning the social behaviour of boys and girls takes place.

The narrator identifies himself with a female goat owned by his sister Pattumma in terms of creativity and exploitation. When the goat eats the books and starts eating the blanket, he does not get angry but gives some more books to the she goat. He shares the hope of the womenfolk in the house regarding the whole family enjoying tea with milk. His anxiety over the delivery of the goat results from his creative mind. His creativity is blocked by the noisy atmosphere in the house whereas the goat wanders everywhere and enjoys the surroundings. Vijayakrishnan says that *Pattumma's Goat* is a metaphor for the protagonist himself. The women exploit the goat with their wisdom. With the same wisdom the protagonist is also being exploited (3). It seems that this similarity makes him sympathetic to the goat during the pregnancy and delivery.

The narrator's desire for the attention of the opposite sex is shown through his desire for the college girls which ultimately becomes another instance of exploitation. As he is unmarried he wants the company of woman though it is not directly expressed. When the girls come he realizes that they were looking at the jambu fruits and not at him: They came. They did not even look at me! They went straight to the foot of the jambu tree, said something to umma and gave her something. Umma gave them a whole pile of jambu fruits that she had tied in a cloth. As they stood there eating one each, they looked towards the jambu tree with delight. Donkeys! The jambu fruits they were eating were tied up in umma's dirty cloth. I was clean. Couldn't they even look at me?" (*Goat,* 157)

He laughs at his own masculine identity saying that the girls did not look him. This passage is an indirect criticism of his male ego which is neglected by the girls. He declares himself to be clean, deserving the attention of the girls. They have come to buy the jambu fruits-which symbolizes the life-blood of the writer. All the members of the family exploit the narrator and here his *umma* is selling the jambu fruits to the girls thus sucking his blood. Every aesthetic creation is stained with the creator's blood. The jambu tree is planted by the narrator and so the jambu fruits are metaphorically the author's blood. When his mother sells them and earns money, the author's own blood is sucked. This is another instance where he is being exploited by his family members.

The only female who gives him due respect is the girl who came for his autograph. He says, "But she did not look in the direction of the jambu tree. She came straight up to me and greeted me respectfully with folded hands. Then she said, 'I know you, sir. I have read all your books. My father told me you had come. That's why l am here. Would you please write something in my autograph-book and sign it!" (*Goat,* 159). This is the only instance in which his male ego is satisfied. Being a man he enjoys the recognition of a girl for his creativity. Different from the women in his family who neglect his ability, this girl appreciates him as a writer.

The feminine voice dominates the masculine voice when the narrator says that he could not find out which of the women have the brainwave of milking the goat with human kid. Though he is present at his home throughout, he did not know whose intelligent brain came out with such a wonderful idea. He concludes the story without giving answer to the question and leaves the novel open ended. The narrator's inability in finding out the wise woman makes it a novel without conclusion.

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