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**Voices of War: A Modernist Anatomy of Trauma, Absurdity
and Humanism in Basheer's *Voices* (*Shabdangal*)**

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Abstract: War narratives in Malayalam literature has evolved over the years from the mythic retellings and historical romances to modernist explorations of psychological aftermath of conflict. The war served as a fertile ground for writers to display their talents, challenging them to confront the darkest aspect of humanity from different perspectives. The novelette *Shabdangal* (1947) written by Basheer and translated by V. Abdulla into English as *Voices* (1976) stands as a seminal work even today with its stark depiction of reality. My paper is an attempt to explore the ways in which Basheer's *Voices* offers a different take on war by moving away from the conventional representations of heroism and nationalism. He presents a fragmented, subjective, nonlinear narrative that brings forth psychological trauma, existential angst and the absurdity of war through the polyphony of voices that mirrors the structured consciousness of an orphaned war veteran from a humanist angle. *Voices* remains the first Malayalam novelette to deal with the taboo subject of homosexuality explicitly and thus invited a lot of criticism upon its release.

Keywords: *Trauma, Absurdity, Homosexuality, Existentialism, Polyphony, Humanism*

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War is a cataclysmic event that has irrevocably altered the course of human history. It has served as a crucible for writers, generating significant literary inventions in the discourse of war. From time immemorial, war literature is associated with heroism, devastation, sacrifice and national identity. Regional literature does not glorify war but offers a profound exploration of its personal and psychological impact. Malayalam Literature has also explored the themes of war by constructing and celebrating stories around it. Thus, we come across war narratives like *Randamoozham* (*The Second Turn*), *Ini Njan Urangatte* (*And Now Let Me Sleep*) *Marthandavarma*, *Dharmaraja*, *Thattakam* and *Abhayarthikal* (*Refugees*) to name a few. Vaikom Muhammad Basheer, one of the most prolific writers of Malayalam literature also dealt with the themes of war in his unconventional novelette *Voices* (*Shabdhangal*).

Shabdangal first published in Malayalam in 1947 by Mangalodayam Ltd., was translated into English by V. Abdulla as part of the volume *Voices/The Walls* by Sangam Books in 1976. Set in the backdrop of post World War II period, this significant work captured the attention of all with its intense critique on society, morality, religion, homosexuality and war. The entire narrative structured in the manner of a conversation between a soldier and a writer explores the brutal realities of war, hunger, disease and poverty. The orphaned soldier recounts his life experience to a writer who is not at all prepared for such an abrupt beginning. “Once upon a time there was a young man who had no known father or mother. He committed a large number of murders. In his twenty-fourth year he” (Basheer11). The writer embarrassingly takes notes when the soldier approaches him and shares his fragmented account of happenings in an erratic manner war. According to D. Laub, “the survivors [of the war] did not only need to survive so that they could tell their story but also needed to tell their story to survive” (qtd. in Ahamad et al. 2). Articulation functions as a purgation for the survivors. As the narrative unfolds Basheer treats war not as an external event but as an internal rupture. Through his unique blend of irony, humour and pathos, the dehumanizing effects of militarization slowly surfaces while reiterating the resilience of human spirit.

The soldier demobbed from the army after the war is presented as completely shattered, as he has no food, no work, no peace and no place to go. The soldier’s situation is so worse that he declares himself mad and wants to be angry at someone. The soldier appears shabby and is not able to take a bath for he strongly thinks “that water is the blood of the earth” (Basheer 11). He confesses that he has killed many people for the despicable leaders to rule this county and ironically they call it “A people’s war” (Basheer 14). According to the soldier the kings, emperors and dictators are all murderers. Religion and political organizations want authority and power to rule over humanity. Religion does this in the name of god and political organizations do it in their own name. Soldier recollects a bomb explosion which badly wounds his friend. To escape the excruciating pain and fear, friend implores

him to kill him. The very horrors of the war come alive through the pages: “From his fingers and his penis blood oozed out like molten steel rods! He was dripping – and every drop made a sound as it fell – on to the uniform of a dead soldier” (Basheer 19). In the course of the narration that oscillates between memory and hallucination, it reflects the psychological scars of conflict left behind by the war, thus aligning with the modernist anti-war tradition. Paul Fussell rightly posits that modern war literature often reflects irony and disillusionment instead of heroism (8).

Soldier talks about his origin and tells how a Hindu Priest becomes his foster father in infancy when he is abandoned by the biological parents at the cross roads. He is sad about the fact that he has no mother, for he says: “... I have never sucked a mother’s breast!” (Basheer 16). Orphaned again by the death of the priest, the soldier is compelled to stop his studies before joining the army. Participation in the Second World War changes his life completely. Returning from the war, the soldier feels himself an isolated being with no coherence or set pattern in his thought and life. He cannot even narrate his story systematically in the correct sequence of events and he talks incoherently from here and there. Cathy Caruth rightly points out that trauma narratives are marked by fragmentation and repetition, mirroring the difficulty of expressing traumatic experiences (4-11). She also posits that trauma should not be understood as bodily injury but as an injury to the consciousness (Ahmad M S & Zainab Buhari et al 2).

Prostitution and homosexuality is given a grave treatment in *Voices*. Every soldier has a woman or sometimes many. This attachment with the beloved finally turns fatal when they contract venereal diseases like gonorrhea and syphilis. Most soldiers return home contracting any of these diseases. The soldier raises a pertinent ethical question and wants the writer to judge whether prostitution is good or bad. The writer replies that it is among the oldest professions, pursued by beggars and queens, but exposes his own hypocrisy, admitting he would not allow his mother or sister to practice it (Basheer 20). In another context, soldier gives a detailed account of his encounter with a mother and a child. It turns out that the mother is a street prostitute who earns a living by selling her body. People in the street are leading a pathetic life. For women prostitutes in the street, copulation is not a private affair; customers want only their bodies. The soldier sadly narrates an incident in which he was kicked in the chest by a mother for saving her child from the bite of ants. Later, when she comes to know the truth that the soldier actually saved her child, she gives him money, mistaking him for a beggar. The narrative examines prostitution from multiple perspectives. Basheer critiques morality when the soldier demands to know the real culprit behind prostitution, the woman or the man. Even a man who has a pregnant wife visits the street prostitute. Every religion has its own outlook about morality, which is why some religions permit polygamy and polyandry. Animals, birds and reptiles all follow their own sense of morality. Here, Basheer satirizes ethics and morality that seems absurd.

For the virgin soldier, the photo of the film star remains his sole love until he returns from war. In a rare turn of events, after an upheaval, the soldier is rescued by a VIP who keeps him in his mansion. While staying there, the soldier wants to embrace a woman passionately and desperately. This curiosity about sex lands him in trouble. In a state of intoxication along with the treachery of a male prostitute, the soldier has his first homosexual intercourse. About which he says:

I I was a river that had sprung forth from a mountain top. For ages the water had been locked up in the mountain, without flow without movement. And now by my strength the mountain had rent asunder ... split into pieces. I was running at tremendous speed. I was losing myself in a boundless ocean. Finally ... finally I surfaced from the ecstasy (Basheer 34)

After that, he is appalled to find a male voice coming from his beloved in unpleasant and unsettling surroundings. Once the room is lighted, he finds that: “There was no womanliness in it. Black hair! Peeping from under the blouse! I was surprised and afraid” (Basheer 35). He cannot even express the emotion he experienced at that time. He addresses the male prostitute as ‘she’ and ‘it’. Male prostitute unveils his story and recalls how he became one. He accuses the society of being responsible for his pathetic condition. Unfortunately, the soldier contracts syphilis and gonorrhea from the male prostitute and, out of shame, leaves the VIP’s house and becomes a homeless wanderer in an insane world. The absurdity of life and pain of disease compel him to commit suicide. After the failed attempt, he approaches a writer whom he respects and tells his story of disillusionment and moral decay. War in *Voices* is delineated as basically absurd, and the soldier’s confusion is evident in the breakdown of his rationality. This corresponds to Albert Camu’s concept of the absurd, where human beings confront a meaningless universe. Basheer employs irony and black humour to project this absurdity. The confusion and alienation hint at the existential concerns about absurdity and the search for meaning. War in *Voices* can be read through the lens of Sartrean existentialism and Camus’s concept of the absurd, as the novelette depicts a crisis in meaning and the collapse of traditional values.

The story resists beginning, closure and linear progression – conventions usually followed by traditional narratives. This absence clearly points to the trauma undergone by the soldier throughout his life. Here, Basheer can be compared to modernist writers like Virginia Woolf who focused on psychological trauma. The soldier in the *Voices* invites comparison to Septimus Warren Smith in the novel *Mrs Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf. The narrative techniques used in both these texts foreground the internalization of war.

The title *Sabdhangal* literally meaning ‘sounds’ gives the readers an amazing aural experience. V.Abdulla rightly translated it as *Voices* making sure that we hear the story happen along with the

polyphony of voices, a concept put forward by Mikhail Bakhtin. The technique of reverberating voices used in the novelette engenders multiple facets of experience challenging authoritarian voices emphasizing subjectivity (Bakhtin 6-7). The blindman's voice vouchsafes this when he says: "What is there to see? I can hear everything!" (Basheer 44). Likewise, the readers can only hear the conversations between people and the description of sounds.

V. Abdulla's translation is faithful as he successfully captures the raw emotional intensity and the colloquial flow of the original Malayalam work. Basheer deliberately discards Sanskritized and bookish Malayalam and uses ordinary language of the people. In his introduction to *Voices*, V. Abdulla observes that Basheer's linguistic brevity create considerable difficulty during translation. Yet, the translator fully appreciates the author thus: "The savagery of war and rioting has been depicted as few other writers have done, either in Malayalam or other Indian languages, in the stark narrative of a demobbed soldier in 'Voices'" (7-8). The themes deployed by Basheer such as vulgarity, violence and severe moral questioning faced a lot of criticism upon its publication. The highly innovative style of writing and distinctive approach to a subject like war can be attributed to his personal experiences as a global wanderer.

Basheer redefines war literature as a site of psychological inquiry and ethical reflection. The narrative captures the inner turmoil of a war veteran who finds it difficult to cope with the trauma of war and its aftermath. Moreover, *Voices* emerges as a potent critique of war and a profound exploration of the human condition. By drawing the reader into the soldier's state of mind, Basheer is able to recreate the experience of trauma in the minds of his readers.

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