

Representation of the Poor's Plight in Vaikom's "Birthday": A Social Realistic Approach

- Laxman Bhatta

Abstract

This paper explores the plight of a poor student who doesn't have a penny to celebrate his birthday. "Janmadinaa" (Birthday) is a story originally written in Malayalam, narrated from the autobiographical perspective. Vaikom Muhammad Basheer, the narrator, makes the readers observe pathetically different encounters with his friends and neighbours. His friends and neighbours look at him with strange gaze and deny lending him even an 'anna' (rupee) to have a morsel of food and a cup of tea on his birthday. Vaikom has varieties of groups of characters: the poor, the students, and the helpless and rich people through the perspective of social realism. Social realism by George Lukacs describes socio-economic reality that rejects the deterministic relationship between the reality and its underlying meaning. Largely this article deploys Lucaks's concept to explicate Vaikom's story and reflects upon the issue of pretty misery of the protagonist. The story encapsulates an optimistic remark that the poor people always remain active and raise voice against the socio-economical domination from the elites.

Keywords: social realism, insensibility, strangeness, voicelessness, domination and discrimination,

Introduction: Struggle, Scarcity and Sacrifice in Students Life

Let the flame of revolution rise everywhere,
Let the present social order be burnt down
And let a new world be born! (Vaikom 76)

First time I encountered with these lines in my final semester of BA Major English. These lines saddened me a lot as my student life was also synonyms to scarcity, poverty and immediate needs of money and materials. More often, financial, social and cultural status of an individual determines how to practice and celebrate rituals, marriage, and birthday celebration. The way a rich and poor celebrate birthday differ on the socio-cultural and financial status. This autobiographical story raises the number of questions like: Does birthday matter same to rich and poor? Does society treat Vaikom respectfully on his birthday? Is a saying 'friend in need is friend indeed' really applicable to the narrator? In this paper I exhumes how poverty and scarcities leads narrator to examine and evaluate the neighbours, relatives and friends their behaviours and gaze to see a poor student fighting to join hands to mouth. Drawing upon the argument of Social Realism theories,

especially of George Lucks, who views “poverty as not only about income, it is about the deprivation of economic and social rights, insecurity, discrimination, exclusion and powerlessness. Poverty is an omnipresent problem that abandons class consciousness in poor people leaving them in alienation, frustration, and disjunction” (187). As Lucks states above, the disappointed factor in narrator’s life in non-other than the class- the rich who holds socio-political power in the society.

Published in the year 1944, Vaikom Muhammad Basheer’s short story “Birthday” provides a detail and vivid account of his own birthday in first person narration I, a day when he has no money to buy even a cup of tea. Narrating in personal tone I, Vaikom portrays his own real life events and incidents that happened in his college life. The story mesmerizes readers as it focuses on just one day in a man’s life: a day for celebration but when he has no money for food and is trying to fill his stomach by scrounging a meal off any of his acquaintance. The poor person only knows actual meaning of poverty and human sufferings. This suffering leads them to hold the faith that financial equality must be gained by blurring socio-economic notion of power. Jo Goodwin Parker, an American writer in her essay “What is Poverty?” states that financial suffering is heart breaking, throughout the hole and corner of the world. She further states:

Poverty is staying up all night on cold nights to watch the fire knowing one spark on the newspaper covering the walls means your sleeping child dies in flames. . . . Poverty is hoping it never rains because diapers won't dry when it rains and soon you are using newspapers. Poverty is seeing your children forever with runny noses. Paper handkerchiefs cost money and all your rags you need for other things. Even more costly are antihistamines. Poverty is cooking without food and cleaning without soap (98).

Parker and Vaikom represent the financially deprived people, whose winter and summer respectively goes on fire site and leakage roof. No birthday, anniversary or any special day for them, rather only special thing for them is to join hands to mouth.

Though the phenomena of expressing pain and suffering are quite common in life narration, but Vaikom’s portrayal of poverty and alienation encompasses the common problem that many financially deprived people experience in their everyday life. The readers follow the narration from one encounter to another and observe the attitudes of various people towards the narrator. And throughout it all there are the police and the CID agents who take him in for the questioning. Regarding the domination of poor people Marxist- Feminist Lillian S Robinson remarks:

Due to the existed doctrine of rich and poor many people rarely

hesitated to question most other established institutions and verities— is due to the preference for a heroic icon over an understanding of how the representation of such an icon derives from and serves—as well as challenges—the dominant social forces. Perhaps it is fair to say that, marginalized people that includes feminists behave as if they are unconvinced that cultural studies is a useful political weapon, whereas the value of the icon goes unquestioned.(6-7)

Even though the narrator is well known to the neighbours and friends, but they treat them as a strange one. This strangeness is indirectly guided by money and materials that clearly draws demarcation line in proletarian society. Hamid an intimate friend invites him for dinner on the birthday night but disappears when narrator approached at his house. This act of disappearing and deceiving the poor is quite common in class base society. That treats people not on the personal and professional basis rather on the monetary bases. This monetary value leads poor people to revolt against the have people either by stealing, looting or capturing the property. Same thing happened in this story as well where to stave off his hunger and with no possibility of gaining a meal by honest means he is forced to steal from one of his neighbours. This act of stealing instigates to be strong and bold to challenge being objected, discriminated and neglected by the nearest and dearest friends and acquainted people.

Reflection of Social and Economic Insensitivity of Friends and Acquaintances in “Birthday”

Being dependent on the political and historical aspect of society, social realism is constantly evolving and changing as per the changing scenario of the time. It is a representative form of art in which real events, incidents and activities often take place. The word ‘Social’ refers to the people in the society, and ‘Realism’ refers to the way these people are portrayed in each medium. Here, Medium denotes the way of representation whether through the print materials, sculptures or created arts that represents society, culture and traditions of an individual. Social realism gives accurate portrayal of the scene and characters without embellishments, and real socio-cultural impacts can be seen in these lines in the story where the narrator exclaims, “My acquaintances passed me by without seeming to see me. ‘Oh my friends, this is my birthday. Wish me happiness on my birthday’, I whispered in my heart. The shadow passed me by. Why was it that my friends did not speak to me on seeing me?” (73). Social realism as a theoretical tool depicts life of an individual in relations to existing social context, set of rules and principles that molds and guides an individual. This realistic presentation of an individual inspires common people to be aware of their rights and duties. Literature, being mirror of a society, must incorporate realistic picture; pain and pathos, emotions and sentiments that dwells in real life experience. Khwaja Ahmad Aabhas, a fierce

advocate of social realism, states “Social realism, then, is the acute awareness of the social forces that surround the individual, their power to influence the lives of men and women—for better or for worse and the over-all interaction of the individual and the society” (98). In this way, Matthew, a selfish friend of narrator, represents the social agencies, institutions and organizations that always hypnotize guide and mobilize as per their wish. Narrator, though seems so furious in the story, but fails to take any action against deceptive and helpless friends and neighbours. Due to the lack of financial position, narrator fails to take any action against the promising friends who assured him to help in time of need.

Social realist texts attempt to convey a message, or at least awareness, about an issue or problem through a single image. “Birthday” also contains realistic picture of modern youth, their insincerity and indulgence unethical activities. Vaikom reaffirms:

What is wrong with the world! Parents toiled and sent money regularly every month. With that money the young people received their education; and there were also cigarettes, tea, Coffee, ice cream, cinema, Cuticura powder, Vaseline, costly clothes, expensive foods, syphilis, gonorrhoea. There were the citizens of the future! Rulers and legislator! What was wrong with the world?” (78).

By throwing the light on then Indian society, the story “Birthday” provides interesting insights into the life of a poor person who thought not obviously poor is stricken by poverty which is doubly crippling because it is invisible to his friends and acquaintances. This autobiographical story incorporates the social realism that has always been predominant in our society but not noticed to common people as they are guided by rules set up by powerful people.

Power, whether financial or political, is always provisional and temporal in nature. In examining time and temporality in Indian society that is still backward, the author shows how the conventional temporal sequence of a past, present and future dominates, with little consideration being given to time as a multiple rather than singular concept. Vaikom compares and contrast differences in the temporal aspects of mainstream set of rules and identifies a changing concept of the time. He remarks “How much cruel is the time, there is no oil in the lamp in my room; and there is a great deal to write. That is why I got out my bed and have come and sat under this lone lamp near the lake side and began to write while things are still fresh in my mind” (70). Moreover, the memorizing act is so dominant in the story that the narrator doesn’t remain silent or passive when encounters the hatred and humiliations of Matthew, Hamid, Mr. P, Gangadhar, and two unknown boys on the auspicious day of the birthday. Henry James explains about realism and role of power to guide the life of civilians in his essay “The Art of Fiction” and argues that it is quite difficult to find the invisible power embedment in society. According to

him, whatever we do, they are all perceptions created by people with power and prestige. James writes:

I am far from intending by this to minimize the importance of exactness-of truth of detail. One can speak best from one's own taste, and I may therefore venture to say that the air of reality (solidity of specification) seems to me to be the supreme virtue of a novel—the merit on which all its other merits (including that conscious moral purpose of which Mr. Besant speaks) helplessly and submissively depend. If it be not there, they are all as nothing, and if these be there, they owe their effect to the success with which the author has produced the illusion of life. (5)

James says that a work of art if based on truthful and worthy incidents and describes the social realism; it provides enough proofs and evidences to the social critics to visualize the mirror image. The ideal views in any work of art do not work, according to him due to direct and indirect influence of the social structures. On the contrary, as argued by James, it is quite difficult to trace exact reality in the world because nothing can be exact reality. Reality is always behind the curtain. Whatever people claim to be real, it is only interpretation. But some are close to real while others are far from reality.

Social sensitivity explores the proficiency at which an individual can identify, perceive, and understand the context where personal or social interactions take place respectfully in the cordial manner. On contrary, social insensitivity promotes and praises the sense of strangeness, hatred and jealousy among the people. This sense of superior and inferior feeling, as explained in Nigerian novelist Chigozie Obioma creates inferior feeling by abandoning the hopes and expectations needed in life. Chinoso, a narrator in his novel, *Orchestra of Minorities*, expresses his agony of being poor like Vaikom in the story Birthday. Chinoso expresses his agonies as below:

“When a man encounters something that reminds him of an unpleasant event in his past, he pauses at the door of the new experience, carefully considering whether or not to go in. If he has already stepped in, he may retrace his steps and reconsider whether to re-enter. Like my host, every man is inextricably chained to his past and may always fear that the past might repeat itself. (28)

The sense of anger is not different to a person whose life is full of pain and burdens of being poor. Gangadhar, a friend of Vaikom coincidentally meets him on the birthday. Gangadhar becomes so insensible that he demands donation for the rally to march against the government. Vaikom, being the penniless, reaffirms “I don't have even an *aana*. It is several days since I have eaten a morsel. Today is my birthday. I haven't eaten anything so far. Ganga if you can help me in this

situation” (75). Gangadhar, being the rich and active in politics, doesn't pay much attention and insists that either financial donation or physical participation in political rally is needed. “Stop joking and listen and listen to me. There is great trouble. Some three thousands workers have gone on strike. They have been starving for a week and half. There may be great trouble” (76). This harsh remark reiterates that poor people are always victim of rich people threat and fear. They have to obey their neighbours in any cost; otherwise they can be ostracized from the neighbourhood.

Another incident of age based social insensitivity is described in the party where his close friends celebrate the party without inviting the narrator. Vaikom satirizes falling Indian ethics and human values in connections to the youth's party which gets arranged without any purpose on the money send to them by their family members. Vaikom further states:

Six o' clock: a beautiful evening. The setting sun was like a bob of blood swallowed by the sea... . The western sky was filled with golden clouds. The ocean seemed shoreless. Nearer, the rippling lagoon. Its shore was so peaceful. Young dandies, smoking cigarettes, were promenading there; and young ladies dressed in gorgeous saris, with glancing look and shy smiles on their faces, were resting there. One could hear heart-easing broadcast songs from erotic films. The gentle breeze carried fragrance from flower... but I was almost fainting. (77)

It is not very clear in the story that whether the young participants really took part in any sort of celebration or that was casual gathering. But one undeniable fact is that the saying 'a friend in need is friend indeed' is not at all applicable in case of financially weaker section of the friend like Vaikom.

Modern world, states S.V Srinivas in the essay “Politics of Failure”, creates the spikes of conspiracies through the means of western education system that only provides certificates than characters and morality. The creation and recreation of institutional mechanism to control the voice of people always make the more poor and helpless. He questions the reliability and relevancy of the colonial education systems that has completely replaced the Sanskrit based Hindu education system. He further writes “The humanistic aspect in our youths is almost at the vanishing point. The major blaming factor is education that neglects humanistic approach in curriculum. The obstructions offered to the acquisition of knowledge in the discipline closes the open ground for the student's real life experiences” (107). The impacts of socio-cultural, educational system also has been at the center of the story “Birthday”. Police for instant, arrested him and interrogated him for an hour. They accused him of inciting the public mob against the administration. The narrator in the story denotes brutality of police in following lines:

After an hour of police interrogation I returned to my room, sat in the darkness and perspired profusely. No light in my room today. How can I get kerosene oil? I must have something to eat to abate my hunger. Do police really protect helpless people like me? Money I think is most important to modern people- an instrument of happiness. (77-78)

Government institutions, like police, always expected to be protective and savior of the civilians. On contrary, this story indicates that the major cause of Vaikom- representative of common people- is lack of socio- political awareness.

The financial status in developing nation is one of the main causes of human suffering, and Vaikom is not an exception. He has tried his level best to depict vivid explanation of the ups and downs that common people face in their everyday life due to lack of money. Indians have to face socio-economic problems for the long time. Before independence, British had controlled all financial resources and even after independence indirectly, they have dominates financial activities through the social and political institutions. These institutions create the discourse of power and hierarchy on the basis of the money, materials and majority they do have in society. These legacies still create divisive walls among the people in name of caste and religion, money and materials, power and party financial activities. Vaikom, being post- independent writers, tries to create the memory, experience, pain and suffering of common people. As a social realistic story, "Birthday" portrays the financial problem that many of the students go in their student life. Moreover, the bond of friendship is important in this time and when our own friends turn deaf ears towards us, we remain helpless like Vaikom still expecting their help which rarely come true in lifetime.

Conclusion

Though equality and justice has become a catchword in realistic stories, treatment on the basis of money, materials and power are significant challenges among the voiceless and choiceless people in many of the third world countries. Besides the other aspects of social justice, behaviors on the basis of financial and social position often cause social tension. Vaikom, tries to analyses upon the public gaze that targets needy and poor people. This story provides a detailed and vivid account of the birthday of the narrator who has no money even to by a cup of tea on his birthday. This story emphasis upon the need to enhance sense of oneness, human relations based not only on money and materials rather on people to people relations, their needs and basic necessities. By incorporating the concern of every individual in the society, Vaikom is able to portray social-economic reality.

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