

'The Card Sharper's Daughter' is a novel written by Vaikom Muhammad Basheer.

The story is about a card sharper Ottakkannan Pokker, his daughter Sainaba and his daughter's lover Mandan Muthappa.

Ottakannan Pokker runs a small tea shop. He also makes quite a small living as a cardsharpener. His daughter Sainaba who takes care of the tea shop falls in love with a poor man named Mandan Muthappa. Pokker disagrees to her daughter's love as he always aimed to get her married to a better groom. The story narrates and

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The story narrates and describes the love between Sainaba and Muthappa. The story ends with how Mandan Muthappa defeated Ottakkannan Pokker in the card game.

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WIKOM Muhammad Basheer  
Unit - 3 (2)

# M Basheer: The Card Sharper's Daughter

## *The Card Sharper's Daughter*

### **An Introduction**

As mentioned earlier, 'The Card Sharper's Daughter' belongs to the group of stories known as the Sthalam stories. All the features of a Sthalam story discussed above are therefore quite evident in this story too. The 'humble historian' makes an early appearance in the story and states in a mock serious tone that he is going to relate the history of how the arch card sharper Pokker was done in by the slow-witted Muthapa and how the latter thus succeeded in winning the hand of Zainaba who is Pokker's daughter. There is the same exaggeration of a small event which lays bare its triviality when considered against the grandiose style used for narrating the same. We witness the use of the whole rigmarole of historical writing in the narrativization of this small event and we are also consistently exposed to a parody of political discourse throughout the narrative. The narrator remains an amused observer merely recording objectively the

On hearing this judgment, Banare protests saying that she will not let the sentence pronounced on her.

triviality of the event which is at the centre of the narrative. Thus the narrativization becomes a deliberate travesty of the process of historicization of events.

Linked to this factor of academic historiography is the use of elements from the discourse of political analysis of historical events. The same is a very common practice in academic historiography and more often than not political ideologies and political rhetoric are a part of the textual apparatus of the historicization of events. In the case of Zainaba and Muthapa, their struggle is presented as a people's movement with the whole village becoming involved. Muthapa becomes 'the universally acclaimed leader of the masses' while Pokker is denounced as a hoarder, a black-marketer and above all 'a bourgeois reactionary.' There is a lot of slogan shouting in keeping with the politically charged atmosphere in the village. Basheer is having a dig at the Marxist leanings of the people of Kerala and in a sardonic, tongue-in-cheek manner presents burlesque at its best by applying these grand terms to insignificant and unimposing subjects.

With Zainaba's help Muthapa is able to connive and beat Pokker at his own game. The secret however, is not revealed till the end and Basheer's talent as a raconteur par excellence is evident in the manner in which he is able to keep his readers and his listeners riveted to the narrative in order to find out how Muthapa could win each time he placed a coin on one of Pokker's cards. The involvement of the onlookers catches on to the readers too as they witness the undoing of the clever Pokker by the slow witted Muthapa. While the crowd applauds Muthapa's luck, we have an ironic comment from our humble chronicler: 'There was absolutely no connection between card sharpening and luck. Pokker knows this too and is at his wit's end. Zainaba's connivance in the game is complete for she offers a lame explanation that probably by now every one has caught on to the trick. But what this trick is Basheer still withholds from us, whipping our curiosity further and thus maintaining our interest in the narrative till the end. Quite ingeniously Muthapa has hit upon the best method in making Pokker concede to his demand "let me marry Zainaba and I'll quit card sharpening for good." The 'valiant villagers' were firm on this compromise formula.

While Basheer has presented a parody of romantic conventions in his delineation of the romance between Muthapa and Zainaba, he has at the same time also presented a burlesque of the tragic conventions as well. We witness here not the conventional fall of a prince or king but the fall of the clever card sharper who is beaten at his own game.

## Such a Long Journey Summary & Study Guide Description

**Such a Long Journey** Summary & Study Guide includes comprehensive information and analysis to help you understand the book. This study guide contains the following sections:

- Plot Summary
- Chapters

of kings and queens or princes and princesses or knights and ladies he talks here about the marginalized sections of society, the thieves, the pickpockets, criminals and so on. And, he talks about them, not with a sense to reform but with sympathy and acceptance.

#### • The Plot

Having enlightened his readers about the characters and the situation, Basheer is now ready to unfold the main narrative which is about the debunking of the arch card-sharper by the dimwitted Muthapa. At the same time however, the narrative is also about the romantic involvement of Zainaba and Muthapa and about their struggle to get married. The two are linked because it is Zainaba, who helps Muthapa to out-wit her father Pokker and Muthapa in turn does so because he wants to marry Zainaba. Keeping true to the parodic mode of the narrative Basheer uses the love affair of Zainaba and Muthapa to make a deliberate mockery of the romantic conventions and the tragic conventions of romantic love stories. He raises their struggle to mock epic heights. With characteristic irony he presents here a love between two riff-raff of society – a pick-pocket and the daughter of a swindler who is caught in the act of stealing a bunch of bananas herself by her lover. Once again her modus operandi is described with interesting details and without any admonition or indignation on the part of the narrator. In this world of criminals and cheats, it is entirely possible to have your lady-love too indulging in such nefarious activities. Yet quite characteristically, the event is recorded objectively rather than it being used as a moral platform.

The romantic conventions which talk of perfection in their lovers are thus made to stand on their head by the realist Basheer. He seems to be saying here that the love between these two crooks yields as well to romantic treatment as any grand and lofty passion between the knights and ladies of conventional romances. He raises the affair to mock-epic heights and presents it as a people's movement with the whole village getting involved in Muthapa's struggle-to win Zainaba's hand, despite opposition from her father. In such a scenario Pokker comes to represent a reactionary force while Muthapa's supporters are the radicals. The event is presented as the narrativization of history and 'the humble chronicler' intrudes into the narrative with a reminder that he is narrating a history here. The implements used in historical writing are mobilized once again and it is implied that whatever is being recounted here has emerged from the fact-finding mission of the humble historian. This mission included his interviews of the main characters Muthapa and Zainaba. So he writes: 'Muthapa testifies to all these facts – Zainaba however, refused to reply when she was confronted by this chronicler and asked whether she loved Muthapa. But she was quite certain that Muthapa was not a *mandan* "Bapa says that out of spite," she said.'

The rhetorical devices of the grandiose Tone on the one hand and of the undercutting of that grandeur by the triviality of the event at the centre on the other are both at play in this narrativization. The insignificant and the trivial are elevated to the significant and grand heights. A pompous tone is developed and the event becomes a battle for Zainaba's heart. Yet at the centre of it all, the event is a small event, not one to have any far reaching ramifications. The whole rhetoric therefore serves to expose the

Arabic words. The dialect cannot be reproduced in an English translation exactly but we have come as close as possible in capturing the briskness of the card-shaper's language. Both Pokker and Muthapa are called artists and Basheer describes in detail how they practice their art. There is a lot of emphasis on the visual and minute observations go in to make up the descriptions of both. The humour is sardonic, tongue-in-check and can be glimpsed in the way Basheer first describes in detail how Pokker cheats his clients and then ends by saying 'There was no fraud in it really!' and finds nothing 'demeaning' in the profession of a pickpocket. Basheer treats pickpocketing as he would treat any other profession -- in his world there seems to be no disrespect attached with cheats and swindlers and the lies they indulge in. The tone of righteous indignation is entirely missing in Basheer's narrative for the simple reason that he is not here to sit in any moral judgement on his characters. He is merely an amused observer, a humble chronicler. While the tone is ironic in this sense, at the same time it is mischievous. He seems to take delight in the fast-paced human drama that he records for us here.

The sheer energy of life and its celebration by the inhabitants of this village affect our detached observer too and it seems difficult for him to remain detached for long. He is irresistibly drawn towards the ups and downs, the small domestic conflicts the rumours, the gossip, the exaggerations, the posturings of these people. In the process of noting these various things Basheer manages to recreate for us a very realistic picture of an Indian village in Kerala complete with its bustling market day; the mounds of tapioca, coconuts, bananas, and vegetables waiting to be unloaded from the boats at the landing; the obscure little coffee shop which serves coffee with jaggery; restaurants which serve tea with boiled black gram, appam, vada and bananas; buyers and sellers who jostle with one another for best bargains and villagers who feel it their duty to be involved with the issue of Zainaba's marriage to Muthapa. Visual details, like the ancient silk cotton tree under which Pokker conducts his daily business, also make up the realistic dimension of the village picture we get in this story.

In a manner similar to his description of the profession of card-sharping, Basheer describes for us the modus operandi of a pick-pocket. Having thus generated a suitable interest in both the protagonists he next fans our curiosity further by mentioning that the tale he is now about to unfold describes how 'Mandan Muthapa, the nitwit, vanquished his nimble witted adversary and won the hand of' and he leaves us teetering on the edge of suspense.

Till this point in the story Basheer has just managed to introduce his characters and set the stage for the action to begin. Unlike the modern short story where character and scene are revealed or implied through dialogue Basheer, like Premchand's 'Holy Panchayat', has devoted a lot of time and space for giving us detailed descriptions regarding both. Can you guess the reason for this? Well, the reason lies in the fact that in telling the story Basheer is following the oral tradition. He is writing this story as it would have been narrated by a story teller to his audience. That is why the sense of the teller and the tale was created right in the beginning from the first sentence itself. The conventions of the oral tradition demand that listeners be told about the characters and the setting. They fall in line with the tradition of stories which begins 'Once upon a time there lived a king.' The modern element in Basheer's story however is, that instead

beings and consequently when he included these characters in his stories, he delineated them with the same indulgence and acceptance.

### • The Event as History

Having introduced the main characters and laid the ground for the story to unfold, the narrator comes to the verge of beginning the narrative but not before he has made it clear that what we are about to read is the narrativization of a historical event. Thus the narrator refers to himself as 'the humble chronicler' and uses the textual apparatus of historical writing. This is the reason why he draws our attention to procedure. Like a historian he has given us 'the essential facts' and again like a historian he is going to base his narrative on these facts as well as whatever other data he has collected from 'interviewing major characters'. Ultimately he concludes by saying that he is now going to record the whole event for the 'benefit of students of history' thus driving the point further. The whole procedure of modern academic historiography will therefore be mobilized in this narrativization of a historical event. Yet the idea itself is undermined and debunked by the fact that the event is of no historical importance at all. It is in fact at best a small event having just local reverberations rather than national or international ones. The triviality of the event exposes and thus parodies the structuring of historical narrative. This parodic debunking of historical writing and also historical explanation is carried on throughout the story.

Notice that the narrator makes a very clever use of political rhetoric and leans towards Marxist terminology for describing people and situations. By doing so, while he is depicting the popularity of Marxist ideology, he is also presenting a critique of it by applying it to trivial matters like a domestic conflict. Thus the two constables are described as representatives of the 'tyrannical regime' meaning the government, the village big-wigs are also named but it is pointed out that they are all peace lovers and have nothing to do with 'war reactionaries.' Phrases like 'tyrannical regime' and 'reactionary' are lifted straight from Marxist terminology. By applying the same to people and situations that have no grandeur or no importance to merit such treatment, Basheer succeeds in making a travesty of the politically charged atmosphere of Kerala which at the time was reeling under the influence of a lot of slogan shouting and political happenings.

### • Laying the Ground for the Narrative to Unfold

Having introduced the characters by name, Basheer moves on to now describe them and begin with Ottakkannan Pokker and then proceeds with the descriptions of Zainaba and Muthapa. It is made evident that these three are going to be the main protagonists of the story. In these descriptions a lot of emphasis is placed on the visual, so, while Pokker's complexion is fair Muthapa is jet black in comparison. If Pokker is 'one-eyed' Muthapa 'is 'cross-eyed'. Pokker's teeth are stained red since he is a voracious betel chewer whereas Muthapa's smile is always charming. Both are therefore almost opposites of each other. Both are known by their respective professions, so, Pokker is

these terms that are drawn from romantic literature about knights and ladies when according to conventions battles are fought by these chivalrous knights for the love of their ladies. Yet a sudden deflation occurs when it turns out to be not a grand tale about knights and ladies but an amusing story about a few simple people in a small village in Kerala. The prosaic fact is mentioned soon after the grandiose introduction of the three main characters. This device of inflation and then deflation creates the mock-serious tone in the story. The style is akin to the mock-epic style where grand themes are applied to puny subjects and the disparity makes for humour.

Other characters in this Saga are next introduced and we have the two police constables who are called 'Stooges of the Tyrannical regime'. These are Thorappan Avaran and Driver Pappunni, the two master rogues. Then Anavari Raman Nair and Ponkurissu Thoma, who are referred to as 'the bigwigs of the local criminal fraternity' and then there is Ettukali Mammoonhu who is their protege. Apart from these there are about 2200 other villagers and they are all 'peace lovers' and have nothing to do with 'war-mongering reactionaries'.

Notice that the main characters all have sobriquets prefixed to their names which in turn describe either some physical feature, a character trait or links them with a past event. Thus Ottakkannan means one-eyed; Mandan means slow-witted, Thorapan is the mole, Anawari is the elephant-grabber and Ettukali is the spider. Prefixing descriptive sobriquets to a person's name is a regional specificity as it is a common practice in Kerala. These sobriquets however, also link these characters to other stories in the group because at times they refer to the events that have already occurred in an earlier story e.g.; Anawari Raman Nair is called Anawari, the elephant-grabber, because he had once mistaken a dung heap for an elephant and had stealthily tried to grab it. Similarly Thoma is known as Ponkurissu Thoma because Ponkurissu is a cross made of gold and the sobriquet got attached to Thoma's name because he had once stolen a gold cross from the Church. Some of these sobriquets work as visual aids and help us imagine what a character may look like eg: Ettukali who is called a spider because of his small head and long drooping moustache. At other times a prefixed sobriquet determines our opinion about a character even before we are given a chance to form one eg: Muthappa is called Mandan, the slow-witted and we begin by precluding that he is a fool. The whole story however is directed at proving that he is no fool after all for he succeeds in outwitting the arch card sharper Pokker whose sobriquet Ottakkannan simply informs us that he is one-eyed.

You must have noticed that the world we have just been introduced to is an anti-world peopled by characters who are the dregs of society being rogues and criminals all. They are the marginalised beings and Basheer's technique of characterization is such that not even for a moment are we made to feel that he is criticizing them or moralizing through them. In fact his attitude towards them is an indulgent one which accepts them along with all their failings. You may recall at this point that Basheer had himself come in close contact with such people on innumerable occasions, especially while being incarcerated along with their likes. He had had the chance to observe them with a humane eye rather than a judgemental one. He had looked at them just as human



'essential facts' concerning the debunking of Pokker by Muthapa. Yet the emphasis placed on 'essential facts' springs from the desire to give a semblance of history to the narrative. In a tongue-in-cheek manner Basheer has a dig at Marxist learnings when he describes Zainaba and Muthapa's love affair as a people's movement and makes a liberal use of the Marxist terminology in describing people and situations so that the small village, the Sthalam becomes a microcosm of a polity. Irony, satire and humour are all present in a deliberate parodying of not only historical fiction but also romantic conventions and political discourse. Let us look at the story in detail to see how this is achieved.

### Detailed Analysis

#### • The First Person Narrator

The sense of the teller and the tale is created right from the first sentence itself and the 'performance' of the story begins. From the manner in which an emphasis is placed on 'the moral' of the story the teller's apparent aim seems to be didactic. A sense of curiosity is aroused by placing hints that the story may go against the fair sex since 'girls will find it neither amusing nor enlightening.' Sweeping statements however, put the reader on guard – why murder all daughters in cold blood? We might well ask ourselves this question.

The first person narrator, who has set the ball rolling, now makes his appearance as the 'I' of the story and indicates that what he has just said is not a matter of personal opinion. He implies that he is the narrator as well as the writer here for he mentions his lady readers who might get incensed by his 'blatantly misogynist observations' and he hopes they would not condemn him 'to eternal damnation'. The sense of the teller and the tale is going to be present throughout. The point of view is going to be that of this narrator who is will observe the action and the characters and present the same to us. The story proper has not been launched yet. Till now the narrator has merely laid the ground for the narrative to unfold and has succeeded in implying that the subject of the story is a serious one. Yet you cannot fail to notice that the tone he adopts is a mock serious one and in the same mock serious tone he introduces the main characters of the story in one go.

#### • Characterisation

Ottakkannan Pokker is introduced as the 'tragic protagonist' and the narrator tells us that all ire of his lady readers should be directed at this figure rather than him for it is Pokker who had made the misogynist observation mentioned earlier. The other characters are Mandan Muthapa and Zainaba who is Pokker's daughter. Muthapa begins as a villain in the story but attains a heroic stature as the story progresses and ends up a chivalrous knight where he takes up arms against Pokker. Zainaba proves to be his 'comrade in arms'. Once again the manner in which these characters have been introduced, builds up expectations for a serious story, grand in 'theme and heroic in stature. There is talk about a 'battle' about 'comrades in arms' about 'chivalry' about 'tragedy'. A steady elevation of an event is being effected through a deliberate use of

called 'Ottakhannan Pokker, the card-sharper' while Muthapa is called 'Mandan Muthapa, the pick pocket'. Pokker's wife is dead whereas Muthapa's parents too have both passed away. Zainaba, Pokker's daughter is the village beauty- and being nineteen years of age is all set to be married off 'to some hard working young man.' Pokker is working very hard to collect the money needed for marrying off his daughter. In a racy colloquial style Basheer continues to bring us up to date with the situation and we are next informed of how the one hundred and twenty rupees that Pokker had collected over the years, are already lost. But nobody had stolen it so where had the money gone? In a chatty tone, where the narrator enters the narrative in first person, refreshing the sense of the teller and the tale, he asks the reader to be patient. Thus suspense and curiosity, two important ingredients of a short story, are both brought into play.

The build up to the main narrative is however not over yet. It is not sufficient for Basheer to simply mention the respective professions of the arch rivals Pokker and Muthapa. He gives us an indepth look at how card-sharpping or pick pocketing works. As mentioned earlier Basheer had modelled many of the characters in his Sthalam stories on the various 'jail-birds' he had met while incarcerated along with them. His behind-the-scenes knowledge about card-sharpping and pick- pocketing, could very well spring from the same source. Like any other profession, Basheer gives due respect to these too and in a style which is typically Basheerian, he proceeds to give us an objective description of them. He is not a conscious social reformer, therefore, while he tells us about professions which run against the law, he neither condemns them nor valorizes them in any way. He remains objective as well as slightly amused, using his device of inflation and deflation to create irony, satire as well as humour. Thus, while on the one hand he tells us that card sharpping requires brains as well as capital, in the next breath we are told what that 'capital' is - 'pack of cards, an old issue of Malayala Manorama and a handful of small stones.' Any inflated expectations that might have sprung up from the imposing word 'capital' are immediately punctured in a manner where the tone remains dead-pan and there is no obvious laughter. An amused smile however, cannot be pushed away. Basheer's humour therefore is not the raucus kind. In fact, it is very subtle.

With Pokker's cry of 'Hai Raja ....., ' Basheer makes the card-sharpping language come alive for his readers. At this point you must remember that Basheer was writing at a time and place when the literary scene was riddled with conventions of Sanskritized Malayalam writings. In such a milieu he intrudes with not only the colloquial everyday speech of the villagers, but also the language of card sharpers and pickpockets. Basheer believed that each profesaion creates its own language and the same is very evident in Pokker's speech as he entices customers to come and play his game. The cry rings in our ears and we can almost visualize him shouting at the top of his voice "Hai Raja.... Come on everybody.... Double your money folks . . . two for one, four for two, the joker makes your fortune. Never mind if you place your money on the numbered cards. It's your alms for a poor man... hai raja!"

The translation can capture the rawness of this language only partially. It would deliver its crispy effects better in the original. As pointed out in the annotations to your text, Basheer used the Mappila dialect of the Malayalee Muslims which was interspersed with-