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The Fiction of Bolwar Mahamad Kunhi

Abstract: Bolwar Mahamad Kunhi is a distinctive voice in Kannada writing of the last quarter century. What is remarkable about his writing is that he writes as a locally rooted Indian who has an intimate knowledge of his background, the Muslim way of life. What his fiction brings out is that people need an anchor in life and they look to religion for sustenance. Bolwar has an equally close knowledge of the way traditional Brahmins live and his portrayal of the inter-face between completely different ways of life is startlingly true and refreshing.

Bolwar Mahamad Kunhi's short stories (1) are like a breath of fresh air in Kannada Literature for more than one reason. Firstly his stories deal with Muslim life in rural India lived in close contact with people of other persuasions, and the texture and feel of such an existence. Secondly while there have been Muslim names in the Kannada literary world which can be counted on the fingers of one hand (mystics and poets included), hardly anyone prior to Bolwar had explored the inner world woven of moral, ethical and social concerns that are peculiar to the Muslim way of life. This is not to say that Bolwar is a Muslim writer but to highlight the fact that he writes from the background of a section of the people of Karnataka whose voice was absent from the concourse of voices claiming attention in the world of letters. In 1973 Bolwar's writing first made an appearance in print. "Those who for the sake of power and consequence in the world, with only the evidence of their eyes and ears, mindlessly quote the Holy Koran, make them stand on the burning coals of hell". This was a voice totally different from all the others clamouring for attention. Bolwar's fiction makes no protest against marginalization, exploitation, lack of opportunities, oppression by the majority community, corruption in political

life, and such other hackneyed themes. He is also refreshingly free of the habit of flogging the dead horse of the caste system. In his fiction the wretched of Independent India appear often, pursuing their traditional occupations, making fools of themselves, showing kindness and consideration to others, getting duped by charlatans – in short, leading ordinary lives without the obligatory mark of Cain on their foreheads that many Kannada writers feel it their duty to display. In most of his stories, a human being is confronted with a situation where conventional wisdom, whether it is religiously sanctioned or socially acceptable, does not answer. In one of his finest stories “A Piece of Wall” there are two themes running parallel, a desperately poor widow hoping to build a roof over her head and a prosperous jeweller’s son who gets sucked into the Babri Masjid demolition plot in 1992. The word “wall” acquires resonances echoing through the prayer halls of mosques and temples everywhere in the world. The question at the end of the story is – can anyone demolish the sense of the sacred in a human heart? Does the demolition of a mosque erase India’s Muslim heritage? Can such an act of covert political vandalism destroy the fabric of trust and mutual dependence that Indians of different religions, living together for centuries have built up? Bolwar does not raise these questions, he trusts the tale to tell the reader what it has to say. In the starkness of its existential position the story reminded me of Tolstoy’s “How Much Land Does a Man Need?” I had read this story in Kannada as an eight year old and it has stayed with me ever since as a measure of things. Whatever the story may have lost in translation from Russian into English and then into Kannada, it still delivered a powerful wallop. As Pushkin said “Translators are the post-horses of civilization”. Very often translation into another language transforms a text in ways unforeseen by author or translator. Bolwar’s stories are deeply rooted in the soil of his native coastal Karnataka and his Kannada is a dialect of that region replete with words from other Dravidian languages, mainly Tulu and Konkani. Add to it the Arabic of the sacred texts of Islam and the Urdu spoken by Muslims in India and the Sanskrit words without which prayers in Kannada to any God cannot be

addressed. Bolwar's fictional world is by and large located in a small village called Mutthuppadi about 40 miles from the port city of Mangalore. This village he has peopled with men and women of varying backgrounds – rich mill-owning Muslim merchants, boys selling fish in baskets on a bicycle, Brahmin scholars, skilled jewellers, canny officials, young men dreaming of the Gulf, beautiful teenage girls destined for impotent or short-lived or inhibited husbands or worse, eyed by respectably married lechers – to name but a few. Bolwar's stories do not sport a fashionable message or a politically correct ideology. The stories are told as stories, interesting because they are about flesh and blood human beings trying to survive in an uncertain world, where the only anchors available are in religion, custom and ceremony. A good many of Bolwar's stories are titled with concepts from Islam. These concepts are guide-posts, not necessarily tickets to heaven. In the story named "Iddat" a beautiful young widow who had been married to an impotent old man, spends the stipulated period of mourning in isolation, austerity and prayer. Islam allows remarriage. The young and attractive man who was her husband's right hand, is staying in the house and taking care of the business. The old lady who is the husband's sister, has ensured this. On the day Iddat ends, the girl learns that he is to marry and bring home a daughter-in-law to her. Whose decision this is, we do not learn. The girl becomes a mother-in-law without having been a wife or a mother. The story ends with a prayer for punishment that she intones silently, for having dared to hope. There is no room for sentimentality in his stories. They do not drip with synthetic pity for the 'oppressed classes'. The treatment of the very poor who think up a ruse to get extra rations and end up having to pay a tithe has the same gentle humour as that of the comfortable, salaried people trying to stir communal trouble in another story. Bolwar's handling of the pathetic calls to mind Nabokov's technique of presenting the essentially tragic Pnin in a comic perspective, leaving it to the reader to arrive at her/his own conclusions. The aging Musliar who reads the Khutub in the masjid on Fridays and is supported by the community which gives him food everyday of the month in one

of the houses of the members, suffers from toothache and has lost several teeth. His reading of the Khutub is affected by this and some younger, Gulf-returned men want to remove him. Musliar has no other means of earning a living. The one influential, wealthy member of the congregation who can speak for him, keeps him waiting for hours and does not deign to see him. The mortified man walks out, braving the ferocious Dobermans in the yard, to face a bleak and uncertain future, but rejecting the false values of the mill-owner ("Jannat").

In a story called "Anka" Bolwar's narrator discusses all the inherent possibilities a situation provides by way of choice. An old, poor Muslim woman has two sons, the older is away on his own, the younger is hard put to make a living in the village. Someone offers him a job if he agrees to become a Hindu. Later he falls ill and is in hospital. His mother goes to see him but does not know his present name. Both communities are in a ferment as to who is to claim the corpse for burial/cremation and how. The Moulvi mildly suggests that they can pray for his recovery. The narrator looks at the various options open to him. The scene between the estranged mother and son could be a great tear-jerker. But in the story the boy recovers, killing all the melodramatic variants to the story. His mother returns to her village.

Bolwar does not dwell on the obvious. Any Kannada commercial movie script-writer can do it. What is important to him is the question of *Swadharma*. We need the word *Dharma* desperately in today's world which is getting increasingly complex day by day. *Dharma* roughly means "the right way to be/act". *Swadharma* is what is right conduct for an individual in a given situation, which can have endless variables. A story from the *Upanishads* illustrates this: a hermit in the forest sees an exhausted man running from his pursuers, who seeks his help. The hermit hides him in a cave. When the King's soldiers come and question him he answers truthfully. The fugitive is captured and taken away. What is the right thing for him to do? Refuse to hide a suppliant? Lie to the soldiers? And he an ascetic,

sworn to truth and purity. He has to make a choice between humanity and detachment and he makes the wrong choice.

Most people live on the teetering edge of such choices. Religion and conventional wisdom offer guidelines but they are often too simplistic to be of much use. In a story about a boy who sold fish, Bolwar has a Brahmin astrologer to whom the boy comes before he undertakes a bigger venture. The astrologer knows that he is a very hard-working honest person and is looking forward to this. He gives him his good wishes and tells him that only those who are dissatisfied with the present need to know the future and since he had made his plans already, he should go ahead. The new venture is short-lived: the old car the young man had bought has an accident and he escapes with minor injuries. But is the astrologer who is hit hardest. He falls into a state of stunned silence and total passivity. The most enjoyable part of the story is the speculation among the townspeople who swear by the accuracy of his predictions, and cannot understand why he did not warn the boy. A month later three of them decide to go to see him. The stony astrologer's wife tells them that he is waiting for the boy to ride by on his bicycle. Even as they stand there, the prediction comes true.

The aged astrologer's sense of failure comes from his being unable to determine his *Swadharma*. He opted for worldly wisdom and common sense. Would warning the boy have been a better thing to do? Who knows?

Many of Bolwar's stories show how neither religion nor conventional thinking come to the help of a person in a moral dilemma. In one story a very poor Hindu woman who was forced to be a prostitute, hears a former customer speaking of her nubile daughter. She forbids her to go out of the house. A little later some of the village worthies come to her offering to help her with the police as her daughter has been abducted by a Muslim boy and married. She tells them she sent the girl with him. Bolwar does not go into the depiction of people's mental states as a narrator, except when it serves a comic purpose. The pathetic and the tragic are left to find their resonance in the reader's imagination.

There are two aspects of Bolwar's writing that appeal to me particularly: the first is the stratum of Indian society that he writes about, poor people in a small village who face life without any props and who confront genuine human problems. Secondly the social fabric that he depicts is authentically Indian, composed of a mosaic of different religions, castes, occupations and interests but living in mutual trust and respect. Even in the years following the Babri Masjid demolition when communal clashes are regularly organized by politicians, very often the affected people prefer to sort it out themselves without outside interference. After all Muslims are Indians who have lived here for centuries along with everybody else and no one thought of them as outsiders. It is this authentic reality that Bolwar's fiction reflects.

When the rest of the world is equating Islam with violence, there is a country where that religion is practised accommodating freedom, tolerance, a progressive outlook and respect for the rights of others. India rarely gets credit for any of its positives: how many Holocaust historians even mention India as a country that welcomed Jews and gave them privileges? India is associated exclusively with poverty and the caste system. Many of the Indian writers currently writing in English have mostly seen the country through a telescope. Regional literatures are engaged with their readership and have a vigorous life. It is so in Kannada. Bolwar is an unusual and exceptionally sensitive writer whose fiction embodies the texture of life as it is lived in this vast and multi-layered country.

NOTES

(1) Bolwar Mahamad Kunhi has eight short story collections, one novel, two stage plays and six children's books to his credit, besides several other editorial works. He was conferred three Sahitya Academy Awards in Karnataka State, and has also won National Awards for his contribution to Kannada Films. His works have been translated into other Indian languages.

Vimala Rama Rao was Professor in the Department of English, Bangalore University until 2005. She was a British Council Scholar at the University of Wales (UK) and a Fulbright Fellow at Harvard University (USA). Her Doctoral work was on the fiction of Vladimir Nabokov. She has presented papers in several international conferences in Russia and Sweden. Her published works include a book on F. Dostoevskij (1982) and a collection of critical essays entitled *Of Walls and Women* (2000). She has published a critical survey of Indian Women's Writing in English (1977) in Kannada, and also translates from Kannada into English.