

The Snake and the Mirror



Shri Vaikom Mohammed Basheer was born on 19 January 1908 at Vaikom, a princely state of Travancore. He was a noted writer and a freedom fighter. He wrote novels and stories in a very simple and open language and in a funny style. His most famous works are *Balyakala Sakhi*, *Pathummayude Aadu*, *Mathilukal*, *Ntuppuppakkoru Aanendaarannu*, *Janmadinam*, *Anargha Nimisham* etc. He was awarded the Padma Shri in 1982. When he was 86, the Bepore Sultwan – so was he called fondly – passed away on 05 July 1994.

Glossary:

1. **Coil (V):** to wind or reel
2. **Coil (N):** something wound
3. **Homoeopath (N):** a person who treats illness using homoeopathic methods
4. **Attentively :** carefully
5. **Kerosene:** a light fuel oil obtained by distilling petroleum
6. **Earning:** (here) income
7. **Meager :** inadequate, insufficient
8. **Possessed:** owned
9. **Solitary:** lonely, (here) single
10. **Hang (v) (pt; pp hung):** fix something at the top and leaving other parts free to move.
11. **Hang (v) (pt; pp hanged):** kill by dropping with a rope around the neck, or to die in this way.
12. **Tiled roof:** roof covered with tiles
13. **Gable:** the top end of the wall of a building, in the shape of a triangle, where it meets the sloping parts of a roof
14. **Traffic (n) :** (here) movement
15. **Lie down (pt lay, pp lain):** to be on a surface in a horizontal position as in a bed. (antonym: **Get up**)
16. **Tempted :** attracted, interested, inclined
17. **Admirer (n):** a person who admires.(**Admire:** respect and approve, (here) accept and enjoy)
18. **Take a look (pt took a look):** look
19. **Make a decision (pt made a decision):** decide
20. **Earthshaking (adj):** extremely important or great in effect.
21. **Light (V) (pt lit or lighted, pp lit or lighted):** burn
22. **Pace (V):** to walk with regular steps in one direction and then back again.
23. **Strike (v):** (here) feel or think (pt struck, pp struck)
24. **Plenty:** enough or more than enough, a large amount of.
25. **Resume (v):** start again after a pause, restart.
26. **Dull:** bad or boring
27. **Thud:** a sound produced when something heavy falls or hits something else.
28. **Wriggle (v):** twist and turn
29. **Simultaneous (adj):** happening or done at the same time.
30. **Slither (v):** to move like a snake.

31. **Hood (N):** a covering for the head and neck, (here) the expandable side parts of a cobra's neck.
(പാമ്പിന്റെ പത്തി)
32. **Image:** a model, a picture.
33. **Creator (N):** maker, The Creator means God
34. **Leaden (adj):** heavy, made of lead.
35. **Rod:** iron bar, wooden pole or stick.
36. **Molten (adj):** (metal or glass) liquefied by heat (ഉരുകിയ ലോഹം)
37. **Drain (V):** (here) cause to run out, to lose.
38. **Lurk (v):** wait somewhere secretly.
39. **Feebly (adv):** without strength or force.
40. **Mascara:** a substance that is put on eyelashes to make them look dark and thick (കണ്മഷി)
41. **Vermilion (n):** bright red colour.
42. **Vermilion spot (n): (here)** സിന്ധൂര പൊട്ട്.
43. **Unwound (V):** to take off something that is coiled around; to uncoil.
44. **Creep (v)** (pt crept): crawl, move slowly.
45. **Close quarters:** a position/situation of being very close or uncomfortably close to someone or something;
(here) very nearer/closer position.
46. **Heave (v):** release air as in a sigh.
47. **Reedy (adj):** very thin, slim like a reed (Reed: a plant of the grass family)
48. **Sprinter (n):** an athlete.
49. **Smear (v):** to spread oil or cream
50. **Was taken with :** was attracted by

Answers to the scaffolding questions in the textbook:

1. What was the topic that came up for discussion between the doctor and his friends?
Answer: The topic of their discussion was snake.
2. What does the expression 'a full-blooded cobra' suggest?
Answer: It expresses that the cobra was very healthy and youthful.
3. The sound was a familiar one. What was the sound?
Answer: The sound created by rats.
4. 'In those days I was a great admirer of beauty...' Pick out phrases and expressions to justify the statement.
Answer: He looked into the mirror. He took the comb and ran it through his hair.
5. What are the two important and earthshaking decisions that he takes while looking into the mirror?
Answer: The important decision is that he will shave daily and grow a thin moustache to look more handsome. The earthshaking decision is that he will keep always an attractive smile on his face.
6. 'Again came that noise from above.' Did the doctor pay much attention to the noise? Why?
Answer: He did not pay any attention to the noise because he knew that it was created by rats and he was familiar with such noise.
7. What kind of a woman does the doctor want to marry? Why?
Answer: He wants to marry a fat woman because if he made a silly mistake and needed to run away from her, she should not be able to chase and catch him.
8. What happened when the doctor was sitting on his chair?
Answer: He heard a dull thud as if a rubber tube had fallen down to the ground. But he did not take it serious. After a while, a fat snake wriggled over the back of the chair and landed on his shoulder.
9. How did the doctor react when the snake landed on him?

Answer: He did not jump; he did not tremble or he did not cry out. He sat still.

10. Why did the doctor sit in the chair like a stone image in flesh?

Answer: The cobra coiled around his left arm and stayed only three or four inches away from his face spreading its hood. If he moved, it would strike him. So, he sat there like a stone image in flesh.

11. In the story, the snake is compared to three objects. What are they?

Answer: The snake is compared to a rubber tube, a thick leaden rod and a beauty-conscious person.

12. Why did he feel that he was a stupid doctor?

Answer: He felt so because he did not have any medicine in his room, though he was a doctor. If the snake had struck him, what medicine he would have taken.

13. 'I was suddenly a man of flesh and blood.' What does the doctor mean by this statement?

Answer: When the snake left him and moved towards the mirror, he got a chance to escape. He became active and vigilant to make use of the opportunity and decided to run out of the room.

14. Why did the doctor run to his friend's house? Did the snake harm the doctor? Why?

Answer: The doctor was afraid to stay alone in his room as the snake was still there. The snake did not harm the doctor because soon its attention was distracted from him to its own reflection in the mirror.

15. '...the thief had left behind one thing as a final insult'! What was the insult?

Answer: The thief had not taken the doctor's one dirty vest. That was the final insult!

Read paragraphs 1- 3 from the story and answer the following questions

1. Has a snake ever coiled itself round any part of your body?" Who asked this to whom and when?
2. Which expressions show that there were a lot of rats in the room?
3. "I lighted the kerosene lamp". Rewrite this sentence beginning with "The kerosene lamp..."
4. How do you understand that the doctor was in a poor financial condition?
5. What does the expression "one solitary black coat" signify?

Read paragraphs 6 - 8 and answer the following questions

6. Why was the doctor tempted to look into the mirror even in the night?
7. What was the important decision he made looking at his face in the mirror?
8. What was his another earthshaking decision?
9. What was his one notion which persuades him to take those decisions and he talks about it repeatedly?
10. "Took a look" and "made a decision" are two phrases used here. Write the suitable single verb forms to replace them.

Read paragraphs 9 and 10 and answer the following questions

11. What was the lovely thought struck the doctor?
12. Why did the doctor want his wife to be a fat one?
13. 'No sooner had I turned than a snake landed on my shoulder'. Rewrite this sentence beginning with "As soon as".
14. Find out a word from the passage that means 'happening or done at the same time'.

Read paragraphs 11- 14 and answer the following questions

15. When the snake slithered along his shoulder, how did the doctor react?
16. Why did he sit in the chair like 'a stone image in the flesh'?
17. The doctor says that though 'he was turned to stone his mind was very active'. How do you understand that his mind was active?
18. Why did he try in imagination to write outside his heart the words 'O God'?
19. What did he feel when the snake coiled and stay on his left arm?
20. "What could I do?" Who asked this question to whom? What is this type of question known as in literature?

Read paragraphs 15 - 17 and answer the following questions

21. Why did the doctor think that death lurked four inches away?
22. Seeing the snake look into the mirror what were the funny thoughts came into the doctor's mind?
23. Find out a word that is opposite in meaning of 'coiled'.
24. "I did not know anything for certain". Rewrite the sentence using "nothing" in place of 'anything'.
25. What did the doctor think about the possible reason why the snake moved closer to the mirror leaving him?

Read paragraphs 18 - 20 and answer the following questions

26. Why did each of them have a sigh of relief?
27. The doctor said, "God willed otherwise". What was his wish against God's will?
28. Someone asked, "Doctor, when you ran did the snake follow you?"
Doctor said, "I ran till I reached a friend's house."
 - a) What did someone ask the doctor?
 - b) What was the doctor's reply?
29. The next day when they reached the room, what did they find as a final insult?
30. According to the doctor what type of a snake was it?

Answers to questions based on the Textual Paragraphs

1. The homoeopathic doctor in the story *The Snake and the Mirror* asked this question to his friends when they were discussing snakes.
2. "One could say that rats and I shared the room."
3. The kerosene lamp was lighted by me.
4. He had just started his medical practice and in his possession he had only sixty rupees.
5. The word 'solitary' signifies his own loneliness as well as his poor financial condition as his coat has also no companion. He has only one coat.
6. It is natural one feels tempted to look into a mirror when it is near. Moreover, personally he was very beauty-conscious and he admired his own beauty.
7. He would shave daily and grow a thin moustache to look more handsome.
8. The earthshaking decision was that he would always keep an attractive smile on his face.
9. 'He was after all a bachelor and a doctor too'.
10. 'Took a look' means 'looked' and 'made a decision' means 'decided'.
11. The lovely thought was that he would marry a woman doctor with plenty of money and a good medical practice.
12. She should not be able to run after and catch him if he made some silly mistakes.
13. 'As soon as I turned, a snake landed on my shoulder'.
14. **Simultaneous** is the word.
15. He did not jump, tremble or cry out. He sat motionless.
16. The snake was only three or four inches away from his face. If he moved the snake would bite him. So he sat without moving 'like a stone image in the flesh'.
17. In the fright he did not lose his presence of mind. He did not move or shout. He thought about God. If his mind had not been active, he would have moved and the snake would have bitten him.
18. He tried to write in imagination outside his heart the words 'O God' because he didn't want to say something that God might not like.

19. He felt some pain in his left arm. It was as if by a rod made of molten fire crushing his arm and he felt drained of all strength of his arm.
20. The homoeopathic doctor asked this question himself. Such question are known as the Rhetorical Questions.
21. The snake stayed only four inches away from his face. If he moved it would bite him and there was no medicine in his room.
22. The funny thoughts came into his mind were whether the snake was admiring its own beauty, whether it was taking a decision about growing a moustache, using eye shadow and mascara or wearing a vermilion spot on its forehead.
23. **'Unwound'** is the word.
24. 'I knew nothing for certain'.
25. Perhaps the snake wanted to enjoy its reflection at closer quarters.
26. Everybody was very anxious to know how the shocking moments had ended. When they knew the snake left the doctor and he escaped without any harm, they all relieved.
27. He wished to marry a fat woman who would not be able to chase him. But actually he married a thin reedy woman with the gift of a sprinter.
28. a) Someone asked the doctor whether the snake had followed him when he had run.
b) The doctor replied that he had run till he had reached a friend's house.
29. The thieves cleared out everything except a dirty vest which they left behind as a final insult.
30. 'It was a snake which was taken with its own beauty.'

Let's revisit

➤ Activity 1, Textbook page 28

Pick out sentences from the story 'The Snake and the Mirror' and complete the table below. These sentences tell you the condition of the narrator. Some hints are given.

was afraid of the snake	was proud of his appearance	was no longer afraid of the snake
I was turned to a stone.	I looked into the mirror and smiled.	I didn't tremble. I didn't cry out.
I sat there like a stone image in the flesh.	I believed in making myself look handsome.	I didn't jump.
I tried to write in bright letters outside my little heart the words 'O, God'!	I picked up the comb and ran it through the hair.	It would not be correct to say merely I sat there holding my breath.
The arm was beginning to be drained of all strength.	I took a close look at my face in the mirror.	But my mind was very active.
Death lurked four inches away.	I would shave daily and grow a thin moustache to look more handsome.	I forgot my danger and smiled feebly at myself.
	I would always keep that attractive smile on my face to look more handsome.	I was no mere image cut in granite.
		I was suddenly a man of flesh and blood.
		Still holding my breath I got up from the chair.

➤ **Activity 2, Textbook page 28**

The story is about a frightening incident narrated in a humorous way. What makes it humorous?

The writer has made use of some striking contrasts in the story to bring about humour. Pick out such expressions from the story and write them.

A)	(i) The kind of person the doctor is	He has just started his medical practice and is poor with a very meager income.
	(ii) The kind of person he wants to be	He wants to become rich by marrying a rich woman doctor having good medical practice.
B)	(i) The person he wants to marry	He wants to marry a fat woman having no ability to run after him and catch him.
	(ii) The person he actually marries	He marries a thin reedy person with the gift of sprinter
C)	(i) His thoughts when he looks into the mirror	He thinks he is a handsome, young bachelor doctor. He would shave daily and grow a thin moustache to look more handsome. He would always keep an attractive smile on his face.
	(ii) His thoughts when the snake coiled around his arm.	He becomes frightened and asks himself what he could do to escape. If he moved the snake would strike him. If it struck what medicine he would take. He thinks he is a poor foolish doctor having kept no medicine in the room.

➤ **Now based on what you have written, prepare a short paragraph on the use of contrasts in the story to bring out the humour.**

Vaikom Mummaed Basheer was a renowned Malayalam writer with a God-gifted ability of using the language in the utmost simplicity and funny way. His story, The Snake and the Mirror, tells us the pathetic story of a homoeopathic doctor in a humorous way. The literary device of Contrast is very aptly used throughout the story to create comic situations. The protagonist homoeopathic doctor appears to be a poor person, only having recently started his medical practice. But he does not seem to have an idea of flourishing in life by working hard. Instead, he wants to be rich in life using a short-cut way. He plans to marry a rich woman doctor having good medical practice. Besides being rich, his would-be wife should be a fat lady. He humorously anticipates that his future wife should not be able to chase and catch him, in case of a possible conflict between them. But ironically, he marries a reedy thin woman with the gift of a sprinter. He also appears to be very proud of his being a handsome young bachelor doctor. Even in the night he enjoys spending time looking into a mirror and planning to take earthshaking decisions of increasing his beauty. He plans to shave daily, keep a thin moustache and fix always an attractive smile on his face in order to make himself more handsome. But his day-dreaming gets only a momentary life. Unexpectedly a cobra falls on him and coils on his left arm. He becomes frightened and curses himself for not having kept any medicine in his room for use in case of a possible emergency situation like this. He now earnestly thinks of God in his helpless condition and writes the words 'O God' on his heart wall. Then the snake leaves him and moves towards the mirror and forgets everything in its mesmeric beauty. Thus the tragic story of a poor doctor ends very humorously as a comedy!

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- *Imagine that the homoeopathic doctor rushes to his friend after escaping from the snake. Prepare a conversation between the doctor and his friend.*

Friend: Hi doctor, good evening!

Doctor: Good evening! Let me sit here; give me some water, please.

Friend: You look very scared and tired! What happened to you?

Doctor: A cobra coiled on my arm.

Friend: What, a cobra! It didn't bite you, did it?

Doctor: No, it didn't. God saved me in the form of a mirror!

Friend: Mirror? Oh my God; what are you saying?

Doctor: Yes, it's true. A cobra fell on me from the roof, coiled on my arm but uncoiled and slithered away when it saw its image in the mirror on my table.

Friend: Thank God! Anyway, don't go there tonight. Let's stay here. We can look for another house later.

Doctor: Yeah, thanks a lot!

- *Imagine that the doctor and his friend were walking to his room to remove his things from there. They had a chat about the events of the previous night. Prepare the likely conversation between them.*

Doctor: Good morning, my friend!

Friend: Good morning, why did you wake up so early?

Doctor: Early! It's eight o'clock now. Would you come and help me to shift my things to the new house?

Friend: Yes, why not? Let's go.

Doctor: It was a horrible night. If you didn't help me find a new house, where would I go now?

Friend: You were lucky. The snake was attracted by its own beauty and left you.

Doctor: Perhaps I am not so handsome, am I?

Friend: You're handsome, but the snake may be prettier than you.

Doctor: The door is open! Did I forget to close it last night?

Friend: Perhaps yeah! Be careful while entering the room; the snake may be still there.

Doctor: All my things are gone! Some thieves have already cleaned out everything.

Friend: I think you have lost nothing valuable, have you? If the things are like this remaining dirty vest, let them go.

Doctor: Yes, let them go. We can go to the new house with new things!

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