

# 'The slum is universal'

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## **A.M. Basheer says he drew from his experience as a civil judge for his first novel, on communal riots.**

**R**iot Widows is the debut novel of A.M. Basheer's, a civil judge in Kerala. The result of four years of work, Basheer's novel centres on the lives of women, particularly in the slums, widowed by the violence of communal rioting.



Excerpts from an interview:

### **What inspired you to take up this theme?**

Forced migration has been a common consequence of violence since the beginning of human history. When their security is threatened, people flee their homes. I visualise a situation where all the victims in a riot are men and only women remain in a riot-hit slum.

The slum in this story is universal. The stark reality of riots between two groups of

people has always troubled me. So, I decided to deal with the aftermath of the riots; with underprivileged people's struggle to cope with the consequences of violence and return to normal life. Women are always at the receiving end of sectarian strife. It took me four years to complete this book.

**The book strongly advocates a secular approach in handling poverty. Your descriptions of the slum evoke empathy.**

India's multi-cultural mosaic has failed miserably to rectify under-representation and has paved the way for inevitability of the disarticulated subaltern.

My attempt has been to perpetuate a 'presence' in an ineradicable absence of full presence. The Indian woman is now much more aware of her rights and liberty.

**The main character Nafsana, who is born out of a rape, is a profile of courage. Does she represent the new woman of India?**

To my mind Nafsana is at the heart of the novel. Born Hindu, though not out of wedlock, she has an adoptive Muslim father who is imprisoned on charges of rioting. Interestingly, when it comes to the question of marriage, she listens to her father and marries a young man of his choice.

An ambitious medical student, she is still deeply rooted to the slum. She cannot disown the place she belongs to. She is extraordinary because she celebrates her ordinariness.

The young lawyer, who is genuinely in love with Nafsan, has moved into the middle-class milieu but she is still caught between her ambition and her commitment to the slum.

**But he cannot take it when she agrees to her father's proposal that she marry the young man serving a long sentence in the same jail. It's his ego, his masculinity that is hurt by her decision. The narrator is Basheer, an advocate. You are also Basheer. Is that why you chose this name?**

Despite my claim that it is fictional, I can't hide myself. All writers source their experiences for fiction.

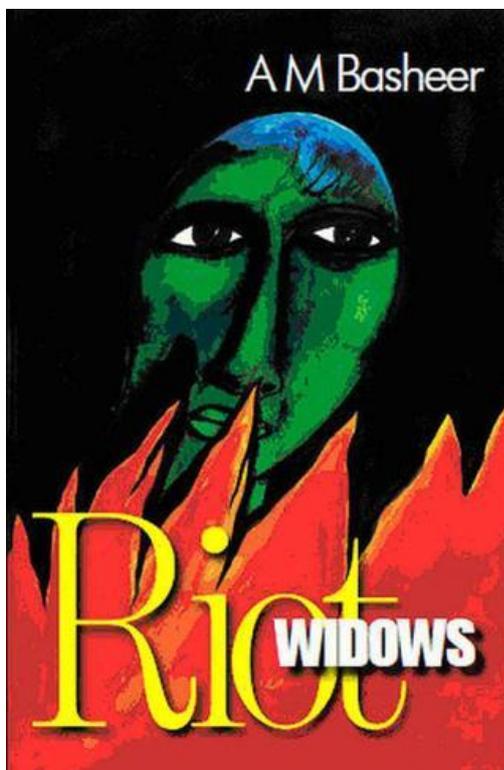
**Future plans? Do you expect any backlash, especially given your views on terrorism and fundamentalism?**

I am planning a novel about Partition and migration. My father's uncle, who was in the Indian Army, had to join hands with Jinnah.

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## From the ashes

**A protagonist is tossed between love, ambition and duty towards her riot-hit community.**



Riot Widows; A.M. Basheer,  
Palimpsest Publishing House,  
Rs.499.

Communal riots are perennial subjects of enquiries, judicial processes and politics. This novel, set against the backdrop of two riots, is a brilliant narrative on the outcome of riots, and the plight of the victims.

It evokes empathy with its portrayal of women in the midst of meanness and poverty. As the husbands languish in jails, housewives are left to look after their children and ailing parents. While vivisectioning the anatomy of riots and poverty, the novel weaves a poignant love story. It is a critique against communal violence, dowry, polygamy and societal and economic exploitation.

The transition of time and space in the novel, set in various locales, is praiseworthy. It is also a eulogy to the new woman: the main character, Nafsan, is a determined medical student who is realistic and aware of her strengths and weaknesses.

A plethora of characters and events present a profile of the slum in this well-researched work. Each character stands out, forming strong strands of the story's fabric. The description is graphic: "The slum also meant street fights, brawls,

cheap used condoms strewn around, country liquor in pouches and painted women walking suggestively around.” The novel forcefully establishes that riots are not caused by caste rivalry, antagonism and ethnic profiling. Riots are never triggered by one community, and contrary to popular belief, violence never erupted overnight. It is agents provocateurs that provide resources and poison the guiltless minds to indulge in violence irrespective of castes or religions. The story unfolds from the perspective of a young boy, Basheer, who is forced to migrate from a village to the slum with his parents and siblings. It was hard for him to get used to the rotten air, garbage, and filth everywhere; the foul smells were nauseating. He meets a young beautiful girl Nafsan. Words fail to describe Basheer’s intense love for her even decades after they meet.

Nafsan is born of a Hindu mother, who is raped by her employer. Her husband loves her intensely but is sick in jail and is undergoing imprisonment for murder. Nafsan obeys step-father’s instructions and foregoes her love for Basheer. She is ambitious but never forgets the reality of her circumstances; she struggles hard to fulfil her dream of becoming a doctor and serving the slum-dwellers. She leads a protest against a proposed demolition of the slum and wins the case. She eventually moves away from the slum and, even before completing medical graduation, begins her practice. The denouement is both dramatic and not judgmental.

‘Going back to the slum I see that nothing has changed. Hunger still reigns in the shacks as women and children, half-naked and starving, sit wearily on the streets with nothing better to do. Thousands of helpless people live in make-shift tents in the middle of the narrow squalid lanes.....the tiniest infant starts to cry and his mother rushes to soothe her