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Nair Caste and Protagonist's Struggle for Rights portrayed in

M. T. Vasudevan Nair's Novel Naalukettu

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Abstract

The novel is a historic context and importance, protagonist Appunni and his quest, and the fall of Nair society in Kerala. Naalukettu is the story of a young boy, Appunni, set in a joint family. Appunni spends his childhood in extreme social misery. The novel speaks about the culture followed in Kerala among Nair caste people. Appunni and his mother Paarukutti is a victim of the same. The girl has all the rights in the property of parents and the son has no rights. The boy who is married to the Nair girl must stay in the girl's house after marriage. After the publication of this novel the entire system has been changed. Naalukettu is a debut and culture changing novel.

Key words: Nair culture, quest for ancestral roots, Appunni's revenge, struggle for rights.

Malayalam novels written in the first ten years after India became independent lacked the radicalism of the earlier novels. It reflected the despondency and inward-looking attitude of the authors. Sadness became a recurrent theme in the writings of those days and writers seemed to see things in an entirely new perspective. The first novel that espoused this new style of writing was M.T. Vasudevan Nair's *Nalukettu*, published in 1958. The other novels that he wrote during his long literary career became equally popular. Nair's much-acclaimed novel *Naalukettu*, Rizio Yohannan Raj comments upon the metaphors used in the novel, historic context and importance, protagonist Appunni and his quest, and the fall of Nair society in Kerala.

MadathThekkepaattu Vasudevan Nair (born 9 August 1933), popularly known as MT, is an Indian author, screenplay writer and film director. He is a prolific and versatile writer in modern Malayalam literature, and is one of the masters of post-Independence Indian literature. He was born in Kudallur, a small village in the present day Pattambi Taluk, Palakkad district which was under the Malabar District in the Madras Presidency of the British Raj. He shot into fame at the age of 20 when, as a chemistry undergraduate, he won the prize for the best short story in Malayalam at World Short Story Competition conducted by

The New York Herald Tribune. His debut novel *Naalukettu* (Ancestral Home- translated to English as *The Legacy*), wrote at the age of 23, which won the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award in 1958.

His other novels include *Manju* (Mist), *Kaalam* (Time), *Asuravithu* (The Prodigal Son - translated to English as *The Demon Seed*) and *Randamoozham* (The Second Turn). The deep emotional experiences of his early days have gone into the making of MT's novels. Most of his works are oriented towards the basic Malayalam family structure and culture and many of them were path-breaking in the history of Malayalam literature. His three seminal novels on life in the matriarchal family in Kerala are *Naalukettu*, *Asuravithu*, and *Kaalam*. *Randamoozham*, which retells the story of the Mahabharatha from the point of view of Bhimasena, is widely credited as his masterpiece.

M. T. Vasudevan Nair is a script writer and director of Malayalam films. He has directed seven films and written the screenplay for around 54 films. He won the National Film Award for Best Screenplay four times for: *Oru VadakkanVeeragatha* (1989), *Kadavu* (1991), *Sadayam* (1992), and *Parinayam* (1994), which is the most by anyone in the screenplay category.



He was awarded the highest literary award in India, Jnanpith, in 1995 for his overall contribution to Malayalam literature. In 2005, India's third highest civilian honour Padma Bhushan was awarded to him. He has won numerous other awards and recognition including Sahitya Akademi Award, Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award, Vayalar Award, Vallathol Award, Ezhuthachan Award and Mathrubhumi Literary Award. He was awarded the J.C. Daniel Award for lifetime achievement in Malayalam cinema for the year 2013. He served as the editor of Mathrubhumi Illustrated Weekly for several years.

Naalukettu is a Malayalam novel published in 1958; it was MT's first major novel. The title attributes to *Nalukettu*, a traditional ancestral home (Taravad) of a Nair joint family. Like many other novels written by MT, the novel is also set against the backdrop of the crumbling matrilineal order of Kerala in a newly independent India. *Naalukettu* remains a classic in Malayalam fiction. It contributed to the renewal of a literary tradition initiated by S. K. Pottekkatt, Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai and Uroob in the 1950s. It was given the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award in 1959. It has had 23 reprints (as of 2008) and was translated into 14 languages and had a record sale of a half a million copies (as of 2008) and still features in the best-seller lists. Doordarshan adapted the novel into a television film in 1995. Malayalam actor Krishnaprasad enacted the protagonist in this film. It won the Kerala State Television Award for the year 1996. A screenplay based on the novel was released on 8 December 2012 as part of the DC International Book Festival, Thiruvananthapuram.

Naalukettu is the story of a young boy, Appunni, set in a joint family (a tharavad) of the Nair caste in the author's native village, Kudallur. Growing up without a father and away from the prestige and protection of the matrilineal home to which he belongs, Appunni spends his childhood in extreme social misery. *Naalukettu* is a veritable depiction of the matriarchal social order of Kerala's Nair community in its final gasp for life. The hero Appunni is a scion of a once rich and powerful family. Appunni is the son of a woman who married a man of her own choice and who did not marry the man whom her karnavars suggested. So she has to leave the family with her son and Appunni grows up without a father and away from the prestige and protection of the matrilineal home to which he belongs.

The novel captures the traumas and psychological graph of Appunni, an introvert and angry youth, aspiring to avenge the insult meted out to him in a matrilineal family by building a new edifice on the ruins of his ancestral home.

This master piece by Kerala's favourite writer M.T. Vasudevan Nair, chronicles the journey of Appunni from his boyhood days steeped in poverty and hardships to manhood, a life he builds on his own hard work and overcoming the tragedies of his situation. "*Naalukettu*" - roughly meaning ancestral home - is a retelling of the east while Kerala Nair way of life, of family feuds and the decay of the matrilineal system. Portraying the life of an underdog who rises up in life while all else surrounding him falls to decay, MT champions his hero's trials and tribulations through a life of misery and bleakness that transforms into one of success, forgiveness, reunion and sweet revenge. He provides a short and intense summary of the novel in the initial pages and gives an informed review about the book. He looks at metaphors of *pagida*, *sarpamthullal* and the *naalukettu* itself around which the story revolves. He studies the character of Appunni and his quest and calls him as the "prototypical quest figure in MT's fictional world."

Fascinated by accounts of the grand 'naalukettutharavad' of which he should have been a part, Appunni visits the house only to be rejected by the head of the household. With vengeance boiling in his heart and the pain of disappointed love a lingering ache, Appunni claws his way up in life to finally buy the symbol of his youthful aspiration and anguish: the *naalukettutharavad* of his ancestors. But victory both financial and emotional turns to ashes. Enemies are not worth conquering; his father's murderer turns out to be the only sympathetic adult in his lonely teenage, and Appunni eventually returns the favor.

The novel sensitively captures the traumas and psychological graph of Appunni, caught as he is in the throes of a transitional period in Malabar, a phase marked by the gradual disintegration of the feudal structures of the matrilineal joint family system and the rise of the Nair's sense of personal identity. The novel, a fascinating read, and the perceptive introduction by the translator herself, will appeal to students and scholars of regional Indian literature in translation, comparative literature, sociology and cultural studies, as well as general readers. Appunni's journey to the world outside is more a symbol of a whole generation's longing for freedom rather than his own quest.

He finds his resolution in the same naalukettu which had once discriminated against him. His laughter that closes the novel is an ambivalent moment wherein opposites meet to co-habit.

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