

Socio-Cultural aspects of Kerala as portrayed in M.T. Vasudevan Nair's
Naalukettu: the house around the courtyard

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Abstract

Naalukettu: the house around the courtyard is a 1958 Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award winning novel authored in Malayalam by M.T. Vasudevan Nair and translated into English by Gita Krishnankutty. M.T. Vasudevan Nair who is popularly known as MT has a successful literary career that spans over a few decades. *Naalukettu*, his first novel, which was written at the age of twenty three continues to hold its place as a classic in Malayalam fiction and has been translated to fourteen languages and had around twenty three reprints as of 2008. Like many of his works the little village called Kudallur, in Kerala, forms the backdrop of the novel. This paper is an attempt at a socio- cultural study of Kerala as portrayed by MT in this fascinating novel that takes us back in time to the twentieth century. A study has been done with its focus on the joint family system that brought together a large number of family members under one roof which is the 'naalukettu', the roles of the men and women, the system of marriage and property division and also the various rituals and festivals observed during that time.

Keywords: Naalukettu, Joint family, Customs, Society, Culture

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Social realities and culture of any place have long been of interest to literary scholars and authors alike. While trying to define the term 'culture' Stephen Greenblatt quotes an anthropologist, Edward B. Taylor, who defined culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities acquired by man as a member of a society" <www. utm. edu>. Greenblatt then proceeds to give his own description of the concept of culture as "the ensemble of beliefs and practices that form a given culture function as a pervasive technology of control, a set of limits within which social behavior must be contained, a repertoire of models to which an individual must conform"<www. utm. edu>. More often than not a literary work is the product of the social and cultural aspects that have influenced the author in one way or another.

Born in Kudallur, a tiny village in Kerala, Madathil Thekkepattu Vasudevan Nair who is popularly known as MT secured his position in the literary field with his debut novel *Naalukettu* (1958) which won the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award in the same year. MT is a critic, novelist, short story writer, editor, script writer and has directed seven Malayalam films. He is a prolific writer of Malayalam literature and many of his works have been translated into English. *Naalukettu* was translated into English by Gita Krishnankutty. MT has authored various works including the novels *Kaalam (Time)*, *Manju (Mist)*, *Asuravithu (The Demon Seed)*, *Randamoozham (The Second Turn)*, short story collections, children's literature, memoirs, plays, travelogues and many more. MT once in a talk with another novelist M Mukundan said that, " I write books to share the painful experiences that I and those around me went through... it was like there were people waiting to meet me and I had to just put their stories on paper" <[https:// m. timesofindia. com](https://m.timesofindia.com)>. He went on to say that his writings are mainly influenced by the local community, its myths and metaphors. His works depict the societal concerns of Kerala and portray its family and culture truthfully. He is a recipient of many awards namely Janapith ,the highest literary award, in 1995, Padma Bhushan, the third highest civilian honour in India, in

2005 for his general contribution to Malayalam literature, Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award, Ezhuthachan Award, Sahitya Akademi Award, J.C. Daniel award, Mathrubhumi Literary Award, Vallathol Award and Vayalar Award.

Set in the village of Kudallur in Malabar, Kerala, *Naalukettu* unfolds through the eyes of Appunni who is introduced as a young, angry boy who isolates himself from everybody. The novel begins with the thoughts that cross this little boy's mind- "He would grow up. Grow up and become a big man. His hands would become strong. He would not have to fear anyone. He would be able to stand up and hold his head high(1)". His mother, Parukutty, was once a member of the prestigious 'naalukettu tharavad', her ancestral house which was home for sixty four members of their joint family. But she was disowned and considered dead by them since she married a man of her choice, Kondunni Nair, a renowned pagida (a game of dice) player. Their life of misery began when Kondunni Nair was poisoned by his business partner, Syedalikutty and Parukutty becomes a domestic help at another household to make ends meet. Displeased with his life and also on hearing the accounts of his ancestral home, Appunni leaves his home to seek refuge at the naalukettu. Though he is driven out the first time by the head of the household, he makes his way in again after a few years knowing fully well that he has as much right as anybody in that household for a matrilineal system was followed by the Nair community then. A bright student, Appunni successfully completes his school education and due to financial constraints he starts searching for a job. Though Appunni had sworn to take revenge against Syedalikutty it was he who came to Appunni's rescue many a times and showed compassion to him more than anybody else in his life. With Syedalikutty's help Appunni becomes a clerk in an estate and after five years he revisits his ancestral home and buys the now partitioned naalukettu from his uncle who once drove him out like a mangy dog.

The novel is pregnant with factual information concerning Kerala of the twentieth century especially that of the Nair community to which the author belonged. Naalukettu in itself is the traditional home in which wealthy families of this community in Kerala once resided. Appunni's maternal family resided in a huge naalukettu which is a house around the courtyard. The structure of a naalukettu is quite fascinating. Four buildings join together around a courtyard which is open to the sky. In fact the word 'naalu' in Malayalam means four and 'kettu' designates a knot or a joint. The courtyard is usually surrounded by four pillars made of wood. The layout of the house catered to the needs of the members of the household who resided in it as one big joint family. Certain naalukettu had a tiny room set aside for a deity who was believed to reside there. It was believed that in the main part of Appunni's ancestral home the Bhagavathi resided. It was for this very reason that the head of the household was unwilling to sell the main part of the naalukettu, which was allotted to him during the partition, to people outside the family even when he was financially constrained. He asks Appunni, "There are mapillas who want to buy it. But how can I give a place the Bhagavathi resides, to mapillas?" (200).

The novel has its focus on the Vadekkapat tharavad, the ancestral home which was once a shelter to sixty four members of the household (15). But during the time frame of the novel though the number of members have dwindled, peace in this family is a rarity for disparity

is seen within this joint family. Meenakshiedathi and Malu are Appunni's cousins. Meenakshiedathi toils hard in the kitchen to make food for all the members of the family and Malu is the only person who lends a helping hand. Cheriachan (Appunni's uncle) who was once wealthy was cheated into giving all his property to his nephew and now he longer speaks to anyone. Kunjukutty (Appunni's mother's sister) and her children lived in relative comfort for when her husband died he left all his property to her and their children. Dominated by her younger brother who is the head of the household, Amamma (Appunni's grandmother) led a life of misery inside the *naalukettu* and she often lamented that even though Kunjukutty(her daughter) had everything she wouldn't help her even if she is dying. Though Kuttan Nair (Appunni's Uncle) toiled in the fields to provide food for all the members of the household, he and his daughter, Malu, lead a miserable life deprived of the luxuries that some of the family members enjoyed.

'Karnavar' or the head of the household enjoyed most of the comforts in the house. Meenakshiedathi and Malu were expected to keep a large vessel of hot water near the well for his bath. In the meantime a brass lamp had to be lit and placed in front of the room where the household deity resided and a grass mat had to be spread out and *vibuthi* or *bhasmam* had to be kept ready for him. After his prayers he would spend some time relaxing. Eggs and fish were fried only for him in the household and these had to be taken upstairs for him. He would take his own time to come down and no matter how late it was nobody was allowed to have their food before he had his meal.

Women during the time period of this novel had little or no freedom. They were assigned certain duties and were expected to follow certain customs and traditions. The women in this novel rarely ventured out of the household except to have their bath in the river that ran close by their '*tharavad*'. When they returned if their Ammamman (Uncle) was in the yard they had to enter quietly with "their eyes lowered and fixed on their feet" (30) and had to "walk so gently that the floor does not know that [they] are walking on it" (30). While the boys completed their education, the girls did not get to do so and they were expected to marry as early as possible. Certain women (in this novel, Meenakshiedathi) were expected to cook food for all the members of the household. Protocol was observed even during meals for the *karnavar* is served first and then the boys and men and the turn of the women and girls came only later.

The opinion of the women were neither sought nor considered for any matter. The decisions were made by the men, mainly the *karnavar*. Appunni's mother, Parukutty, was arranged to be married to an older man by her Uncle who is her mother's younger brother. The marriage ceremony was called '*sambandam*' and it is usually negotiated and fixed when a man presents a length of cloth to a woman. When the man who was to marry Parukutty came to the household with two other men she chanced to have a look at him- "he was old and there were disgusting stains that looked like slices of raw yarn on his lips and palms... Her mother knew how she felt: 'What can I do? Kunhikrishnan made the decision' "(33). Parukutty unable to stand her sadness poured out her heart to Kodunni Nair, a man she had often seen on her way to bath at the river. He offered to help her and with her consent, the day before the wedding was to take

place, he carried her away from the tharavad on his shoulders. The much conservative Vadekkapat tharavad was immensely insulted and the villagers called her a slut. Her family took the bath of purification which is usually taken after a period of mourning after a death had occurred in the family. “For her parents, a daughter had died and for her uncles, a niece” (29).

The ‘marumakathayam’ system which is the matrilinear system of inheritance was followed by the Nair community in the twentieth century, that is, children had no rights to their father’s property and their inheritance was traced through their mother while the father’s property was transferred to his sister’s children. This was mainly done to ensure that the property remained within the family. Manoj Vadakkan in an article *Does Marumakathayam make sense?* says:

William Logan has beautifully explained the predicament of wealthy Nairs in around A.D. 1880, the time when he wrote the Malabar Manual. They wanted to pass on the property after their deaths to their sons, but the custom prohibited that. After their death all the property would go to their nephews. The alternative was to transfer the entire property to their son while they are still alive. This at times resulted in their sons ignoring their parents after getting the property. <[http:// blog.vadakkan. org](http://blog.vadakkan.org)>

Slowly with the passing of many laws by the government regarding the division of property especially the Marumakathayam Act of 1933, this system declined. A large part of the novel deals with the issue of dividing the property and the partitioning of the naalukettu is not peaceful. The karnavar demanded that he should be allotted two shares of the property as per tradition which his nephew, Kuttan Nair, strongly opposed since it was he who toiled in the field to provide food for the family. The novel does not describe the procedure of the partitioning except to say that two advocates were summoned by the uncle and nephew and they had long sessions with them. By the time Appunni returned to his village for a visit, after five years since he secured a job as a clerk, the properties of the Vadekkapat tharavad was already partitioned and a portion was set apart for him also.

Serpents were considered as the guardians of the household. Vadekappat tharavad also had a serpent shrine. At one point of time a serpent was spotted outside the shrine, around the main part of the naalukettu. A ceremony was conducted to determine the reason for this occurrence and it was found out that the serpents were not satisfied with the milk and turmeric that was provided for them every day. So an elaborate ritual called a ‘sarpam thullal’ was arranged as a solution to this problem. It was during this ceremony that Appunni set foot in his ancestral home for the first time. The novel also mentions a number of other rituals and festivals like ‘Bhuvaneshwaripooja’ to worship the divine mother, ‘Kalampattu’ which is performed as an offering to invoke the blessings of the gods, ‘Pana’, an offering of music to attain the favour of Goddess Bhadrakali, ‘Thiruvathira’, a festival in celebration of the birthday of Lord Shiva, ‘Pooram’ which is an annual festival conducted in temples dedicated to goddesses Durga or Kali, and the like that are celebrated at various occasions.

With its scenic landscape and a river that flows relentlessly, MT paints in the novel a Kerala that is untouched by modernity. While Appunni's wealthy cousins, to the envy of the other children, came to school in a bullock cart, he, along with his friends, walked for miles to attend school. The men and women dressed similarly and in a simple manner. While the men wore a 'mundu' which is long piece of cloth that was tied around the waist and a 'thorthu' which is a smaller piece of cloth thrown carelessly over the upper body, women wore a 'mundu', a blouse and a 'thorthu' over it. 'Kanji' or rice gruel formed a major part of the diet. When Appunni returned from school he would "swallow the kanji [which is stored] in the covered bowl hanging in the rope *uri* in the kitchen in one long gulp" (2).

While talking about his novel, *Naalukettu: a house around the courtyard*, MT says:

I witnessed the last stages of the crumbling of the matrilinear system of inheritance. However, the background of *Naalukettu* is not solely that of my own family. There are characters from my neighbourhood in it as well. Some personal experiences, the experiences of other people I knew: I put them all into it (Kakkattil, 288)

A socio- cultural study of this novel with focus laid on the elaborate structure of the building that housed a huge joint family, roles of the men and women, its unique system of marriage and property division, the rituals and festivals observed portray that MT through his brilliant narrative takes the readers back in time to the Kerala of the twentieth century.

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