



M.T. Vasudevan Nair's *Naalukettu*: A new historicist reading

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Abstract

Creation of literature in the English language by Indians is termed as Indian writings in English or Indian literature. Most of the Indian writers have gained varied range of fame through their literary genius. M.T. Vasudevan Nair is one of the creative genius of Malayalam Literature. His magnum opus works includes *Naalukettu (The Legacy)*, *Manju (Mist)*, *Kaalam (Time)*, *Asuravithu (The Demon Seed)*, *Randamoozham (The Second Turn)*. Much of his fiction is against the social backdrop of the matrilineal Nair 'tharavad' at the point of time. *Naalukettu* is a Malayalam novel written by M.T. Vasudevan Nair. The novel has been translated into various Indian and Foreign languages. It is a veritable depiction of a typical Nair family and the decline of Nair dynasty as result of 'marumakkathayam'. This paper attempts to study M.T.'s novel *Naalukettu*'s in the aspect of 'New Historicism'. New Historicism is a method based on the parallel reading of literary and non-literary texts of the same historical period. It refuses to privilege the literary text instead of a literary foreground and a historical background.

Keywords: *Randamoozham*, foreground, *Naalukettu*, English

Introduction

Madathil Thekkepaattu Vasudevan Nair is born on 15 July 1933 and popularly known as M.T. He gained fame as an Indian author, screenplay for the film *Murapenn*. He won the 'National Film Award for best screenplay *Oru Vadakkan Veeragatha* (1989), *Kadavu* (1991) *Sadayam* (1992) and *Parinayam* (1994). His debut novel *Naalukettu*, written at the age of twenty three, won the Kerala Sahitya Academy Award in 1958. His other famous novels include *Manju (Mist)*, *Kaalam (Time)*, *Asuravithu (The Demon Seed)* and *Randamoozham (The Second Turn)*. The deep emotional experience of his early days has gone into the making of M.T.'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 matrilineal family in Kerala are *Naalukettu*, *Asuravithu* and *Kaalam*. The protagonists of these novels are alienated individuals, painfully aware of being isolated from uncaring and unkind members of society or their own families.

M.T. Vasudevan Nair's novel *Naalukettu* remains as a classic in Malayalam fiction. The dissolution of the Nair tharavad is historical and has created imprints in the minds. Nairs lived in large joint families called 'tharavads' until the break-up of the matrilineal joint-family system. The decline of 'marumakkathayam' really happens in the Vadekkeppat Tharavad in *Naalukettu*. This paper is an attempt to analyse M.T. Vasudevan Nair's novel *Naalukettu* in the light of the perspective of New Historicism. New Historicism is a critical approach developed in the 1980s in the writings of Stephen Greenblatt. It is characterized by a parallel reading of a text with its socio-cultural and historical conditions, which form the co-text. New Historicism rejects the fundamental tenets of New Criticism, Liberal Humanism and the Post Structuralist practice of close reading. According to Louis Montrose, New Historicism deals with the textuality of history and the historicity of texts. Textuality of history refers to the idea

that history is constructed and fictionalized, and the historicity of text refers to its inevitable embedment within the socio-political conditions of its production and interpretation.

M.T. Vasudevan Nair's *Naalukettu*: A New- Historicist Reading

M.T.'s *Naalukettu* as a novel is a lively one with a soul which is shackled within in the four walls of the village of 'kudallur'. He captures the whole of the village in his *Naalukettu*. As a fact the novel could be used as a picturesque image of the village cradled by the warmth and odour of kudallur. Nostalgic memories, the tradition of the village, its slang and open minds of the people altogether makes the novel having a 'koodallurian touch' which can only be shown by the author. Thus both the novel *Naalukettu* and kudallur shares a mutual symbiotic relationship with the author. The Nair Community represented in the novel *Naalukettu* by M.T. Vasudevan Nair is embodied within the ancestral home of 'Vadakeppattu'. The title of the novel *Naalukettu* attributes to 'naalukettu', a traditional ancestral home (tharavad) of a Nair joint family. The novel deals with many of M.T.'s familiar themes: the break-up of the matrilineal joint family system, patterns of revenge, the mother-son relationship, the open-mindedness of people lived in the village and traditionality. The dissolution of Nair tharavad is the major theme of the novel *Naalukettu*. The old system was degenerated and a new one being forged, that is the background of the novel *Naalukettu*. In this novel, the influence of the Nair community spans all over the novel with the fact that each and every character knows about the tharavad. Once it had all its grandeur where people praised, but towards the end people discuss about the conflicts happening within the tharavad among its Karanavar and other members of the family, who claim of their right of property. So *Naalukettu* is a veritable depiction of a typical joint family's steady decline.

Naalukettu significantly and fascinatingly portrayed the degeneration of matrilineal system of joint families or tharavad, where large numbers of relatives lived together. The decline and collapse of the system resulted in nuclear families and consequential social, traditional and economic changes. So, the feudal system was declined and the matrilineal joint family system or marumakkathayam was reluctantly giving way to nuclear family patterns. The system of inheritance among Nairs was called marumakkathayam. This means the property passed from a male to his sister's son (the eldest among his sisters' sons). The father's role was played by maternal uncle. In this particular novel, *Naalukettu* reflects the decline of marumakkathayam. It begins with the conflict between 'Kutta Ammaaman' and 'Valia Ammaaman'. When Kutta Ammaaman struggles to gain his legitimate right for the share of the property is a typical beginning of the decline of marumakkathayam in the novel.

"I must be given my share of property. I'm going to stand firm on that" (109)

In the period of 'Marumakkathayam' Act, the old system was crumbling and a new one being forged. In this particular novel the old system of 'Valia Ammaaman' were crumbled and a new system of 'Kutta Ammaaman' being forged. The karanavars who manages the affairs of the tharavad were beginning to lose their authority. While the legal disputes initiated by younger members who claimed their own shares of the joint properties started to drain the financial resources of the family. Towards the end of the novel, the protagonist Appunni becomes financially secure. He had spent all his hard-earned money to buy the *naalukettu*.

The *naalukettu* with its ancient memories belonging to him now. He had spent all the hard-earned money he had accumulated over the last five years on it. But he had a sense of deep satisfaction. It was from here that he had run away once, holding his life in his hands. (203)

These lines suggest that at the end, Appunni bought the ancestral home and restores his mother 'Parukutty's' rightful estate. These situations of the text are also here in the history itself.

Certain elements of "Matrilineal" system as seen in the novel such as 'tharavad', 'sambhanam', 'rituals', 'karanavar', 'women' and so on. These elements are closely interwoven with the plot of the novel. By depicting these facts M.T. achieves more attention to the novel. 'Karanavar', an eldest member of the tharavad, has the right to rule there. In the novel *Naalukettu*, the karanavar, Appunni's mother's uncle who is ruled by avarice and arrogance. He did not provide any consideration for others and no respect even for his elder sister ten years older than him. 'Valia Ammaaman' exploits his position as the 'karanavar'. He is a fairly typical example of the karanavars of the time as imperious, callous and completely unconcerned about his sisters and their families. Decisions are taken by him and the rights and desires of the other members of the family are trampled.

Nairs followed the marumakkathayam system of inheritance and lived in units called 'Tharavads'. 'The Vadakkeppatt tharavad' of the novel is the central image of the matrilineal system. Prosperous Nair families generally lived in *naalukettus*. The Kerala *naalukettu* is a residential building consisting of four wings build around a central sunken courtyard with a stone floor. It is flanked by thick wooden

pillars. Ordinarily, there are four pillars in a *naalukettu*. *Nalukettu* architecture is basically a rectangular shaped structure wherein four halls are joined together with an inner courtyard called 'Nadumuttam' which faces the open sky. This type of structural pattern is in the novel's *naalukettu*. The four halls on the sides are named Vadakkini, Kizhakkini, Thekkini and Padinjatti. *Nalukettu* also consists of a basement storage room called 'Nilavara'. In the vadakkeppatt tharavad's *naalukettu* consists these blocks. The union of four blocks is vital in *Nalukettu*. These structures of *naalukettu* are depicted in the history of Nair Community. So the author once again establishes the relation of history and text. The novel depicted the sufferings of 'women' in the matrilineal system. The male patriarch subjected the women of the house also to domination and exploitation. There was a total denial of freedom of expression and no freedom of choice was granted even in such crucial matters like marriage. So Parukutty is expelled from the family and the legitimate right to her share of the property is denied to her for choosing a man she liked as her husband. There were Meenakshi and Malu who wasted away their lives in the dark old mansions of the tharavad. They had no right but only duties, the heavy burden of feeling the family. They were never raising any complaints or demands. The patriarchal values enshrined in the system impacted devastatingly on women. The women like Meenakshi, who suffers the traumas of the matrilineal system especially in the hands of Karanavar like Valiya Ammaaman.

In the novel, *Naalukettu*, M.T. never attempt 'sambhanam' as a major fact. Appunni's mother parukutty's wedding had been arranged as a 'sambhanam'. The senior most male member karanavar decided to choose her a wealthy Brahmin for Parukutty. The sambhadham rituals is auspicious than the thaali and puberty rites and literally means 'alliance' women following 'marumakkathayam'. The sambhadham ritual of the matrilineal system is described in the Nair history itself. Namboothiris were lived in the household called 'illam'. The novel's female character Parukutty Amma was working in the 'illam' after the death of his husband. Namboothiris have a distinct dialect as a part of their culture. So these are the evidences of history, which portrayed the author in the text.

In the first chapter of the novel there are certain ritualistic art forms are portrayed by the author. This marked the traditional aspects of Kerala. The rituals of 'serpent thullal' organized in the Vadakkappatt tharavad. In *Naalukettu* serpent thullal were organized for worshipped the Bhagavathi of the household. Besides this annual-puja, special offerings are made to the serpents if misfortunes or calamities occur in the family. A 'prashnam' ritual is first performed, during which an astrologer identifies to precise nature of the evil that has befallen or threatens the household. The astrologer throws a handful of 'cowdies' on the ground and rituals of propitiation are suggested on the basis of the formation the cowdies. Serpent thullal is a long and elaborated ritual which is conducted by the household and which may last for three or four days. In *Naalukettu*, 'prashnam' ritual conducted by 'Appukutta Panikker' and 'Pullava Raman' calculated a date for the thullal. 'Kanyakas' or young virgins are the main participants in the ritual and while it is being performed, they became possessed by the serpents that have been invoked. Here, in the novel, Ammini, daughter of the Valia Ammaaman is one

of the participants in the ritual of the serpent thullal. The novel involved other rituals like Bhuvaneshwari pooja and kalampattu song. In the first chapter muthaachi an old lady who portrayed how the Bhuvaneshwari pooja was conducted in the vadakkeppatt tharavad to the protagonist Appunni.

The novelist, on the one side reveals the 'Untouchables of Dalit' with the analysis of the 'Cheruman' people or 'Cherumis' in the novel. The Cheruman people are a large Dalit group. They live in India's South Western State of Kerala, where they speak Malayalam, Kerala's language. They respected the upper caste people even it was a child. M.T. suggests 'Untouchability' in the novel, because the untouchability of Dalit is a fact in his time. Purity and divinity are much emphasized attributes of Hindu way of life. The untouchables were not permitted to enter the city without proper announcement. They were not allowed to enter into temples and also were forbidden to draw water from common wells. Among the Nair characters from the novel, Kondunni Nair, who considered all the people of the community were equal. He does not think of the untouchability of Kerala at that time. So he ate food made by other castes. Another incident of the novel, Syedalikutty partner of Kondunni Nair invited him to dinner.

That night, Syedalikutty Appunni's father to dinner. Appunni suddenly had a doubt: 'Do we Nairs eat the rice that Mapillas cook, Muthaachi?' 'Remember, it was your father!' They had pathiris and mutton curry (14)

M.T. Vasudevan Nair has proved a skillful craftsman by creating a glorious novel *Naalukettu*. The novel might be seen as an embodiment of history. Here history is recorded and represented in different perspectives which shaped the cultural artefacts of the novel. In this novel M.T. Vasudevan Nair attempts to bring something about the social life of his time and spoke in a new and different voice. His personal history is clearly demonstrated in the novel. For instance, he witnessed the last stages of crumbling of the matrilineal system of inheritance. History is the main character in the novel even larger than Appunni. History nourishes certain characters like Valiya Ammaman, Valiya Ammayi and their off springs and it destroys certain other characters like Kuttan Ammaman, Meenakshi Edathi, and Malu and so on. It also avoids certain characters like Appunni and Parukutty Amma. The rest of the characters like Ammama, mother of Parukutty Amma become immobile and powerless in front of the powerful history. Ammama has the desire to bring back parukutty into the tharavadu, but she is unable to do this because her immobility in naalukettu. At the end of the novel this power structure changes, when Kutta Ammaman claims his share of the property. This leads to the collapse of the matrilineal system. Naalukettu collapses because of the power structure on which it is built itself is collapsed. Naalukettu is the not only building with bricks and woods but also symbols of power structure. So it is a symbol of authority, prosperity, strength, honourship and it's a miniature palace. Hence the power structure collapsed and it redefines the relationships in naalukettu. At last the protagonist Appunni buy his mother's ancestral property naalukettu, which represent the ultimate destroy of the matrilineal system. Land reforms of 1950's led a complete collapse of the system. All becomes reawakened by the change in the system. System redefines everything. The sidelined and suppressed characters now become prominent. Text also changes with the change in history.

The end of the novel Appunni was able to buy his ancestral property of naalukettu. People who were thrown out have got the power to buy the symbol of its authority called naalukettu. With this change, the text ends because that is the end of naalukettu itself it cease to exist. A New History begins here. History redefines text in *Naalukettu* and becomes complementary to the text. It builds the structure and character here no other option to follow. Thus the study of *Naalukettu* proves to be a complementary reading of history and text.

Conclusion

The paper has arrived at bringing out the co-relation between the theory of New Historicism and the text of M.T. Vasudevan Nair's *Naalukettu*. New Historicism is a method based on the parallel reading of literary and non-literary texts of the same historical period. It refuses to privilege the literary text instead of a literary foreground and a historical background. The major aspect of the paper is the decline of Nair dynasty. M.T. Vasudevan captured in subtle detail, the pain and anguish that marked the crumbling of 'marumakkathayam' in Kerala in his particular novel *Naalukettu*. By observing the novel in a New Historicist reading, it was capable to found certain historical references such as rituals and festivals.

The novel mainly deals with the themes of the break-up of the matrilineal joint family system and the decline of Nair dominance. During post-colonial years, the Land reforms of 1950's led to massive loss of land-ownership by Nair Feudal Lords and some Nair gentry were relegated to poverty overnight. Thus the decline of Nair dominance came to a full circle by mid the 20th century. For this reason, the matrilineal system was begun to crumbling and break-up. It was depicted that the old system of matrilineal was crumbling and a new one of patrilineal system being forged. Marumakkattayam is a matrilineal system of inheritance that is unique to Nair tharavadus or Nair communities in Kerala state. Naalukettu is a kind of cage, the only freedom that is given to the people only by history. In the history of marumakkathayam, Karanavar is a guardian of this so called setting. He has the power to define the freedom and property of the right within the framework of naalukettu only. He has the right to take decision. He decides what will happen in the naalukettu setting. No other movement is possible and they are completely trapped within the four walls of naalukettu. The relationships of naalukettu are determined by the historical equations. These historical equations create a kind of space and if any member violates this equation they have to go out like Appunni's mother Parukutty Amma and there is no space to return. She is the only women who decide her own life in the naalukettu setting. This is supposed to be a crime according to the system. So she was forced to leave her tharavadu. She was no longer a part of this cage or naalukettu setting. She challenged the historical setting of Nair community that is why she was thrown out completely. Because of her challenge Appunni is invisible in naalukettu. When he first visited the Vadakkepaatt tharavad accompanying with an old woman 'muthaachi', the karanavar 'Valia Ammaaman' drove him out of the tharavad. As a son of Parukutty Amma he also rejected from this particular tharavad.

Historical context of the novel *Naalukettu* is the interpretation of the past for the sake of the present. Montro's famous definition of New Historicism is that it

centers upon the historicity of the text and the textuality of history. By observing the novel *Naalukettu* as a New Historicist way, history is textualised and texts are historised. The novel *Naalukettu* demonstrates the historicity of the text and the textuality of history. Thus, the paper aims to understand the novel through its historical context and to understand cultural and intellectual history.

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