Chapter Six

M.T. Vasudevan Nair’s Naalukettu:

Feudalism, Modernity, Patriarchy and Home

Naalukettu, a modern classical novel by M.T. Vasudevan Nair, Jnanpith awardee, novelist, short-story writer, editor and composer of screenplays in Malayalam, is a comprehensive record of social transformation. The novel foregrounds themes like the collapse of joint family system, the formation of nuclear family, young men’s search for employment in newly emerging industries other than the traditional jobs in agriculture, and the desire for making a life in modern style different from the old conventional lifestyle. The novel unveils these social realities and more, in addition to the individuals’ dreams and aspirations, failures and disillusionments in their endeavours to realise them. This masterpiece and first published novel of the author who is popularly known as M.T., chronicles, according to K.S. Ravikumar, the angst of social life in a distinct period of Kerala history (101). It is a phenomenal work in the history of Malayalam literature on the following grounds: (a) it appeared in a crucial period when Malayalam novel had slowly started breaking the barriers of realism, (b) it illustrates subtle, palpable and passionate subjective experience and (c) it portrays social changes in the period of Renaissance in Kerala when feudalism was on the decline and modernity was emerging. In short, Naalukettu creates a fiction by highlighting the death of an old era and birth of a new one at the crucial juncture of transition from Feudalism to Modernity. The novel creates a socio-political discourse on conflicts of the time which is unfolded in and out of home (naalukettu). Home, the epicentre of the novel, enables M.T. to give an iconic explanation of the conflicts of ideology of the epoch-making period in Kerala history.
My attempt in this chapter is to validate the argument that naalukettu, an old and dilapidated structure, iconises feudalism. Unable to confront and resist the sweeping changes of modernity, feudalism was disintegrating in the early phase of 20th century in Kerala. There is a common notion that Naalukettu is essentially subjective, and that M.T. is an individualist without any political commitments who depicts here mainly a young man’s dreams and ambitions, and his triumphs and failures. I, therefore, initially elucidate my postulate that Naalukettu is basically a socio-political novel, and that M.T. was a novelist with socio-political commitment. The socio-political background of Naalukettu is the period of transition from feudalism to modernity, and that is also elaborated in this chapter to substantiate how naalukettu, the ancestral home in the novel, transforms into the ideological icon of these socio-political changes of the time.

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1. **Naalukettu: Socio-political lineage**

The importance of Naalukettu becomes all the more prominent in the context of socio-political history of Kerala of the 19th and 20th centuries. A.S.A. Sreedhara Menon comments, “The 19th and 20th centuries witnessed the emergence of a new social order in Kerala under the impact of diverse social, economic and cultural influences” (306). Even towards the end of the eighteenth century, the traditional social structure had begun to show signs of tottering. The centralising policies of Marthanda Varma (the then Ruler of old Travancore State) and Sakkan Thampuran (the then Ruler of Cochin State) and the shock of the Mysorean invasion by Tipu Sultan served to give the coup de grace to the old social order and to usher in before long a new era wherein the feudal mobility and the caste aristocracy lost their old position of primacy. Customs and institutions of a feudal character and several other vestiges of the old order
remained to be modified or wiped out. A major factor that has contributed to the evolution of a new society in Kerala is the emergence of the new economic and professional classes. The traditional Kerala society, in which the caste of a person and the extent of the landed property owned by him determined his standing in the social scale, is now a thing of the past. The revolutionary economic and social changes that have taken place in quick succession in recent decades have brought the new economic and professional classes to the fore. The disruption of the old Joint family system, and the spread of Western education and liberal ideas, the increasing entry of the lower classes into the public services, the introduction of adult franchise, the progress of industrialisation, the decline in the power of the land owning classes, the rise of the new peasant classes with rights in the soil and above all, the disappearance of royalty have dealt the blow to the old social order. At the same time, the industrial workers, the businessmen, the Government officials, the teachers, the lawyers, the doctors, the engineers and journalists constitute the new economic and professional classes that have taken the place of the members of the old caste-ridden and landed aristocracy in Kerala. E.M.S. Namboothiripad in his Kerala Charithram: Marxist Veekshanathil (Kerala History in Marxian Perspective) shares this view and argues that the decline of feudalism in Kerala started when people of lower classes and castes such as Jews, Christians and Arabs began to acquire private property other than land through business and other activities (37). In his yet another famous work Keralam, Malayalikalude Mathrubhoomi (Kerala: The Motherland of Malayalis), E.M.S. points out that these social reforms spread more widely in the Nair community mainly for the reason that they were the first to gain English education and employment (238). The educated Nairs wanted to lead a family life like any other civilised communities with husband, wife and children. They
realised the importance of reforms in social and family life which finally put an end to the notorious system called marumakkathayam in Nair families.

2. **M.T. and Social Criticism**

M.T., who started his writing career in 1940s, had shared in many respects the social concerns of his fellow writers, but he spoke in a different voice remarkable for its introspective nature. M.T. is allegedly a non-political writer, showing no interest in the socio-political developments of the country either of the past, or of the present. This question has been raised by M.M. Vasudevan Pillai in his essay “M.Tyude Gothram” (M.T.’s Tribe), and the critic argues that M.T., in spite of his overt indifference towards socio-political events, had expressed his concern and sympathy towards genuine problems affecting humanity. Vasudevan Pillai observes that Hemingway and Beckett are the most favourite writers of M.T., and there are reasons for it; he would have found parallels in these writers to his own thoughts and responses. In his view, M.T. was born in Malabar where there had been various revolts of violence and bloodshed, and such a novelist can never be totally indifferent towards politics. Vasudevan Pillai concludes that M.T. has always been moved by human issues raised in the epic wars in history and mythology, and it is well evident in M.T.’s Randamoozham (Second Turn). According to Vasudevan Pillai, this is not just a dream or vision of a romantic writer; it is the anxiety and concern of a writer about the degeneration and destruction of humanity (169). In an interview with N.E. Sudheer, published in Mathrubhumi Onam Special, where M.T. makes clear his views on literature, the author elaborates that literature is one of the most prominent and powerful influences on life. It is like religion, law or judiciary that impacts the life of the individuals and society. The power of literature is imminent in everybody’s life either consciously or unconsciously (7). In his essay “M.T. Vasudevan Nairude Jeevithavum Sahityavum” (Life and Literature of M.T. Vasudevan
Nair), M.M. Basheer details how M.T. blended his romantic imagination with the social and political realities of his time. In his words, “M.T. has skillfully shown his craftsmanship in synthesising the pangs and agonies of down-to-earth existence along with the subjective, dreamy, passionate and aesthetic experiences. In his novels Naalukettu (1954), Paathiravum Pakal Velichavum (1958), Arabipponnu (1960), Asuravithu (1962), Manju (1964), Kaalam (1969), Vilapayatra (1978), Randamoozham (1984), M.T. portrays intensely and with passion man’s tears, smile, ecstasies and agonies (6). Gita Krishnankutty, in her introduction to the English translation of Naalukettu, comments that “He [M.T.] was one of the first writers in Kerala to concern himself with the inward turned vision” (xix). She continues that “Throughout the fifty-odd years that he has been writing, this vision has been consistent and is now acknowledged as the distinctive feature of his craft” (xix). However, the scholar recognises the fact that M.T. situates much of his fiction against the social backdrop of the matrilineal Nair tharavad at the point of time when it was slowly disintegrating, largely to emphasise the power, the frustration, or the helplessness that characters moving against this background have to deal with. The protagonists of his early novels – Naalukettu, Asuravithu and Kaalam – are alienated individuals, painfully aware of being isolated from uncaring and unkind members of society or their families (xix).

C. Unnikrishnan in his essay “Naalukettum Swathwaprathisandhiyum” (Naalukettu and the Existential Crisis) maintains that every writer tries to sketch her own age in her works, and so did M.T. In Naalukettu, it is micro-social history and not macro-political history that has been portrayed. The society in which M.T. is born, and the inequalities and injustices that exist in that society, have produced in him a lot of frustration and anxiety. In Naalukettu, M.T. recognises that history is not just the story of himself and his society; it is an account of the changes that
occur naturally and the changes that are forcibly imposed. To him, the small changes that happen in his surroundings everyday form a part of history and they are more important than the great revolutions that take place in a public sphere. That is why Naalukettu is debated even today. (182-188)

3. M.T. and naalukettu

Bichu X. Malayil in his essay “MTyude Tharavadukal” (The Ancestral Homes of M.T.) recognises M.T.’s apt portrayal of naalukettu and states that nobody can deny the fact that M.T. has excelled other novelists in portraying powerfully the disintegrating and degrading family traditions in his novels. The broken Nair taravads and the broken family relations is the favourite background of M.T.’s works (184).

M.T. spelt out precisely how far naalukettu mattered in his writings. To him, naalukettu meant his home, and in the novel, he was writing about his home. In an interview with M.T., Ibrahim Bevincha put a question: “Does naalukettu ever afflict your mind in moments of literary creation? Is it the reason why several of your stories and novels revolve around naalukettu?” M.T. replied:

This question has been raised by many. It seems that there is no other question more senseless than this one. The home we [members of the Nair family] live in is called naalukettu. Every author writes about his home. He also writes about the environments where he lives in. Since I was born in a Nair taravad, our home was a naalukettu…. Like other writers all over the world who write about their home, I also write about my home, that is, naalukettu. I titled my novel Naalukettu. While describing naalukettu I used terms like kitchen, kottathalam, thekkini,
vadakkini and so on which are the different sections of our home…. Those who
have awarded me the title as a writer of naalukettsu, are totally ignorant of these
matters. (35-37)

Naalukettu depicts the various scenes of conflicts when marumakkathaya system began to
decline and fall. So, it is certain that the novel represents an important period of transition in the
social history of Kerala. The helpless men and all-suffering women become a part of M.T.‘s
taravudu. These characters are proud of the feudalistic tradition and they have an existence only
in these broken and disintegrated Nair taravads. In short, A ppunni in Naalukettu, Govindankutty
in Asuravithu and Sethu in Kaalam – the three protagonists in M.T.’s novels – are born and
brought up in the background of Nair taravudu, the atmosphere of which played a crucial part in
their lives. Living in such a miserable and wretched social system, they had woven the dreams of
their future and worked hard to fulfil them. In the penultimate chapter of Naalukettu, M.T. says:
“The naalukettu with its ancient memories belonged to him [Appunni] 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).

In fact, A ppunni is the Madhavan (the protagonist in Indulekha) in M.T.’s Naalukettu; he
not only grows out of naalukettsu, but also demolishes it. His manifesto was “Nothing to lose but
naalukettsu; instead, I can gain a new personal world of fresh air and light” (Soman 89). In the
words of the novelist,

A ppunni opened the front door of the naalukettu. The thekkini was enveloped in
darkness. When he tugged at the bars and opened the window, slivers of light fell
in. The air had a wet, musty odour. Even when the doors were opened, darkness
lurked in the nooks and corners. Dust lay in heaps on the granite slabs covering
the floor of the central courtyard. Termites had eaten their way into the wooden
pillars. (Naalukettu 202)

4. **Naalukettu: Blending Subjectivity and Social Concern**

Naalukettu deals with many of M.T.’s familiar themes: the break-up of the matrilineal
joint family system, patterns of revenge, and the mother-son relationship. Naalukettu is a
bildungsroman in the sense that the novel unfolds the way the mind-set of the characters
develops and changes during the course of the novel. M.T. says of Appunni, the protagonist:

> There is very little of the autobiographical element in him. Experiences that any
child could have gone through…Appunni could have been a child in my own
family. And there is a happening in the novel culled from the stories in my
village. One of my uncles started a business with Syedalikuttu. One day, after he
ate in Syedalikuttu’s house, my uncle threw up and died. The rumour that he had
been poisoned spread through the village. I was told that the police investigated
the case. But everyone said that nothing was proved. (xx)

He goes on to speak about the background of the novel:

> I witnessed the last stages of the crumbling of the matrilineal 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.

(Sargasameeksha 288)
The novel opens with the child Appunni reiterating his desire to kill Syedalikkutty, the man who had deliberately poisoned his father. In fact, Syedalikkutty, who first makes his appearance as Appunni’s much hated arch-enemy, is gradually transformed into a friend who turns up at every critical juncture in his young life. Appunni’s uncle, his mother’s elder brother who he calls Valia Ammaaman is another enemy. He exploits his position as the karanavar, the head of the matrilineal family, ruthlessly and steadily siphoning the income from the joint properties into his wife’s estate until his family can bear the situation no longer. He is a fairly typical example of some of the karanavars of the time: imperious, callous and completely unconcerned about his sisters and their families. He remains dominating and inimical until he is transformed by circumstances into a helpless old man, crippled by debts. He is forced to agree to whatever Appunni, the boy he once drove out of his house, decides best for everyone.

Naalukettu is the story of Appunni, the protagonist, who grows up from a small boy full of fears and secret longings into a confident young man. As he grows up, he encounters numerous obstacles that appear insurmountable. Each time he comes up against one of them, it is Syedalikutty, the man who poisoned and killed his father Kondunni Nair, who helps him overcome them. Appunni manages to make enough money to buy back the naalukettu that had been his mother’s home until she was turned out of it. However, his sense of victory is soured when he learns that his uncle’s daughter, Ammini, had died in childbirth. Ammini had not only treated him with affection, she had also been the first girl to arouse his sexual feelings.

How far M.T. has succeeded in blending subjectivity and social concern in Naalukettu is recognised by M.M. Basheer in his essay “Naalukettum English Paribhashayum” (Naalukettu and its English Translation):
Appunni in Naalukettu is said to be a romantic outsider. Most of M.T.’s protagonists are romantic heroes. In Naalukettu, there is a collapse of a classical institution and the rise of a romantic outsider. The demolition of naalukettu marks the failure of a social system and the presence of the romantic outsider as the protagonist indicates the birth of a new age. (40)

5. Naalukettu: Home Around the Courtyard

5.1. Structure of naalukettu

In the novel, the architectural structure of the naalukettu (naalu: four; kettu: building) itself has metaphorical implications. Naalukettu is a house consisting of four residential quarters built around a central roofless quadrangle. A small room called machu towards the west of the naalukettu is dedicated to kaavilamma, the household deity, before whom a lamp is lit every evening. Despite the family’s prosperity, discontentment often brews in the naalukettu owing to the dictatorial attitude of the head of the family and the self-seeking ways of the various occupants of the house. M.T. himself has given an account of naalukettu in his D.Litt acceptance speech delivered at Calicut University:

The old naalukettu is related to marumakkathayam system which existed in Kerala. The courtyard supported by four wooden pillars is open to the skies. The rooms, dining hall, kitchen etc. were situated on two sides. There will be a huge gate. There will also be storerooms for preserving grains, etc. The storeroom is known as pathayappura. This is the picture of an ordinary naalukettu. (“MT on naalukettu” in Naalukettinte Thachushastram 354)
The ancestral home, naalukettu, with its huge and imposing structure in the golden era of feudalism, which stood among the small huts of the poor farmers and tenants, represented the unquestionable authority and domination of the upper castes in Kerala. The poomukham (front part) of naalukettu, with a characteristic armed chair exclusively meant for the patriarch of the family, and in contrast the narrow and dark anthapurams (inner apartments) for women, were the two striking features of these ancestral upper caste homes. They signified respectively the unique authority of the head of the family and the pathetic conditions of women who were subjected to both mental and physical torture by these patriarchs. The storerooms in the naalukettu where grains were collected and gathered from the poor tenants indicated the immense wealth of these landlords in a period of history when agricultural crops formed the main wealth of the society. The money the landlords spent for constructing such huge residential houses for themselves, displaying their craze for superiority and domination over others, showed not their innocent aesthetic sense of architecture, but their greed and pomposity along with their callousness, suppression and exploitation of women and the downtrodden.

According to P.K. Poker and N. Jayakrishnan, who edited a collection of essays on the novel titled Nalukettinte Thachusastram (The Architecture of Naalukettu), “Naalukettu is a social history. It is through the various phases of this history that Appunni marches ahead with his personal strengths and weaknesses” (iii). Jayakrishnan continues that the structure of naalukettu has definitely moulded the character, thoughts and demeanour of the people who lived there. Normally, light inside a house increases in proportion to its size; but in the case of naalukettu it happened otherwise. Here the distance between the people widened and their

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1 Ironically, the same naalukettu, when feudalism declined, is purchased, artistically modified and used by the new emerging bourgeois, suggesting that this ancestral home still remains as a sign of social supremacy.
mutual relations were strained. Moral and economic anarchy prevailed. Wealth got accumulated in the hands of a few people, and it led to a discord among family members (vii).

5.2. **Naalukettu: Time, Space and Atmosphere**

A. S. Pratheesh, in “Naalukettu: Kudumbaghadanayude Anthakshobhangal” (Naalukettu: the Inner Turmools of the Family Structure) argues that Naalukettu is related to time and space in several ways. There are many references in the narrative to determine the locale of action in the novel like Pattambi, Kudallur, Maniyur, Ponnani, Thrithala, Mannoor, Mulayakavu, Bharathapuzha (some local places mentioned in the novel) and so on, which give a clear picture of old Valluvanadu in South Malabar. M.T makes use of the manifestation of space in Naalukettu in every sense of the term. In the narrative, he underpins the background, people, atmosphere, localism and the other elements. Besides, the space is pictured symbolically with all the intensity of emotions. Kudallur village is in the background of the story. It is a rustic atmosphere with naalukettu, paddy fields, river, sarpam thullal (a ritual to appease the serpents) flood and all (82). Pratheesh further comments that the time that dismantles and recreates is one of the major concepts in M.T.’s novels. Space supplements time in M.T; it appears either as change or realignment of place. Appunni, the protagonist, was twelve years old when the novel begins. He was going to join high school. After his education, he goes to Wayanad, seeking job, and returns home after five years, with sufficient money to buy the naalukettu. He was then twenty-two. Thus, the novel covers a period of total eight years, and within this short span of time, the novelist relates the decline and disintegration of the Vadakkeppatt taravad, an emblem of aristocracy which was once very rich with an income from 10,000 acres of paddy land at its doorstep (86). Similarly, the novelist has succeeded in sustaining the atmosphere of naalukettu. In the novel, Muthaachi tells Appunni:
Yes, a naalukettu, four wings built around a central four-pillared quadrangle. It was constructed many years ago. The prestige it had in the days when I was a child! Three outhouses. There was an eight-pillared hall in the house and two sunken courtyards. But those days are gone… . (21)

The novelist creates the atmosphere of naalukettu through various and varied images and metaphors:

Yes, the naalukettu was huge! Thatched with straw, just as he had imagined it. Walls from which the whitewash had crumbled. Worn, ash-coloured windows with thick bars. The pathayappura was next to the house and had a tiled roof. He could see the outhouse and a part of the dilapidated wall.

This was the naalukettu his mother had lived in, the one where the Bhagavathi (the Goddess) resided. He had heard that that was why the building could not be tiled. The naalukettu had been built very, very long ago. They said even Amma’s (mother’s) grandmother’s grandmother had no idea when it had been built. And then, one of the older uncles in the family had decided to lay a tiled roof over it. But as the original walls were not strong enough to support the tiles, they would have had to be demolished and new ones built. The astrologers who did the prashnam ritual had said that the Bhagavathi would not like this and that the household shrine and the walls should not be disturbed.

And this was that naalukettu! (46)

The pathayappura, machu, kuttiyara, thekkini, vadakkini, the rooms above them and the room set apart for the bridegroom of Thangedathi, and besides, the places where the departed
souls of Poremmavan and Narayanammavan and the Bhagavathi are worshipped – all these add to the mystery of naalukettu. The novelist captures the sense of smell of naalukettu in various ways: the sweet smell of the silk dress worn by A mminiyyedathi and Thangedathi, and the enchanting smell of oil, sandalwood and flowers used by them. The traumas of the in-dwellers of naalukettu complete the picture: the grandmother who always weeps, the great aunt who is always demanding and protesting, the young uncle who always wraps his feet with a blanket and grumbles about the pathetic condition of man by leaning on the wall, and Kuttammama, who visits the naalukettu occasionally like a tornado with all its boisterousness.

5.3. **Naalukettu: a System of Human Relations**

Naalukettu is the naalukettu of ardent human relations. Here, the relation between the mother, sister and brother is intense. However, the decadence of naalukettu also shatters these human relations. There takes place the encounter between Valia Ammaama and Kuttammaama. Kuttan Nair, the younger brother, challenges Valia Ammaama’s privileges on agricultural produce. Thus, there is an inner class struggle within the naalukettu between the owner and producer. Kuttan Nair, though an upper caste Nair, is almost like a lower caste labourer who produces paddy. The karanavar exploits these real workers and by storing all the produce in large boxes. He establishes a control and dominance over others. Kuttan Nair questions this system of exploitation of land and its produce within the precincts of naalukettu. It is, in fact, a desire to liberate oneself from serfdom. The karanavar refuses to give his brothers and relatives even the wage that is paid to the common workers. Naalukettu unfolds the evils of this system of serfdom built on the sweat and blood of the downtrodden. M.T. portrays several scenes of human exploitation, both physical and emotional, along with the shattering of human relations.
Naalukettu is a nucleus of varied emotional bonds. Here the relation between mother, sister and the brother is strong, and the breaking up of this relation, in fact, caused the decline and fall of naalukettu. The uncles in the family begin to clash with each other. The elder uncle’s traditional right on the marketing of paddy is questioned by his younger brother Kuttan Nair. In this way, there is an inner class struggle in naalukettu between the producer and the owner. The members in naalukettu like Kuttan Nair who produce paddy with their hard work are treated as subordinates, but the patriarch, who collects and stores the paddy and thus establishes an authority over others, is the overlord. Kuttan Nair questions this system of authority of the patriarch, and thereby proclaims his love for liberation from domination and control.

The house was always the centre of all kinds of prejudices, based on wealth, pride and nobility. In naalukettu existed a system of rule centered on the individuals, where the patriarch had the right and power to reprimand and punish even people who were senior to him. No other man except the patriarch had any role in the family. In marumakkathayam, father had to give more importance to his nephew than to his own son. The children therefore lived with uncles and not with fathers. The patriarch in the family did not produce anything; he simply enjoyed the wealth produced by others. Gold and paddy were the main properties, and paddy, coconut and areca nut formed the basis of economic property. The patriarchs were very calculative and their strictness had the worst impact on the women in the family.

5.4. **Naalukettu: a System of Rituals**

Naalukettu is a traditional house with several age-old practices, ceremonies and rituals, which often serve as a figurative device in the novel. An example is the Sarpam Thullal. Serpents are invoked during the ritual, and virgins who sit in the kalam or the sacred design on
the floor, get possessed by them. The girls fall into a trance and sanctify the chitrakootam, stones found in the yard, with the snake spirits that have entered their bodies.

Naalukettu synthesises old traditions, conventions, beliefs, rituals, and also the fears, complexes and inhibitions created by all of these. Women, mostly mothers and sisters of the family, create the prosperity, well-being and grace of the marumakkathayam system. Therefore, the family deity is not a god but a goddess. The Bhagawati installed in the inner apartments of naalukettu is believed to be the protector of the family. Just as thattakam (domain) where the Kavilamma (local deity) dwells is the centre of power of the Nair leaders of the locality, naalukettu where the Bhagawati dwells in inner apartments is the centre of power of the karanavar. So, naalukettu becomes a small unit of feudal culture. Kavilamma is responsible for the agricultural growth and prosperity; similarly, Bhagawati in the naalukettu is responsible for the agricultural prosperity and the welfare of the children. Naalukettu is the kavu (grove) of the Bhagawati. The social system called naalukettu is pre-destined by Bhagawati, and so it should be protected forever. Appunni unsettles this primitive creed. The novelist gives a vivid picture of it in the final chapter where Appunni decides to demolish the old naalukettu:

The young man stopped as he reached the front steps. He said to the woman who followed him:

‘Go in, Amma.’

He saw her hesitate and said, ‘You can go in fearlessly.’

The slender woman whose hair was just beginning to be touched with grey climbed into the veranda.
The old man climbed the steps with a look of distress, as if aware that he was following the woman into a place which he had no right.

The woman said as she entered, ‘How dark it is in here, Appunni.’

‘It’s dark here even in the daytime. The ghosts of all our ancestors must be here even in the day.’

The mother looked at him bewildered.

‘Don’t worry, Amma. We’ll arrange to have this naalukettu demolished. All we need here is a small house that will let in light and air.’

‘Demolish it? The place where the Bhagavathi resides?’

The young man laughed aloud. The sound of his laughter dashed against the broken walls, the worn pillars, the dark corners, and flowed back.

The old man still stood confused, his head bowed. (205)

Appunni’s laughter suggests rejection; he rejects through his laughter naalukettu and the age-old customs, beliefs and rituals associated with it. His laughter anticipates the laughter of the velichappadu (oracle) in M.T.’s acclaimed movie Nirmalyam (1973) who looks first at the face of Devi’s idol and then spits on it. By demolishing even the foundation of naalukettu, Appunni proclaims the destruction of an old system based on rituals and customs and also denounces the culture inherent in it. Along with naalukettu, sarpa thara (a platform where serpents are worshipped in a grove exclusively meant for them) also is dismantled. The grove, sacred to the serpents, has a structure similar to that of naalukettu. There are upper castes and lower castes among the serpents. Kari Nagam is a black serpent, while Mani Nagam and Anjana Mani Nagam
are white and golden respectively. Serpents dwell under a structure carved out of beautiful stones called chitrakootam. In one serpent family itself, there are sons, daughters, nephews, cousins and also servants. They are comparable to the characters in the novel like the elder uncle, paternal grandmother, father of Malu, Meenakshi Edathi, her husband and Appunni. Along with the collapse of naalukettu, the naalukettu of the serpents also breaks down. Serpents symbolise motherhood, and so, appeasement of serpents is equivalent to appeasement of mother. The destruction of sarpa kavu (grove of the serpents) implies then the destruction of matriarchal system:

There were two serpent-shrines, one below and one above the hill, and three serpents in all of them together. She had learned their names: Karinagam, Maninagam and Anjanamaninagam. Karinagam was wicked and belonged to a lower caste. Malu assumed he was like Ayyappan or Chathappan, workmen who belonged to inferior castes. It was because he was wicked that Karinagam had to be appeased during the Shivaratri festival by being given the offerings of milk and banana first, before they were offered to the others. If they were offered first to the serpents in the other shrine, he would come out and pollute the offerings.

Malu had never seen these serpents. Their dwellings were below the chitrakootam stone in the serpent-shrine. There were many serpents in each dwelling – children, nieces, nephews and servants. Obviously, it was one of them that they had seen on the front steps a few days earlier. Thangedathi had cried out when she went to place a lighted wick there at dusk: ‘A mme, a snake! Cheriamme, a snake!’ (36)
5.5. **Naalukettu: a Site of Social Transition**

In *Naalukettu*, the transition of Appunni, the protagonist, runs parallel to a radical change in his immediate society. Just as Chandumenon’s *Indulekha* captured the decline of the Brahmanical society and the rise of the Nairs in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, *Naalukettu* presents the gradual disintegration of the matrilineal joint family system or marumakkathayam. In the marriage known as sambandham which had been corollary to the Nair matrilineage, the man negotiated with the head of the woman’s family and thereafter began to visit her. In order to safeguard the woman’s interest, the wealth of her family was handed down to her line. But in actual practice, the karanavar who managed the household affairs often misused the family property and the junior inheritors were deprived of whatever was due to them. By the 1930s, marumakkathayam in Travancore, Kochi and Malabar had been banned by law. The heads of the Nair families began to lose their authority as the younger members initiated legal proceedings to claim their shares. It is from this socio-historical context that Appunni emerges as a figure of the newly-awakened sense of personal identity among Malabar Nairs.

Laws regulating the Nair systems of inheritance came into effect while M.T. was still a child. At the time of publication of the novel in 1958, most of the prosperous Nair families had their second or third generation of English learners. The text of *Naalukettu* is ambiguous about its time. Going by the turns in the plot, one would surmise that the novel is set in the late 30s or early 40s, though there is no historical event in the text that might act as a point of reference.

In Malabar, the rule of marumakkathayam was introduced in 1933, the year in which M.T. was born. S. Guptan Nair in his essay “The light and shadow in *Naalukettu*” remarks that it
was perhaps M.T.'s destiny to write against marumakkathayam. He adds that M.T.'s novels are the expressions of a person who knew directly and indirectly the pangs and agonies of an age of social transformation (63). In the essay, Guptan Nair discusses M.T.'s philosophy as a writer, and concludes that it is nothing but a statement of Appunni, the protagonist of Naalukettu towards the end of the novel that “here, a home with little more light should be built” (64). In his view, on reading the novel, naalukettu, the ancestral house impresses the reader as a character with dark and gloomy face (65). Guptan Nair holds again that the broken Nair families in M.T.'s novels are upshots of economic crisis (65).

5.6. **The collapse of naalukettu**

In fact, as we found earlier, it is the economic situation along with the social changes that brought about the collapse of naalukettu. The inner apartments of naalukettu still rumble with the suppressed cries and lamentations of women who lived there. How man’s craze for power and wealth strangles all other human considerations during the feudal period is evident from various stories about naalukettu. Most probably naalukettu collapsed itself due to the heavy burden of injustices and inequalities it brought upon itself. It is not the outside pressure, but the inner struggles of its own inhabitants that wrecked these sign boards of feudalism.

Obviously, naalukettu is not just an architectural structure; it is both a system of family and the human predicament during the period of feudalism. The social system in the novel is serfdom based on untouchability. In a community dominated by caste, the upper caste/class people had expressed their intolerance and hatred towards the downtrodden and the suppressed, and this detestable social condition is poignantly expressed in the novel. This inequality between the upper and lower class people existed both outside and inside of naalukettu. The patriarch
(karanavar) in the naalukettu was the master and the other members of the family slaves. In a society where there was inequality, it is natural that this inequality reflected in the family system as well. In naalukettu, ‘man’ is the only patriarch; the others are all ‘women’- weaklings.

M.T.’s Naalukettu has an importance in the cultural history of Kerala as it records all the trends of Kerala renaissance and the complex social issues. It gives a clear picture of the Kerala society and the Nair families based on joint family system. Except the story, the whole novel is history. The other side of history is culture. There is in the novel the history of village and of the family system. In the writing of that history, M.T. created a hero called A ppunni, and his life story becomes the history of a crucial transitional period in the history of Kerala. M.T. is a writer with a historical as well as cultural sense; history travels with him, and then he also carries culture.

M.T. wrote Naalukettu fifty years ago, based on his traumatic personal experience inside the naalukettu. Whether A ppunni, the protagonist, is the mouthpiece of the author or not, his demand towards the end of the novel to build a small house, open to light and air, by destroying the old naalukettu is much more meaningful; it is a clamour for change from the dead and inane feudal age to a new modern democratic age, however challenging it is. Into his new house A ppunni invites his mother along with Sankunni Nair who was a moral support to his mother in old age. The novel heralds the death of an old age and the dawn of a new one – an age when there is much more genuine love and affection between people than in the previous age. Through the dismantling of naalukettu, a new and fresh atmosphere of love and freedom is created. Darkness gives place to light. Such destructions are inevitable because they are not just the demolitions of some buildings; they mark a triumph of humanism over feudalism.
M.T. took special care not give an impression that he is a revolutionary propagandist of some social or cultural reforms. So he ends the novel with a note of reconciliation. It is curious to note that victory, both financial and moral, does not bring any permanent sense of elation to Appunni. He lets go of all his ill feelings towards his mother and brings her and Sankaran Nair to the naalukettu. He must now demolish that crumbling structure with full of darkness inside and build a small house that lets in air and light. He must do it with a free and unprejudiced mind, with the sheer act of living as his frame of reference.

The two homes in the novel – one the naalukettu and the other the small house Appunni intends to build – represent respectively the decay and disintegration of feudalism and the emergence of a modern age with all its hopes of freedom. Appunni’s laughter towards the end of the novel reflects the joy of victory of modern man over a decadent tradition symbolised by naalukettu. In the words of the novelist, “The sound of his laughter dashed against the broken walls, the worn pillars, the dark comers, and flowed back” (Naalukettu 205). For half a century, Appunni’s laughter has remained the true Sisyphean expression in the countenance of Malayalam fiction. Heard at a juncture of transition, it was meant to resonate way behind and beyond its own historical moment, to be gracefully accepted at once by its past and future.

6. **Appunni in naalukettu**

In the novel, M.T. narrates the story of Appunni before the disintegration of naalukettu begins. The novel shows what happens when naalukettu is being built; it ends when the naalukettu is dismantled. Naalukettu in the beginning stood for all the glory and grandeur of the feudal age; in due course, with the disintegration of feudalism and the arrival of modernity, the dilapidated naalukettu epitomised all the social evils. The novel transforms itself into a journey
between the time and space of the flourish and collapse of naalukettu. M.T. tells the story of those who live or who are destined to live in this ancestral house. The highlight of Naalukettu is on the solitary journey of Appunni who is expelled from naalukettu before he is born.

Appunni’s story is the story of a modern angry young man frustrated by the existing orthodox family as well as social system. Charmed by the tales of impressive naalukettu to which he justly belongs, Appunni visits the house during the magical rite of Sarpam Thullal – the possessed dance ritual associated with the practice of snake worship in Kerala – only to be pushed out by his granduncle, the karanavar, who heads the household. Later, when he feels hurt and humiliated by the buzz in the village linking Sankaran Nair, a hand at the illam, and his mother, Appunni runs away from his home and gathers courage to go to the taravad again. He cannot bring himself to appreciate the fact that whatever assistance his mother has sought from Sankaran Nair has been for none else but him. His arrival in the naalukettu is met with much resistance from Valia Ammaman, his grand uncle. But his disgruntled nephew Kuttan uses Appunni’s presence as a chance to raise his long-suppressed voice against the dictatorial karanavar. It encourages Appunni to assert his own right to live in his ancestral house.

The love-hate relationship between Appunni and naalukettu is at the core of the novel, and the novelist gives some heart-rending accounts of Appunni’s traumatic experiences in Naalukettu:

Muthaachi often used to tell him, ‘You belong to a great tharavad, child.’

He would repeat this to himself many times. A tharavad that had once harvested ten thousand paras (a measure) of paddy! But that was very long ago. Around the period when Muthaachi’s second husband began to visit her, the tharavad
property had been divided. At the time, there had been sixty-four members in the extended family.

A household with sixty-four members!

Muthaachi told him that the house had had two naalukettus at that time. More than half the building had been pulled down later. The naalukettu where the Bhagavathi resided still existed. And the pathayappura and outhouse as well. Muthaachi used to visit the place once every two or three months.

‘A tharavad that used to radiate passage! Even now, I tremble when I enter the courtyard.’ (15)

The novelist multiplies these experiences of Appunni:

This was the Vadakkeppat tharavad. He belonged to it.

His mother belonged to it.

The house he lived in had only two rooms and a kitchen. The walls were not lastered. At night, pieces of broken brick would fall onto his mat. There were rows and rows of windows above the naalukettu here...did everyone have a room for themselves then? Even the children? (47)

6.1. Appunni, a Modern Man

Appunni witnesses the slow disintegration of feudal structures of the matrilineal joint family system as he stays on in the naalukettu and continues his studies now supported by a scholarship. His grandmother supports him and gradually comes to terms with his condition. It
was a turbulent period of social and political transition from feudalism to modernity but, with increasing detachment towards the turbulence around, Appunni grows up and finishes his school. While Appunni determinedly earns his education and leaves the village for employment, his defenceless mother is left in the void created by his desertion. At one point, she finds Sankaran Nair, her only anchor. By the time Appunni finds his way up in life, the disintegration of his matrilineal taravad is complete. Property is divided among the numerous inheritors, debts around, the granary is empty, and the family does not claim to be financially or socially powerful any longer. Appunni returns to his village at this point and buys naalukettu, the symbol of his youthful desire and distress.

Home in the novel becomes an arena of battle between two generations, represented by Appunni and the karanavar. Appunni’s encounter with the karanavar, his grand uncle is a crucial moment in the novel. During their first meeting, the all-powerful Valiya Ammaman pushes him out of the naalukettu. By the time they meet next, the karanavar’s position in the household has been weakened and his much-afflicted nephew Kuttan has risen in rebellion. During their third confrontation, the equation of power between Valiya Ammaman and Appunni is completely inverted. At first Appunni experiences a cruel delight in the invasion of roles and positions in his relationships. But after he buys the naalukettu, he realises that in the bigger scheme of things, all the experiences that he has had are justified in some way: there was no point in pitting “his gains against his losses” (204).

The middle class in Kerala emerged from agrarian sector. They form a class between the agrarian sector and feudal landlordism and not between the proletarian and capitalistic classes. So, they are nostalgic about rituals-bound feudal art, including literature, and their spirituality. In Appunni, one finds no such nostalgia. He wants to return to his village not because of his love
for rustic life; he wants to capture naalukettu, both physically and symbolically, and thus to prove himself before his former enemies who had expelled him from there.

Appunni gives the message that it is not the nobility of the family but money that determines the life of Malayalis. The transition from feudalism to modernity culminated in the change of values: in feudalism, the nobility of the family counted more than money, while in the modern age, money dominated all values and power structures. With money, Appunni resolves to create a new world of human relations. He corrects his own impression that he is alone. In order to show-off at the peak of power and wealth, one needs dependents as well as subordinates. Therefore, Appunni restores first his mother and Sankaran Nair, his mother’s protector.

6.2. Naalukettu and New Humanism

That the ideology of naalukettu is that man creates everything by himself implies that self-creation, including physical and economic strength, is decisive. P. Soman holds that in 1958, when communist ideas of social reforms were prominent, M.T. in Naalukettu underlined the individual’s role in her own and society’s transformation. In a subtle sense, that itself was a part of creating history. His creed is made clear in the opening lines of the novel:

He would grow up. Grow up and become a big man. His hands would become very strong. He would not have to fear anyone. He would be able to stand up and hold his head high. If someone asked, ‘Who’s that there?’ he would say unhesitatingly in a firm voice, ‘It’s me, Kondunni Nair’s son, Appunni.’ (1)

Appunni does not want to be known after his family; he is known as the son of Kondunni Nair. So, naalukettu marks the transition from marumakkathayam system to makkathayam system. To Appunni, naalukettu is not a nostalgia; he does not want to go back to naalukettu. It
did not provide him with any sweet dreams to be nurtured. Instead, he wants to escape from naalukettu, a place of hatred, hostility, malice and all. The demolition of naalukettu and Appunni’s escape from it is symbolically the dismantling of feudal system. Appunni is his father’s son. His father too, had gone out of the naalukettu and thus abused Vadakkeppatt taravad. Here is the encounter between Valia Ammaaman and Kondunni Nair:

Who’s that Madhava?

It was Achan who answered. ‘Kondunni of Thazhathethu.’

‘What business do men who do not belong to this tharavad have here after dark?’

Achan said respectfully, ‘I was not in the northern wing, in the woman’s quarters. I came here to talk to one of the men in the family.’

Valia Aammaaman paced up and down furiously. ‘You should have sat in the front veranda, finished your business, and left. The men of Thazhathethu have not risen so high that they can enter the Vadakkeppatt pathayappura.’

Achan controlled himself. ‘I did not come here in secret. If Kondunni wants a girl from here, he knows how to get her.’

Valia Aammaaman lunged forward and made a sign ordering him out, ‘Phoo!’

Achan cleared his throat, spat and exclaimed, ‘A fine tharavad, indeed!’ (12)

If Appunni’s father insulted naalukettu by taking his mother away from it, Appunni takes his mother back to taravad and then demolishes it. The son expresses his father’s manliness,
though in a different manner. So, the feminists can argue that naalukettu reveals the patriarchal ideology.

M.T. portrays the philosophy of love and compassion in the place of racial prejudice and hatred through the relation between Appunni and Syedalikutty. He stood always for Hindu-Muslim harmony. M.T. seems to bear in his mind the impact of farmers’s agitation in Malabar (represented in the novel through Kuttan Nair’s participation in the same) and Gandhian vision of Hindu-Muslim unity.

Naalukettu of the feudal period was always against humanity. It begins to crack once Appunni enters it with a humanitarian outlook. There is a social reformer in Appunni who first appears to be solitary among the crowd. He dismantles the naalukettu of untouchability by eating the food prepared by a Muslim woman. Humanism is an alchemy that converts hatred to love.

* *

In conclusion: Naalukettu, a landmark in the history of Malayalam novels, is more a socio-political discourse on the conflicts and concerns of a crucial period of transition from Feudalism to Modernity than a Romantic novel with a passionate account of a young man’s traumas and triumphs. The protagonist’s heart-throbbing personal experiences merge into the wider social concerns, and they together recapture the agonies and ecstasies of an epoch in the history of Kerala. Naalukettu, the ancestral Nair taravadu, embraces both the subjective experiences of Appunni, and witnesses and partakes simultaneously the death of an old age and the dawn of a new era which formed the main ideology of Renaissance in Kerala. The ancestral home is not merely a house; it is a system that accommodates joint families, marumakkathayam, age-old beliefs, customs, rituals, ceremonies and all, and therefore dismantling it means
dismantling a system comprising them all. In precise, Naalukettu grows into an icon of that ideological system of values, customs, beliefs and doctrines of the decadent period of feudalism, the destruction of which becomes inevitable for the birth of a new age. That home in M.T.’s masterpiece is more a socio-cultural icon than just a residential building accounts for much of the novel’s success and popularity among the readers and scholars even after 50 years of its publication in 1958.