



## Exploring the Ancient Kerala with Appunni: A Cultural Probe into M.T. Vasudevan Nair's *Naalukettu*

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### Abstract

*The research paper entitled “Exploring Ancient Kerala with Appunni: A Cultural Probe into M. T. Vasudevan Nair's Naalukettu” critically investigates the culture of a particular region in Kerala as presented by Vasudevan Nair's novel Naalukettu. Culture binds the life of every human being. The study takes to travel with the protagonist, analyses his lifestyle and explores the culture of his challenging society. It also deals with the lack of identity and the domestic violence faced by the protagonist as an inter-caste child in a culturally bound orthodox society.*

**Keywords:** Culture, Caste, Oppression, Identity crisis, Struggle, Violence.

Literature is a boon to the world which explains the culture, tradition, history of every society to their future generation. The history, geography, customs, traditions and ideas plays a major role in shaping the culture of India. Many part of the world has been influenced by the religions and traditions of India which has been created by amalgamation. Cultural studies have been originated from the two books titled, *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) by Richard Hoggart and *Culture and Society* (1958) by Raymond Williams. The establishment of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural studies by Richard Hoggart and Stuart Hall in the year 1964 popularised the cultural studies. Bijay Kumar Das in one of his essay titled “Reconfiguring Cultural Studies and Postcolonialism” has quoted Punter that “Cultural Studies is a whirling and quiescent and swaying mobile which continuously repositions any participating subject.” (Das 404) It is Coleridge, Burke, Arnold, Carlyle, Ruskin and Morris wrote about the cultural issues in their society during the nineteenth century. Later, the early twentieth century writers D. H. Lawrence, T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, F. R. Levis and Raymond Williams also helped in the development of cultural Studies. The word culture has been defined as the word that “refers to the beliefs, rituals and practices of a given social or ethnic group or nation” (Habib 172)

Kudallur, a small village in Kerala has been blessed by the great writer Madathil Thekkapattu Vasudevan Nair. He is a versatile writer of Malayalam literature. He has been awarded Sahithya Akademi Award in the year 1958 for his debut novel *Naalukettu*. His other works include *Manju*, *Kaalam*, *Asuravithu*, *Randamoozham*, etc. He has been awarded



Padma Bhushan (2005), Kerala Sahithya Akademi Award (1958, 1982 and 1986), Kendra Sahithya Akademi Award (1990), Njana Peedam (1995), and Padma Bhushan (2005) for his novels, short stories and dramas. *Naalukettu* has been published in the year 1958. It has been translated into English by Gita Krishnankutty. This novel has been adopted as a television film in the year 1995. A screenplay has also been released based on this novel.

Appuni is the protagonist of the novel *Naalukettu*. His mother Parukutty is from a Vadekkapet tharavad of a Nair family and his father Kondunni Nair is a Pagida player. As his mother came out of the tharavad without the permission of her parents and relatives, they made funeral rites for her. The struggle in their life started only after the death of Appunni's father. He has been poisoned by his partner Syedalikutty. Appuni has been provided scholarship by the school for his brilliance. He has a desire to return back to the tharavad. First time he has been driven out of the tharavad by valiyammaman. The second time when he has been visited to the tharavad he has been accepted by his grandmother. Appunni has faced harassments from the society. This leads to the inferiority complex of him. Appunni's elder uncle has the full power in the tharavad. This has led to partition. Appunni after completing his school education joins an estate for job with the help of Syedalikutty. Finally, Appunni buys the tharavad from the Valiyammaman and brings his mother back to his house.

During this period, there is no freedom for women. Their words are not considered seriously and they are expected to follow the customs and traditions. Women are married as early as possible and they are considered just as a commodity. Though these women are grown up physically, their minds are just like the mind of a child. Occasionally, Malu asks silly questions to Appunni which irritates him and he doesn't respond to it. The women of the tharavad are not allowed to move out unless and until the pond in the tharavad dries up. "In summertime, the water of the bathing tank in their compound would dry up, revealing the bed of sand underneath. They were then allowed to go and bathe in the river" (30) If the elder uncle of Appunni is there in the front yard, the women should not raise their head. In the case of Parukutty, she has been engaged to an old man and she elopes with Kondunni Nair. As she eloped, her parents took a purification bath and her parents considered her to be dead.

The Caste system prevails in this society as the novel is set during the twentieth century. Though the tharavad is in debt, elder uncle of Appunni is not ready to sell the Tharavad to the people of the caste Mappillas. And Appunni's father has been hated as he drinks tea in the shops of mapillas. "To make worse, Achan kept company with people of all castes. He drank tea in teashops run by mapillas..." (11) Once when Appunni went to the Yusuf's shop to buy some coconut oil, he has been thinking that he may get polluted because the shop has been crowded by the Cherumis who belong to the low caste. "Appunni made an attempt to push his way through them. It wouldn't matter if he touched the cherumi women and was polluted. He would have a bath anyway as soon as he got home." (4) And that day he immediately after returning home takes bath. This shows that even the young minds are polluted due to the caste system that prevails in the society.

These people are strong believers of myth. They believe that snakes are very fond of sweet scents, good music and beautiful women. Because of this, Appunni is afraid to cross



the screw pine bush because, it is said that the snakes like the smell of the screw pine flowers.” They liked the scent of screw pine flowers. Sweet scents, good music, and beautiful women: these were what cobras liked. Were these good things meant only for cobras?” (3) Once, there was a small snake in the corridor of the tharavad. So, a ‘serpent thullal’ has been arranged in the tharavad. It is when Appunni first visited the tharavad and he saw to girls danced like serpent during thullal. ““Dance, dance, snakes...accept these offerings...” (51)

Pagida is a game that those people played but not the high caste people. Kondunni Nair belongs to a respectable tharavad. But as he plays Padiga and talks to all the people without considering their caste, he was not respected by the Nair. He is the best player of Padiga in his place. “Kondunni Nair had had an excellent reputation as a padiga player.” (9) He says the number just by the sound of the rolling dice. Once, he has been rewarded a dice made of bell metal for his talent. “He gifted Achan a pair of bell – metal dice weighing four pounds” (11). As Paarukutty works in the illam she has been treated mean than a dog. She eats from the leftovers of the others from the illam. Once Appunni went to the illam with his mother and he understands the struggle of his mother and he never went to the illam after. Unlike present days, those days’ people followed the old traditions and culture which was a boon to some people and a bane to some other people. At present due to modernity culture takes a new transformation. It is through the literature, the present generation are able to understand the difference between the ancient culture and present culture of Kerala.

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