

17 July 1991



Sahitya Akademi



India International Centre

invite you to

meet the author

M.T. Vasudevan Nair





I prefer the river passing through my village, which I know very well, to the unknown, wonderful oceans I have heard of," wrote M.T. Vasudevan Nair in his introduction to his *Selected Short Stories*. This might, on the face of it, appear somewhat paradoxical in one who, as a young lad, often trudged twelve long miles to borrow a book, a work of the imagination. However, an assessment of his work shows only too clearly that it is precisely this

seeming paradox that distinguishes Vasudevan Nair as a writer of eminence. In his writing, the commonplace acquires the quality of a poetically imagined creation, and the imaginary acquires the quality of the familiar.

Born in Kudallur village of Palghat District in Kerala, M.T. Vasudevan Nair (popularly known as 'M.T.') was the youngest of four sons in a farmer's family. Although untouched by the socio-political upheavals that raged elsewhere in the country in 1942, the sleepy village, set on the banks of the Bharathapuzha, was rudely shaken by the destruction wrought by famine, cyclone and cholera. The misery that the little boy witnessed, he never forgot; it would come, in time, to influence his writing profoundly.

M.T. began his literary career at a very young age, with poems. He later switched over to the short story form, and his stories began to be published in all the leading



With the other Central Akademi award winners after winning the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1970 (M.T. third from right)



Addressing a literary gathering.

magazines when he was still a student. He shot into prominence when a contribution by him won the first prize in a short story competition organised by the Mathrubhumi group of publications. His first collection, *Raktham Puranda Mantharikal* (The Blood-Stained Sand), came out even before he had graduated from Victoria College, Palghat. After a short spell as a teacher, he joined the Mathrubhumi group as an apprentice journalist and within a few years was editing their Weekly magazine. He gave up his job in 1981, but re-joined the group in 1989 as the editor of three publications.

M.T. has published seventeen volumes of short stories, eight novels, a play and nine other books which include critical writings, stories for children and travelogues. The recognition which he has deservedly received in Kerala and outside—thanks to the art of the translator, and the cinema—is formidable. At twenty-five, he re-

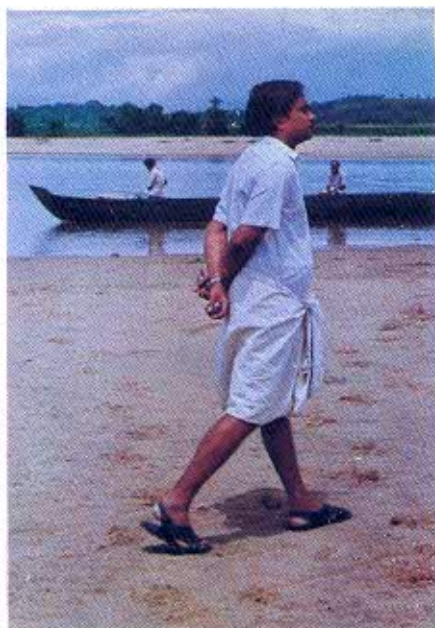
ceived the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award for *Nalukettu*, the title referring to the structure of the traditional ancestral household in Kerala. The novel has been translated into all the major Indian languages and English, and depicts the last struggles for survival of a dying matriarchal social order. In 1978, M.T. received the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award for his play *Gopurana-dayil* (At the Entrance of the Temple), and in 1981 again for his collection of short stories, *Swargam Thurakkunna Samayam* (When the Gates of Heaven Open).

Irutinde Atmavu (The Soul of Darkness), published when M.T. was just twenty-four, is the story of Velayudhan who is mentally retarded but emotionally sensitive; his plight is conveyed to us through a series of vivid, sharply etched and telling cameos that speak for themselves. This story was filmed with a screenplay by M.T. and it went on to win a National Award in 1967.

M.T. received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1970 for *Kalam* (Time) which explores with imagination and sharp unsentimental sensitivity, the dialectic of having and not having, of the links between 'rising' in life and the fall of integrity.

Three years later, M.T. received the President's Gold Medal for the film *Nirmalyam*, written, produced and directed by him. It is a profoundly disturbing depiction of the intellectual and emotional trauma of a priest who cannot cope with the social transitions where the old and familiar values have been replaced with hardened, cruel materialism. The Vayalar Award went to M.T. in 1984 for his novel *Randamoozham* (The Second in Line) which is a bold variation of the Mahabharata theme with Bhima as the hero; in 1989, he received a National Award for the best screenplay for the film *Oru Vadakkan Veeragatha* (A Heroic Ballad from the North).

Some of the other outstanding works by M.T. are the novel *Asuravithu* (Demon-Seed), where Govindan Kutty, ostracized unjustly by the community of his birth and adoption, works obsessively to assert his humanist ideals. In *Vilapayatra* (Funeral Procession) the writer appears almost to endorse the "outsider-attitude" of Camus; in *Manju* (Snow), which depicts the anguish of a frustrated being waiting for the flow of grace that never comes, M.T. experiments with the stream-

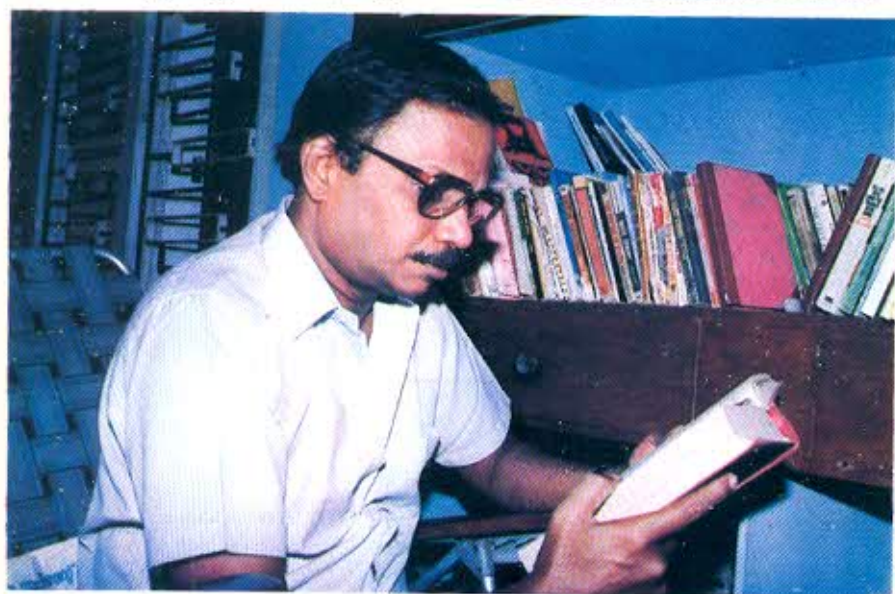


of-consciousness technique. Among his most remarkable short stories, characterized by lyrical intensity and a delicate exploration of inner discordance, are *Kuttiedathi* (Kutty, my Elder Sister), *Vittukal* (Seeds) and *Bandhanam* (Fetters).

M.T. Vasudevan Nair is the quintessential modernist, blending as he does inner and outer landscapes in innovative, often experimental styles. Of modernism he says, "[It] is not a label or earmarking of a particular period. It is the spirit. I will call the mental make-up of a creative person who wants to see ahead of his times modern." So successful is he in deploying the spirit of modernism that Sukumar Azhicode, the renowned critic, described him as "the foremost of the avantgardists" who offers "the best defense against the calumny that modern Indian literature is just a second rainbow, cast on the oriental sky by the West."

The telling of a story for M.T. is never independent of a need to make the reader feel and experience it with him. His fiction moves from a concern with the plot and action to what Professor Azhicode describes as "the quicksand of the individual mind torn asunder by vague forebodings, fugitive feelings

of futility, a depressing sense of frustration and a pervasive inner presence of romantic ennui." Indeed, a singularly different world is born and nursed by a sensitive art. Seeing their own image in his characters and the situations he creates for them, M.T.'s readers wait in anticipation for the stories yet to be born.



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MANIKYA KALLU: Current Books, Trichur, 1957, pp. 64.

DAYA ENNA PENKUTTY: Malayalam Publication, Calicut, 1987, pp. 65.

A Chronology

- 1934 Born, Kudallur Village of Palghat Dist.
- 1949 Begins contributing to periodicals
- 1952 First collection of stories
- 1953 Graduated from Victoria College, Palghat
- 1956 Joined Mathrubhumi
- 1959 Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award for novel *Nahakettu*
- 1963 Travelled Soviet Union
- 1968 Editor of Mathrubhumi Weekly
- 1970 Central Sahitya Akademi Award for *Kalan*
- 1971 Study tour in USA on a travel grant

- 1973 President's Gold Medal for Film *Nirmalyan*, written, produced and directed by him.
- 1974 Toured Europe, USSR and Far East
- 1978 Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award for drama, *Gopuranadayil*
- 1981 Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award for short story collection *Swargam Tharakkunna Samayan*
- 1984 Vayalar Award for novel *Randamoozham*
- 1989 National Award for Best Screenplay of *Oru Vaalakkan Veeragatha*
Re-joined Mathrubhumi Group of Publications as the Editor



M.T. - at his village home.