

January 25, 2025

M.T. Vasudevan Nair: The Alchemist of Malayalam

By: Meena T. Pillai

M.T. Vasudevan Nair's works captured generational angst and an uneasy nostalgia for a fading matrilineal past. He directed 'Nirmalyam', a groundbreaking film, and as editor of 'Mathrubhoomi Weekly', helped launch the careers of many literary figures.

In the beginning was the word, and the word for many Malayalis was M.T. Vasudevan Nair, or just 'MT', an acronym denoting a perennial spring of literature and cinema in Malayalam. With sublime artistry, he immortalised the landscapes and lives of the village of his birth, Koodallur in Kerala's Malabar region, transforming its tiny bits of chaos into a cosmos, invoking the ebb and flow of the waters of the Nila to be his muse.

MT's writings were epiphanic, for they revealed to his generation the angst that was their burden to bear. His pen dipped into the nostalgia of epochal shifts to etch the passing away of a matrilineal past, and the disquietude of grappling with its remnants; the agony and the ecstasy of being men who had inherited the unease of shifting times.

And yet, his writings danced through this paradox of human existence, making Malayalis discover the magic of words, and turning them irretrievably into readers. His departure on 25 December 2024, at the age of 91, marked the passing of an era for multitudes of readers for whom MT was the very face of Malayalam.

In 1958, soon after the state of Kerala was formed, a young 25-year-old Vasu (as he was fondly called by many) won the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award for *Naalukettu*, a novel that was to become a cult classic in Malayalam. Though it narrated a coming-of-age story of Appunni, it was also a bildungsroman of the land emerging out of the ruins of matrilineal *tharavads* – the joint homestead – setting forth on new journeys of kinship and compromise. It epitomised an era of social and cultural transitions, portraying a world in the shadow of a feudal and matrilineal past, at the crossroads of nostalgia and shame, secret delight, and defensiveness, all tinged by an unchecked yet uneasy machismo.

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MT's short stories such as *Valarthumrigangal* had already won him international accolades, and there followed a long line of stories that set the benchmark in short story writing in Malayalam. With stark simplicity he could strike gold, bringing out the poignancy of a situation or a psyche. Yet, each story was so vividly described that they were almost cinematic, and many would later be adapted to the screen. It is a technical awareness of the literary form and style that runs through MT's short stories and novels, which also became the hallmark of his cinematic style.

His breakthrough into the world of cinema was in 1965 when he crafted a brilliant screenplay from his own short story for the movie *Murappennu*, contributing to its winning the National Film Award for the year. This was the dawn of an MT era in Malayalam, where his alchemy of the word morphed into magic on the screen, captivating and enthralling readers and viewers, sketching the form and movement of social rhythms, and capturing the agitational pulse of the age. He probed the rawness of human desire in prison houses of the self, creating immortal characters who were emblematic of the epoch's conflicting views and misapprehensions. In the slow unveiling of the complexities of Kerala's social panorama, in his supple weaving of description and dialogue, in his subtle narrative control, and in his felicitous handling of time and the psyche; MT was the Guy de Maupassant of Malayalam.



In 1973, MT donned the cap of a cinema director with an adaptation of his own short story *Pallivaallum Kalchilambum* (The Sacred Sword and the Anklet) into *Nirmalyam*, which more than a half century after its making still remains a daring and a singularly original social document in Malayalam cinema. With great elan, MT, the writer with a feel for the throbbing pulse of the word, dexterously manoeuvred visual images to communicate beyond any written language. Anyone familiar with MT's oeuvre can perceive in the film the exhilaration of a writer who had discovered a new language that expanded the horizon of his writerly expectations.

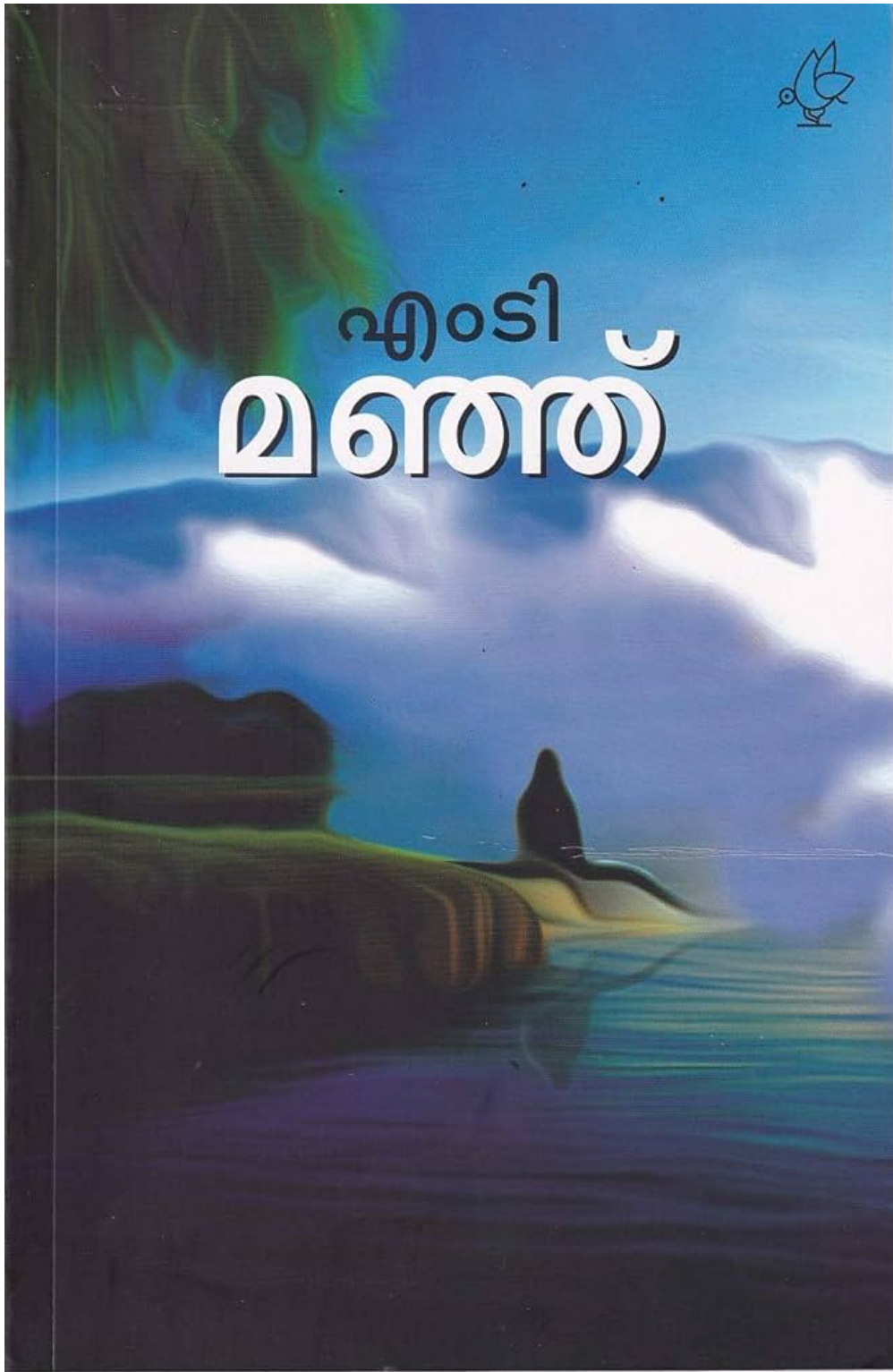
Though in MT's later scripts such as *Vadakkan Veeragatha* or *Parinayam* one comes across a celebration of the word as dialogue, *Nirmalyam* is an example par excellence of artistic restraint. There are no extraneous scenes or conversations and the director's economy was as striking as his craftsmanship. *Nirmalyam* was an exceptional self-adaptation: for the excellence and courage of its screenplay, the tautness of its construction, and for its thematic complexity. But what fascinates one even today was the boldness of its approach, and the coherence of its aesthetic experience.

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This restraint of the spoken word resurfaced in *Manju*, MT's only novel with a female protagonist, who is wrapped in the mist of the male gaze. Yet, there are numerous short stories where MT, with infinite empathy and sensitivity, attempted a reassessment of the travails of women through the institution of the family, its tyrannies and servilities, and its private spheres dominated by patriarchy, often critiquing the conjugal romantic plot. Oppositional narrative was MT's forte, offering space for his characters to be both inheritors and critics of tradition, repeatedly undermining the hegemony of received wisdom, both in idea and narrative practice.

Randamoozham (The Second Turn), published in 1984, was an absorbing retelling of the Mahabharatha from the perspective of Bhima, considered by many to be his masterpiece. Revisionist myth-making was characteristic of MT's iconoclasm, a deliberate method of challenging the entrenched beliefs of the Malayali moral majority.

Whether it be Bhima in *Randamoozham* or the infamous warrior Chanthu in *Vadakkan Veeragaatha*, MT's attempts to redeem marginalised, subaltern, and outcaste figures in myths and legends, or to give them a voice with which to tell a different version of the story, made potentially rebellious Malayali readers alive to other possibilities in revolutionary readings. This would yield revelations in a time when ancient myths would be co-opted by jingoist rhetoric and Kerala would need all its revisionary zeal to counter such politics.



The 1980s signified a second turn in MT's journey, when he turned to mainstream cinema, casting the spell of his screenplays on the silver screen. The social realism of Malayalam cinema pulsed with the alchemy of the word, as the cinematic image played second fiddle to MT's dialogues, and his fountain pen became the camera. Numerous directors such as I.V. Sasi and Hariharan queued up for a screenplay and film posters had MT's name printed more prominently than even the director's. The word had indeed become god in Malayalam cinema!

MT probably received more awards than any other writer in Kerala. From the Jnanpith in 1996 to the Padma Bhushan, Vayalar Award, Vallathol Award, numerous Sahitya Akademi awards, seven National Film awards, and 21 Kerala State Film awards, the list goes on

and on.

As the editor of *Mathrubhoomi Weekly*, one of the most influential magazines in Malayalam, MT's literary genius was a great influence on budding writers. He was initially editor from 1968 to 1981, when he left to focus on writing and cinema. In 1989, MT was persuaded to take over the editorship again, and he continued until 1999. During his tenure, he helped launch the careers of many literary figures, including O.V. Vijayan, Sethu, M. Mukundan, Paul Zacharia, and Sarah Joseph. His concise and impactful writing resonated with writers of his time and subsequent generations, becoming a lasting influence on creative practices across literature, film, and other art forms.

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Thus, MT's literary and cinematic oeuvre became the hallmark of Malayalam and the Malayali in post-Independence India. For many, who were struck by this genius who could fathom the existential crisis of the age and transform it into language through clever craftsmanship, it was bliss to be alive in MT's time.

In a divided world full of flawed people, where no one can certify to anyone's moral rectitude, how tenable is it to expect that a writer be politically correct in all his writing? In the digital age of online lynching squads and morality brigades, MT too faces moral and political squads in Kerala; of feminists calling out the macho masculine undertones of his writing and his patriarchal mores, of subaltern studies scholars pointing out his propensity for upper-caste representations, and of fundamentalists deriding the sacrileges of *Nirmalyam*.

One can only stand up for the freedom of writing, for the idea that any writer's personal response to the social complexities of his times be undertaken with autonomy. The flight of ideas or emotions, the holding of a mirror to the social milieu, or the sculpting of language would all be difficult to undertake with absolute conformity to political correctness, or dominant morals and tastes.

While irreverence and critique of the canon are historical necessities, what remains with MT would be a language that dazzles with the wizardry of wordsmanship, and a sepia-tinted world with characters that troop out of the pages of Kerala's social history and its underlying myths. MT did not inspire revolutions, nor did he make any clarion call for reform, yet his commendable oeuvre will, like the verdant banks of his beloved Nila, yield fresh pastures for new and more iconoclastic heirs.

(On Republic Day 2025, MT Vasudevan Nair was posthumously awarded the Padma Vibhushan for his contributions to the field of literature.)

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