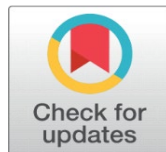


# FROM TEXT TO SCREEN: FEMINIST NARRATIVES IN THE ADAPTATIONS OF NEELATHAMARA AND MURAPPENNU BY MT VASUDEVAN NAIR

Nandana P. <sup>1</sup>, Dr. Sreena <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Student, Integrated MA English Language & Literature, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Kochi Campus, Kerala, India

<sup>2</sup> Associate Professor, Department of English, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Kochi Campus, Kerala, India



**Received** 29 March 2025

**Accepted** 21 April 2025

**Published** 25 April 2025

**DOI** [10.29121/granthaalayah.v13.i4.ISMER.2025.6083](https://doi.org/10.29121/granthaalayah.v13.i4.ISMER.2025.6083)

**Funding:** This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

**Copyright:** © 2025 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



## ABSTRACT

This research paper is an attempt to analyze the film adaptations of MT Vasudevan Nair's novels. This paper investigates the nuances of film adaptations of MT Vasudevan Nair's classic novels Neelathamara and Murappennu. The research also ponders the possibility of analyzing these films from feminist film theory.

MT Vasudevan Nair, one of the most prominent Malayalam writers, has explored complex social and personal narratives that often center around the struggles of women in patriarchal societies. This study examines how his works were transformed on screen, focusing on the representation of gender roles in the novels that align with or diverge from their cinematic counterparts.

The paper explores the way the filmmaker navigates issues such as agency, social norms, and the emotional complexity of female characters, while simultaneously analyzing the fidelity and creative liberties in the adaptation process. This work not only contributes to the discourse on adaptation theory but also highlights the intersection of feminism and literature in the context of South Indian Cinema.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Adaptation Theory, Malayalam Cinema, Human Emotions, Male Gaze, Intersectional Feminism

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Malayalam literature and cinema have a close-knit relationship, with literary adaptations playing a key role in the development of the industry. MT Vasudevan Nair, affectionately known as MT, is a giant in the literary world, and many of his works have been transformed into films. His storytelling showcases a profound grasp of human emotions, the socio-cultural landscape, and the essence of Kerala. Malayalam is one of India's rich languages and is the mother tongue of nearly thirty million Malayalis, with about ninety percent residing in the state of Kerala, located in the Southwestern corner of the country. In the early years, poetry was the primary form of expression in Malayalam literature, but prose began to flourish

rapidly in the late 19th century. This paved the way for novels, dramas, short stories, and literary criticism in the language.

MT Vasudevan Nair is regarded as one of the most brilliant minds in Malayalam literature. He first showcased his talent through novels and short stories before moving into filmmaking and screenwriting. His works often explore themes of nostalgia, family ties, and the socio-political landscape of Kerala. With the use of simple yet profound language, he captures the struggles and hardships of the Indian populace, especially during the era of feudalism. His numerous accolades include the Kerala Sahitya Academy Award, Jnanpith Award, Padma Bhushan, and the Vallathol Award. Many of MT's stories reflect the fundamental family structure and culture of Kerala, and several of his novels have been groundbreaking in the context of Malayalam literature.

For over fifty years, he has been a towering figure in this literary field. Adapting novels into films is an interdisciplinary endeavor, requiring a shift in narration techniques to fit the cinematic medium. While literature relies on linguistic expression and detailed descriptions, cinema conveys stories through visual representation, performance, and time structuring. MT Vasudevan Nair stands out as both an exceptional novelist and renowned screenwriter, making his adaptations particularly insightful for understanding how novels translate into films. Notable works like "Neelathamara" and "Murappennu" critically examine themes of love, betrayal, patriarchy, and social hierarchies within Kerala.

MT Vasudevan Nair's works have often been appreciated for their sensitive depiction of human emotions, particularly women's emotions within social constraints. His novels *Neelathamara* (1959) and *Murappennu* (1963) reflect a profound understanding of the problems faced by women in traditional Kerala society. Both novels were adapted into films that faithfully followed the basic narratives but also interpreted the texts from the filmmaker's perspective. This paper analyses these adaptations through feminist theory to understand how women's roles, agency, and societal pressures are depicted in both literary works and film adaptations. It also applies adaptation theory to analyze how these stories were transformed from the page to the screen.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of adaptation has been greatly developed, offering an outline to understand the nuances of adopting literary works in the film with scholars such as Linda Huchon (*A Theory of Adaptation*, 2006). Huchon argues that adaptation should not only be seen as a copy but also works in itself with its interpretation and creative freedom. Film scholars such as Thomas Leach (2007) also contributed to the discussion of loyalty in adaptation, questioning the need for strict loyalty to the original material and instead focusing on the rehabilitation of subjects and characters. In terms of feminist theory, scholars such as Simone de Beauvoir (*The Second Sex*, 1949) and Judith Butler (*Gender Trouble*, 1990) have emphasized the social construction of gender roles and the implications of these roles on the lives of women. Both *Neelathamara* and *Murappennu* have strong female heroes, whose fate is associated with the navigation of oppressive patriarchal norms. The feminist Criticism of these works, both literary and cinematic, provides information about how these roles are portrayed.

This paper investigates these adaptations from three theoretical perspectives: Adaptation Theory, Feminist Theory, and Male Gaze Theory. Through these lenses, it analyzes how the adaptations' transition from novel to screen affects the narrative

integrity and representations of gender. Scholars like D.R. P. K. Rajashekar (2004) have observed the recurrent themes of moral deterioration, familial conflict, and feminine pain throughout MT's literary oeuvre. These themes are also evident in his films.

M.T.'s career as a screenwriter began with the 1965 release of *Murappennu*. Even in a matrilineal framework, *Murappennu* illustrates the inflexibility of kinship structures and the suppression of female autonomy, according to scholars like C.S. Venkiteswaran (2010). M.T.'s early attempts to infuse cinema with his unique narrative voice, which emphasizes internal tension and subtle emotional shift over drama, are reflected in the adaptation. Critics such as Kozhikodan (1997) have admired *Murappennu* for its realist tone and restrained performances, particularly in the way it presents the moral conflicts of women in patriarchal homes. The figure of the "Murappennu", trapped in strict family roles, becomes a space to examine the unstated pain and repressed longings of women in Kerala's conservative world.

*Neelathamara* is a short story that was first made into a movie by Yusuf Ali Kechery in 1979. The story is reimagined for a modern audience in Lal Jose's 2009 adaptation, which was once again scripted by MT. The protagonist of the tale is Kunjimalu, a maid who develops feelings for her boss's son. The fabled blue lotus (*Neelathamara*) flowering serves as a metaphor for feminine disillusionment, betrayal, and optimism. According to academics like Meena. T. Pillai (2011), the movie exhibits a dual temporal consciousness by examining the past from a contemporary perspective while also connecting with it. The tale gains levels of subjectivity and reflexivity from the employment of a female narrator and the flashback technique. Using Laura Mulvey's (1975) concept of the "male gaze", feminist critics have examined *Neelathamara*, emphasizing the ways in which the film navigates the objectification of feminine desire.

### **3. RESEARCH GAP**

Significant research has been conducted on the evolution of MT Vasudevan Nair's films concerning gender norms, sexuality, and women's identity. However, this study aims to examine the representation of female characters, particularly in *Neelathamara* relative to *Murappennu* has yet to be adequately addressed through the above paradigms of feminist theory and the male gaze, an area that has not been explored. This analysis aims to plug this gap by providing a theory-based, critical analysis of the adaptations.

### **4. SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS RESEARCH**

There are various reasons why this research is important, as it provides a comparative analysis of two significant literary film adaptations by MT Vasudevan Nair, one of the most significant figures in Malayalam literature and cinema. By concentrating on *Neelathamara* and *Murappennu*, the study draws attention to the ways that narratives change when they are adapted for the screen and how these changes are a reflection of changing social, cultural, and gendered viewpoints over time. It also analyzes how female characters are portrayed in both films using feminist theory and the idea of the male gaze, clarifying gender representation in Malayalam cinema.

## **5. METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The study takes a qualitative approach based on textual and movie analysis. This research consists of a close analysis of the source literary works of MT Vasudevan Nair and their adaptations to cinema in the forms of Murappennu (1965) and Neelathamara (2009). The center of the main focus is analyzing how characters, themes, narration, and gender roles transform in the process of adaptation from literary work to cinematic adaptation.

The research is anchored in two theoretical lenses: Referring to scholars such as Linda Hutcheon and Robert Stam, adaptation is not viewed as a secondary or derivative action, but as a creative activity of reinterpretation and intertextuality. Such a system enables one to examine how MT Vasudevan Nair reworks his literary fiction into visual texts, and how meaning is reconfigured through cinematic strategies, spectator expectations, and historical movements. The study applies feminist literary and cinema theory to the representation of women in Neelathamara and Murappennu. The study questions the level of feminine autonomy, how society defines the norms for femininity, and how romance and emotional storylines are constructed according to gender. Feminist theorists like Meena T Pillai provide context on how regional cinema intersects with patriarchy and traditionalism.

## **6. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

- To critically examine the adaptation of MT Vasudevan Nair's literary stories into film adaptations.
- To analyze the representation of women in Neelathamara and Murappennu, both as they exist in their original literary format as well as their respective film adaptations.

## **7. REPRESENTATION OF FEMINISM IN MT VASUDEVAN NAIR'S MOVIES**

MT Vasudevan Nair, Malayalam literature and cinema's most renowned figure, is famous for his profound psychological understanding, cultural grounding, and melancholic representation of human relationships. Although not a self-proclaimed feminist writer, his novels frequently revolve around female characters whose emotional complexity and societal limitations open them up to feminist interpretations. Two of his best works, Murappennu and Neelathamara, are good case studies for understanding how women are represented as involving love, agency, and tradition in the patriarchal setup of Kerala society. Female protagonists in both Neelathamara and Murappennu embody the emotional content of the story. Their identities are situated in male characters and the demands of the family and society. They may feel strongly, but act on their feelings infrequently in empowered ways, and their wishes are frequently denied or punished. This becomes pivotal in assessing M.T.'s female characterization from a feminist perspective.

In Neelathamara, the heroine Kunjimalu is a juvenile maidservant who develops a love for Haridas, the family's son. The love she harbors is innocent, trusting, and pure, but is eventually betrayed when Haridas gets married to another girl. Her trust in the Neelathamara flowering is a reflection of divine endorsement of her love is an entwining of feminine desire and cultural superstition. The tale thus weaves together romantic idealism and social realism.

On a feminist reading, Kunjimalu's character is a representation of the profound vulnerability of women who internalize patriarchal values and feel that love and loyalty will secure their emotional security. The betrayal she suffers is not merely personal; it is representative of a system that uses female devotion while providing them with scant protection or justice. In the 2009 cinematic remake, the narrative is presented from the retrospective voice of Ratnam, yet another woman who recollects Kunjimalu's history. This narrative decision provides a muted feminist twist, making room for women to recall, reflect, and reclaim erased stories. But even here, Kunjimalu's suffering is sentimentalized instead of resisted, and her silence becomes a poetic gesture instead of a place of protest. In *Neelathamara*, both films position the female characters primarily as objects of male desire or emotional consequence. In *Neelathamara*, Kunjimalu's beauty and innocence are visually underscored and frequently framed to lead the viewer's eye to her expressions, her waiting, and her silent longing. The camera stays on her eyes, her pauses, and the time she spends by herself produce voyeuristic enjoyment for the viewer while also withholding her story power. Her voice is heard in flashbacks, not in present-time decision-making.

In *Murappennu*, Sarojini is situated in the traditional position of a *Murappennu*-a cousin bride, destined to marry within the family to maintain caste and property boundaries. Her character is torn between cultural obligation and emotional exposure. Her relationship with her cousin Balan is tense with unspoken emotions and the suffocating burden of tradition. From a feminist perspective, Sarojini is the very model of the patriarchally constructed ideal domestic woman- obedient, in control of her emotions, and self-sacrificing. She is a symbol of a society in which women's autonomy is oppressed by custom and in which virtue in women is defined by silence rather than action.

While Kunjimalu speaks for herself, Sarojini does not possess even that privilege; her life is revealed to us solely through the words of the male characters, especially Balan, torn between new values and traditional duties. In *Murappennu*, Sarojini is less emotionally intimate on screen, but her character remains defined in terms of conventional codes of modesty and self-sacrifice. Her emotions are read and explained by male characters, and she hardly declares her voice except in terms of resignation. The absence of female subjectivity in both films indicates a film tradition in which women are observed but not heard, felt but not perceived.

The feminist representation of *Neelathamara* and *Murappennu* is not through open resistance or activism but through the very personal depiction of women trapped between love, custom, and betrayal. Although the characters are not feminists in the aggressive sense, their experiences permit feminist readers to question the structural rigidity surrounding them. Through such depictions, M.T. Vasudevan Nair offers a moving, though conservative, exploration of women's lives in an extremely patriarchal culture. His writings are worth their place in feminist scholarship for their emotional truthfulness and the capacity to identify the tragedies of women's lives in old Kerala.

## **8. TRADITION, TRANSITION, AND THE FEMALE SELF: A STUDY OF ADAPTATION IN NEELATHAMARA AND MURAPPENNU**

Adaptation is not just the process of converting a literary work into a filmic one; it is an interpretive process that reworks narrative meaning, cultural context, and character representation. In the instance of MT Vasudevan Nair's *Neelathamara* and

Murappennu, the process of text to screen provides a critical space to examine how deeply embedded cultural traditions, changing social transitions, and the female self are represented, negotiated, or silenced. Both narratives, well rooted in Kerala's sociocultural milieu, revolve around woman whose existence is defined by tradition, especially love, marriage, cast, and family duty. In Murappennu, the heroine Sarojini is molded by the traditional role of being a "murappennu" a cousin bride to be married within the family. She is largely voiceless, performing duty rather than desire, representing the female self buried beneath generations. By contrast, Neelathamara, although composed decades ago, was translated in 2009 into a movie that provided greater space for introspective narration, especially through the device of a contemporary female protagonist, Ratnam, who goes back into Kunjimalu's history. This narrative strategy opens up a conversation between the past and the present, the mute woman and the remembering woman, so that the audience can feel a shift in narration and the growing self-consciousness of women in Malayalam cinema.

## 9. CONCLUSION

This paper examines the representation of feminism in MT Vasudevan Nair's referenced films. These films show how the adaptation process moves from text to screen. This paper focuses primarily on female characters in the movies Neelathamara and Murappennu. MT Vasudevan Nair's novels primarily feature female characters based on real-life individuals. These films are made with the male gaze in mind, and they emphasise the importance of female beauty in the movies. He emphasizes emotional connections and cultural authenticity in his films.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

## REFERENCES

- M.T. Vasudevan Nair : the Icon of Malayalam Literary Heritage.
- M.T. A Timeless Maestro of Words and Cinema.
- The History of Malayalam Cinema.
- M.T. Vasudevan Nair (1933–2024). A chronicler of the 'Internal Malayalee Life'.
- M.T. Vasudevan Nair (Director). (1965). Murappennu.
- M.T. Vasudevan Nair (Director). (1979). Neelathamara.