

Mist: An Analytical Study Focusing on the Theme and Imagery of the Novel

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ABSTRACT

Mist, the Malayalam novel is certainly a golden feather in M.T. Vasudevan Nair's crown and is a brilliant work which has enhanced Malayalam literature's fame across the world. This novel is truly different from M.T.'s other writings such as Randamuzham or its English translation titled Bhima. M.T. is a writer with wonderful narrative skills. In the novel, he combined his story-telling power with the technique of stream-of-consciousness and thereby provides readers, a brilliant reading experience. This paper attempts to analyse the novel, with special focus on its theme and imagery, thereby to point out how far the imagery and symbolism agrees with the theme of the novel.

Keywords: analysis-theme-imagery-Vimala-theme of waiting- love and longing- death-stillness

Introduction:

Madath Thekkepaattu Vasudevan Nair, popularly known as M.T., is an Indian writer, screenplay writer and film director from the state of Kerala. He is a creative and gifted writer in modern Malayalam literature and is one of the masters of post-Independence Indian literature. He was born on 9 August 1933 in Kudallur, a village in the present day Pattambi Taluk in Palakkad district. He rose to fame at the age of 20, when he won the prize for the best short story in Malayalam at World Short Story Competition conducted by the New York Herald Tribune. His first novel *Nalukettu* ('Ancestral Home' translated to English as *The Legacy*) won the Kerala Sahitya Academy Award in 1958. His other works include *Manju*(*Mist*), *Kaalam*(*Time*), *Asuravithu*(*The Prodigal Son*' translated to English as *The Demon Seed*) and *Randamuzham* (translated to English as *Bhima*). Most of his works feature the basic Kerala family structure and culture and many of his novels were path-breaking as far as the history of Malayalam literature is concerned. *Naalukettu*, *Asuravithu* and *Kaalam* portray life in a matriarchal family in Kerala, while *Randamuzham* recounts the story of *Mahabharata* from the perspective of Bhimasena, which is widely acclaimed as his masterpiece.

M.T. is also widely known as a script writer and director, and has directed seven films and has written script for about 154 films. He has also received the National Film Award for Best Screenplay, four times. He is also the recipient of the highest literary award in India, Jnanpith, in 1955 for his overall contribution to Malayalam literature. He was also awarded Padmabhushan, Kendra Sahitya Academy Award, Kerala Sahitya Academy Award, Vayalar Award, Vallathol Award, Ezhuthachan Award, Mathrubhumi Literary Award and, J.C. Daniel Award for Lifetime Achievement in Malayalam cinema, in 2013.

Mist (1964) is one of the novels by M.T. which stands on a different plane as far as the theme, setting and the characters are concerned. Profound lyricism adds aesthetic beauty to the novel. The novel is set on the ecofeminist theme of patriarchal domination and exploitation and also *Mist* is M.T.'s only novel with a female protagonist. Set in the splendid landscape of Nainital makes the novel quite unique. Usually, M.T.'s novels are quite often set in the Valluvanadan regions of Kerala. Here, M.T. has placed this novel in Nainital, which is truly apt for the theme of the novel.

Quite different from M.T.'s other novels, *Mist* has a female protagonist Vimala. The novel depicts the confused mind of Vimala. Her mind is like the landscape of Nainital; clouded with mist. As the wind blows at regular intervals of time, the mist which covers Nainital gets disappeared and we get shades of the town. Likewise, Vimala's mind which is like Nainital, clouded with mist; at times as if the wind blows, certain shades of her mind gets revealed to the readers. In this novel, M.T. employs the technique of stream-of-consciousness. All the events in the novel are narrated from the point of view of Vimala. The narrator sees everything that are seen by Vimala; i.e. the novel is written from the consciousness of the central character, Vimala.

Who is Vimala? What is she? How she reached Nainital? Where is her family? etc. are questions which will arise in the mind of the reader when he/she goes through the initial pages of the novel. All such facts about her life are revealed as the novel progresses and those bits of information about her life, carries the feeling of the mist which gets disappear at times of the wind. Nainital is a place or rather a lake, which is surrounded by mountains. Like the lake which is caught up in the midst of mountains, Vimala is also caught up in the midst of the place. Vimala works as the warden of a boarding school in Nainital.

In the novel, all the characters do passive actions. The novel is not written following a chronological order. There isn't much action that takes place in the novel. The entire novel takes place in the mind of Vimala. What Vimala does in the novel is futile waiting for Sudhir Kumar Mishra, her lover. Vimala's counterpart is Buddhu, who is the boatman of the Mayflower boat, which is an ongoing presence in the novel. Buddhu is optimistic when compared to Vimala's attitude. Actually Buddhu's waiting is real futility as his so-called father Ghora Sahib will never come to see him. The novel has a colonial subtext and Buddhu is part of this. Buddhu stands for the remains of colonialism left by Britain in India. Buddhu was born out of the sexual thirst of a white man on an Indian woman. Never will Ghora Sahib return to India claiming the parentage of Buddhu and probably Ghora Sahib would not even know that he had a son in India. But as far as Vimala is concerned, she has reasons for waiting, as her lover Sudhir may come back to her at some point of time. It is also to be kept in mind that from the picture we get about Sudhir Kumar, we can conclude that the possibility of Sudhir's return is rather the least, as he is a sort of tourist, and like a tourist who visits one place, make some memories and leave the place, Sudhir also visited Nainital, made some memories with Vimala, thereby enjoyed the love of the place, and left the place for good. Hence, Sudhir's return is to be least expected.

M.T. Vasudevan Nair narrates a death-in-life situation through the novel. T.S. Eliot has pointed out four stages in life. They are: life-in-life, death-in-life i.e. spiritually dead, but physically alive, life-in-death which he considers as the ideal situation, and death-in-death. The novel is abound with images of stillness. Vimala's life could be called as a still life, where it indicates 'stillness in life' as well as 'still there is life'. Hence Vimala experiences both these. Vimala can be seen as an extremely introvert mind. She is happy only when she is in her private world. She is not concerned with the present, which is clear from the novel, as there is an instance wherein Vimala does not change the calendar folds from January to April, which symbolises the still life of Vimala.

The novel has a very casual beginning. It begins with an epigraph by Archibald MacLeish. M.T. in the novel deals with the theme of 'carpe diem', with a melancholic tone. The novel cannot be taken as a reflection of the society. It is not a social novel, rather the novel deals with the introvert individuals of the society. The central image with which the novel begins is that of a book; which describes the typical modernist theme of boredom. Vimala hears sounds from the nature more than the sounds of humans. Vimala had her own reasons to be alienated from the society. Regarding the craft of M.T., *Mist* can be described as chiselled poetry. Once M.T. himself remarked that the only word which he later felt to be removed was the word, 'potato'. M.T. employs the music of silence as a narrative technique in the novel. All the lines of the first ten paragraphs are lyrically beautiful. Through certain instances in the novel, M.T. conveys the uncertainty of life. Life is unexpected at all points of time.

Another character in the novel is Reshmi Vajpayee, a member of the boarding school and Vimala's friend. Vimala sees Reshmi as her own youthful self. Reshmi can be seen as a poetic metaphor of Vimala's past youth. There is an instance in the novel where Reshmi once left the boarding school informing Vimala that she is going home, when, in reality Reshmi went to have some happy moments with her lover. Vimala knew that what Reshmi had told was a lie and that she was going with her lover. But Vimala did not prevent Reshmi from going with her lover, which also tells that Vimala is not worried and she did not have any regret for what happened between her and Sudhir. The presentation of the mysteries of the woman mind, the portrayal of the psychological depth of the woman characters is at its best in the works of M.T. and Padmarajan. Most of the characters in the novel are self-talkers and a number of soliloquies are there in the novel. Vimala is someone who loves loneliness and solitude and she rarely goes out.

Vimala could be called a fatalist. She believed that everything happens according to destiny. As the whole novel takes place in the mind of Vimala there is one instance when Vimala hears the sound of bells from the Nainital temple, the sound immediately takes Vimala to her native place i.e. Kerala; which is an example of the stream-of-consciousness technique. Through this episode, another character is presented; Vimala's father, who is a symbol of typical M.T.'s character. The only person whom Vimala loves, other than Sudhir, was her father. The only time in the novel, when movement occurs in Vimala is during her father's death. For Vimala, her father symbolises the epitome of power and authority. Through this sequence M.T. also portrays the disintegration of a once-powerful family structure.

One of the themes which the novel showcases is that of death, which is brought forth through Vimala's father. Vimala says that her father lived like an emperor and she uses the very colonial image in describing her father. The image of her father as a rebellious hero pervades her mind and this image of him is what Vimala loves much. It was this powerful image of her father which gets shattered at a later time because of the misdemeanour of her mother who led an immoral life, after Vimala's father's decline.

'Thanatos' and 'Eros' are two drives with which the Greek writing is concerned. Thanatos means death wish and Eros means love. They are siblings. Love and death are very close to each other. Vimala wished for her father's death. She did not want to see her father living as a powerless man. She wanted to maintain the image of her father as a powerful man. Vimala thinks of only two things; love and death. Through the novel, what M.T. conveys is the music of love and music of death.

In chapter 8, M.T. introduces another character called Sardarji. There are certain similarities between Sardarji and Sudhir in terms of feelings. Sardarji indirectly reminds of Sudhir to Vimala. In a way, the youthful Sudhir's old-age is what Sardarji represents, in the eyes of Vimala. Vimala experiences love through Sudhir and death, through Sardarji. In the mind of Vimala there occurs a fusion of Sardarji and Sudhir; Sudhir's song and Sardarji's Ikthara, gest combined. Sardarji is not new to the place. He had once stayed in Nainital for some time and then left. And after years, Sardarji has returned to the same place. Through Sardarji's second visit to Nainital, M.T. also hints at a minute possibility of Sudhir's second visit to Nainital.

One of the factors which makes *Mist* special is its imagery. M.T. excels in using the apt images for the situations portrayed in the novel. The beauty of the novel lies in the fact that, it is the images that tells the story. The story is contained within the images. The solitary path which is present in the novel, is a dominant image. Through the metaphor of the solitary path, M.T. conveys the loneliness which Vimala experiences in Nainital. Vimala always prefer this forlorn path during her walks in the evenings, which again suggests the solitary and lonely life which Vimala leads. It is through the images of cinema that M.T. describes the physical intimacy between Vimala and Sudhir. M.T. adopts a non-linear pattern of narration in *Mist*. Vimala's love for Sudhir is portrayed as a highly romantic one. Through the characters like Vimala, Reshmi Vajpayee and Vimala's mother, M.T. portrays people who are love thirsty.

The most romantic chapter in the novel is the one which describes the physical union between Vimala and Sudhir, which M.T. pictures through images of cinema. Paul Anka's "Put your head on my shoulder" was played in the background to their physical consummation scene. M.T.'s narrative technique is that he uses images from other genres; as in this instance, where he uses images from film to depict the love making of Sudhir and Vimala. Again, the song which follows gives hint at the solitary days which are yet to come.

Waiting is a dominant theme in European literature. Waiting is non- action; a mental state. M.T. in the novel tells about Vimala who experiences a sort of death-in-life situation. She is leading a very still life and it is stillness which projects forth in her life. Vimala's waiting and Buddhu's waiting become one. The history of their waiting lies in the arrival of a man; Sudhir's arrival Vimala waits for and Ghora Sahib's arrival is what Buddhu waits for. Buddhu's waiting is purely futile. But still he hopes that his father would come to see him, one day. It is this belief which makes Buddhu's life on the go. Similarly, Vimala's life also depends on the possibility of Sudhir's return. It is this faith which makes life continuing for Vimala.

Conclusion:

M.T. Vasudevan Nair has beautifully pictured a moving tale of love and longing in *Mist*. He offers an excellent reading experience wherein the readers would get the feeling of mist enveloping them, throughout the reading process. The title, 'Mist' complements the plot, theme as well as the setting of the novel. The phenomenon of mist, partially limits the sight of people and makes it unable to see beyond a specific point. Likewise Vimala's love for Sudhir metaphorically limits her sight and she fails to see beyond. Hence Vimala gets stuck to that particular period in her life; i.e. Sudhir's entry into her life, their love and eventually his leaving. Her intense love for Sudhir fails her to see beyond this life of waiting, which makes her life still and monotonous. 'Mist' is also a metaphor for Vimala's life. Like the mist which gets blown away at times, and we see things around, Vimala's life is like the mist and at times the readers get certain shades of her life. In the novel, death is one among the themes which M.T. deals with. We could see that, M.T. sees death not as something to be sympathized, rather he sees death a permanent relief. Death is not seen as an end of life, but the continuation of life. The novel presents the unbreakable relationship between life and death and similarly between love and loss of love.

Boat journey and the lake are two constant images in the novel. The lake is a metaphor of life. Boat journey through the lake represents the life, which moves forward. Every boat journey always ends where it has started; the same is with life too. The story continues to go on and only the characters change. Here in the novel, Vimala, Buddhu, Sardarji, Nainital- all are waiting for something or the other. In a way, life itself is nothing but a long waiting.

It is to poetry that the novel adheres more to. Reading the novel would provide the feel of reading poetry, because of its intense lyricism. M.T.'s fatalism is that everything that happens in life is pre-determined. Here, he brings in a fatalism which is not European, but one that is based on Vedic Hinduism. Through the

characters of Vimala and Buddhu, M.T. presents the theme of hope and longing; two intermittent things which define the lives of people and add meaning to it.

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