



Voice for Voiceless in Narayan's Kocharethi: The Araya Women

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Tribal Communities across India face many challenges and are being uprooted with impudence politically, economically, socially and culturally. These tribes are marginalised for their economic and technological backwardness and illiteracy. They face discriminations and misrepresented everywhere. Through the debut novel *Kocharethi*, Narayan articulates for his own tribe in Kerala in which he portrays the true lives of the tribal community representing them as how they are. Tribes, naturally live in dire poverty never had a choice or voice. This novel depicts the Araya community's struggles and their cultural transformation over the passage of time. This paper analyses the powerful voice of Narayan on creating an identity for the Malayarayar community, defining their lives, struggles and challenges faced by them.

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Literature is the art of discovering something extraordinary about ordinary people, and saying with ordinary words something extraordinary

(Boris Pasternak)

Tribal peoples also known as Adivasi in India have their own cultures, languages, customs. Early literatures or history has not told much about them. Known for their oral tradition, they have no printed religious texts. Everything is passed orally to their generations. Since they lack education they remain marginalised and exploited. Their life is always associated with always nature and hence considered to be

uncultured. The importance of Adivasi is promptly mentioned by the journalist Dayamani Barla in *The Wire* in his article, “Over the Last 75 Years, Struggles of India’s Tribal Communities Have Multiplied” as:

History stands witness to the glorious role Adivasi and indigenous farming communities have played in preserving water, forests and land in the past. They fought off ferocious animals, cleared bushy forested regions, set up villages and inhabited those areas. The linguistic and cultural identity of the Adivasi and indigenous communities has evolved in the lap of nature amid these forests, rivers and mountains. (1)

In the recent times, tribals started voicing their issues. The so-called mainstream has kept them aloof from the door of civilization, since ages. As awareness increased the boundaries and enclosures are destroyed and started to speak their identity. Modern tribal literature often misrepresents the tribal community as it is mostly written by people nontribal writers. *Kocharethi: The Araya Woman (2011)*, is the first book by Narayan-an adivasi written for adivasis symbolizes their history, lives, traditions and miseries of the malayarayar tribe that lived in the mountain folds of the Western Ghats. In the *Introduction*, G.S Jayasree informs that, “There are thirty-two different groups of adivasis in Kerala.”(xv) She also gives a detailed description of the term Malayarayar –“ ‘Mala’ is the Malayalam word for hill and ‘arayar’ may be semantically related to ‘arachar’ meaning ruler. It is possible that the Malayarayars as a clan enjoyed control over the western slopes of the Ghats. The land occupied by the Malayarayars originally belonged to Poonjar or Puniyat Rajas. Around 1749-50, Marthanda Varma annexed these territories to his kingdom.”(xv).

In the book titled, *Caste and Tribes of Southern India*, under the section “Mala Arayan” quotes the Travancore Census Report (1901) describes Malayarayans as “a class of hill tribes, who are little more civilised than the Mannans, and have fixed abodes in the slopes of high mountain ranges.”(388). Also,

Their villages are fine-looking, with trees and palms all around. They are superior in appearance to most other hill tribes, but are generally short in stature. Some of the Arayans are rich, and own large plots of cultivated grounds. They seldom work for hire, or carry loads. (388)

Narayan’s text recreates the socio-cultural milieu as it existed in the early decades of the twentieth century and tries to retrieve. Narayan was born in 1940 at Kadayathur in Idukki district of Kerala. He belongs to the Malayarayar tribe. That novel has been translated into several languages and made part of the curriculum by many universities. This novel was published in 1998 and won him the Kerala Sahitya Academy Award in 1998. An English translation of the novel, titled *Kocharethi: The Araya Woman*, by Catherine Thankamma was published

in 2011. It won the Economist-Crossword Book Award in the Indian language translation category that year.

Narayan's other works include *Ooraalikudi*, *Chengarum Kuttalum Vannala*, *Ee Vazhiyil Aalereyilla*, *Aaranu Tholkkunnavar* and "Nissahayante Nilavili" and "Pelamarutha" are short stories. Narayan breathed his last breath at 82, while undergoing treatment for Covid at a private hospital.

As a tribal writer, Narayan aims to portray the life of tribals as it is. *Kocharethi* is far from all misrepresentations. It is a book that speaks about the rich culture of the tribals and their challenge to preserve their culture. Narayan as a mouthpiece attempts to bring the life of natives closer to the non-natives.

The story is set in the Western Ghats in the early 20th Century and moves towards post-Independence era. *Kocharethi* is the story of the tribal couple Kunjipennu and Kochuruman. Both gets married out of love. Through the first half, the couple seems to lead an independent, happy, contented and respectful life. This initial part sets the stage on their belief systems, rituals, and various social codes. The second half shares loss, death, despair and uncertainty of their lives. Within this time, it captures the battles, woes, wants and frustrations of the Arayars describes their move towards citizenship in independent India, the changing perceptions of land and its ownership, and their longing for a normal rudimentary life. Together Kunjipennu and Kochuruman create an identity for the Mala Arayars, and present a life-system that is slowly fading away.

This paper presents the lives, challenges faced by the tribal community and highlights the marginalization of the marginalized. Malayarayar tribe is rich in tradition. To them, the voice is life embodied. They relied on voice and memory. The spoken word passed from generation to generation and hence tradition and values are passed orally. The concept of writing was not known to them some sixty years ago. According to them, the marriage is in accordance with 'illam' and clan traditions. Ittyadi Arayan, father of Kunjipennu marries off his daughter to Kochuruman of a different clan against the practiced tradition. In the introduction of the story, he seems to be very rigid man in believing rituals, belief systems and divine spirits. It is understood, that nothing stands between the love of a father and daughter. This strong familial bonding is beautifully represented by the author. Narayan himself says in an interview, "We wanted to tell the world that we have our own distinctive way of life, our own value system."(208).

The life of adivasis is completely one with nature. Beyond it, they don't know anything. They as the first inhabitants of the land, there is no question of acquiring individual rights of the land. The notion 'land' as 'property' is far from their understanding. They are not aware of the possession and dispossession of land. The way they handled the land is no natural and the novel accounts it well:

Ittyadi had intended to give that land to his daughter at the time they had cleared the part of the forest. He mentioned casually as he took a break from work one day: ‘This is for my Kunjennu and her man.’ (23)

The land is always inseparable from their identity. They were one with it and celebrated this union in all rites of passage. There is no distinction between ‘you’ and ‘me’ as it is widely in the advanced society. For them, it is always ‘us’ a sense of oneness with the hills, waters, animals and men. Narayan gives a larger picture of land and its associations of adivasis in *Kocharethi*. But this perception later changes as modernity encroaches, “. . . we managed till now with the money got by selling the land next to the house to Pathrose Nanaaru.” (202).

The novel explores the connectedness of the past, present and future in the initial part, middle part and the end part respectively. In the initial part tells us the beliefs, rituals, customs of tribes and communion with nature in the past. Here, the author describes elaborately about the tribal rituals and practices. Starting from birth ceremonies, marriage customs and funeral rites that are observed by Malayarayar people. ‘Eettappera’ symbolizes one such ritual for the women who are menstruating or giving birth should stay separately in the shack. Such rituals create a sense of belongingness to the community.

Then moving further, it vividly describes the cultural change or acculturation, orientation to modernity and disorientation of their habitual customs. Later it represents the unpredictable future of the malayarayar tribe though modernity. With the coming of colonizers and different religious mainlanders leads to destruction of the customs and the emergence of new one creates identity crisis. The merchants and traders of the village take advantage of the ignorance. The tribals are not good with numbers and hence are highly susceptible to different array of cheating by traders, forest rangers and mainlanders.

Tribals’ sufferings and struggles are a never-ending episode. From forest fire to small pox their problems are many. Ignorance of modern medicine, lack of education, unaware of social and political changes remains them to suffer. But in due course, they also understand the necessity of education to resist the exploitation by the settlers. Hence, the children of their community start learning from the teacher, Kochupillai. Educating the young tribes not only lead them to light but also pushes away from their araya tradition. Parvati, the daughter of Kochuruman and Kunjipennu is a representation of educated new generation breaks all the connections and expectations of her community join her love life Padmanaban by her conscious choice. Her parents though initially resist however accepts their daughter’s decision.

Kocharethi reveals the gradual acculturation of the indigenous into the economy, culture and politics of the nation-state. Narayan has intensely captured the nuances of this changeover. The feudal lords, the king, British raj are symbols of the various stages in this transition. Cut off from the main stream society of Kerala, the tribals were unaware of the social and political changes that were happening in Kerala. “Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru is our Prime minister. Then is Kanthi our king? Keshavan thought for a while ...” (203). Lack of political structure leads them to confusion and embarrassment.

They would not understand. They were too simple; their doubts arose from ignorance. There were Maharajas and emperors in India at one time. But now they do not rule. The people’s representations are the rulers.... Those kings who refuse join the India Union will be dealt with by the Internal Affairs Minister Sardar Patel with an iron fist. The king of Thiruvithamkoor too cannot escape this fate. (163)

The novel also articulates Narayan’s anger, pain and angst for their community being misrepresented in the writings of non-tribals and settlers. In an interview to the translator Catherine Thankamma, Narayan says:

The adivasi, when represented, appears as a monochromatic figure, like the rakshasan or nishacharan of mythological stories. It was always a negative picture; he was depicted as apathetic, unable to react to injustice or worse, inhuman or subhuman, vicious. (209)

Narayan is a writer in a period of transition. He is involved far more in the world of struggle in our country, while dealing with serious concerns of his own community. *Kocharethi* discloses the rupture of the continuity of traditional Malayarayar community. Narayan welcomes modernization but warns his community on evading their indigenous identity and culture under the clasps of modernization. Through *Kocharethi* Narayan defines and defends his own tribal community and giving its cultural identity. His voice represents the community’s perspective, struggles and shows the challenges faced by them such as pain, discrimination, racism, violence, looting of their resources and land. Narayan’s voice unmutes the years of long silent passivity endured by them.

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