

Kocharethi, the Araya Woman: A Saga of the Mala Arayar Tribe

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Abstract-The Tribals have a rich oral literature in the forms of songs, tales and riddles. Their written narratives aims at self-representation, search for identity, a sense of being an adivasi into the world of imaginative writing. Narayan is the first tribal writer to depict the history, traditions and travails of the Malay Arayan tribal community in Kerala in the twentieth century through the lives of Kunjipennu and her husband Kochuraman. The writer portrays instances how the Mala Arayar challenge the social injustices prevalent in their society, from a insider's point of view. The novel promotes the idea that education is a fundamental right that can lead to personal growth, empowerment and social change This paper discusses the acts of resistance of various forms of oppression, attempts to challenge and showcase the strength, resilience and the determination to fight for their rights and create a more equitable community.

Keywords: Social Injustice, Oppression, Identity, Resistance, Resilience, Empowerment.

Tribal writings can be divided into two forms: Oral Narratives and Written Narratives. The tribal have a rich oral literature in the forms of songs, tales, and riddles. A number of writers and compilers have gathered these oral forms and translated them into Indian languages and into English. Apart from the theme of protest, other aspects of the life of the tribal too are reflected in these narratives. The genre 'written tribal narrative' aims at self-representation, and the search for tribal identity or 'adivasi-ness'. Through this writing, the tribal writers try to demolish the perception of the non-tribal writer that adivasi culture is backward, uninvolved and superstitious. Written tribal narratives are the result of modern education and social consciousness. While reading on tribal literature, one might have observed that the aim of tribal writer is to set the representation of their people right and to establish self-representation or to bring the sense of being an adivasi into the world of imaginative writing. The novelist Narayan also had the same aim when he wrote the novel in his language -Malayalam.

Narayan comes from a very humble background. He was born in Idduki district of Kerala in 1940. After completing Matriculation he worked in the Postal Department. He worked as a clerk when he wrote and published the novel –*Kocharethi: the araya woman*. He wrote this novel as he and his friends were not happy about the account of his people in texts written by the mainstream writers. In an interview to Thankamma he says, “A few of us were sitting together, talking and discussing related matter. I said why not write our version? They said it was a good idea. I began to write the novel drawing on my childhood memories, my grandfather's stories, and the rituals that he performed. The title came much later” (209).

The writer draws heavily from their oral traditions and evokes nature and spirit of the tribe imagined as present in the imagination of the tribe. Translated by Catherine Thankamma and introduced by G.S. Jayshree, the novel, *Kocharethi: the araya woman* published in Malayalam, received three prestigious awards. The novel has been held in high esteem by many writers and critics like Ayyappa Paniker and Mahasweta Devi. Mahasweta Devi regards it as “a remarkable work.”(cover page) Catherine Thankamma who has translated it into English calls it “a landmark piece.” G.S.Jayshree has rightly pointed out in her introduction saying that “It gives us an insider's view as Narayan chronicles the changes that take place in the lives of the inhabitants of the foothills of the Western Ghats as they negotiate the interests of modernity.(xvi) The novel received many awards including Thoppil Ravi Foundation Award, Abu Dhabi Shakti Award and Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award.

Narayan's *Kocharethi: the araya woman* is the first tribal novel of South India. It is the first novel to be written by a tribal writer in the region to which he belongs. Narayan makes a conscious attempt to show his community as a distinct community with distinct

form of cultural practices. The turmoil the Arayar had to face in history – in the pre and post-colonial era-become the main focus of the story. *Kocharethi* narrates the tale of the Mala Araya adivasi community in the early half of the twentieth century. The novel depicts the history, traditions and travails of the Malay Arayan tribal community in Kerala in the twentieth century through the lives of Kunjipennu and her husband Kochuraman. It is set against the backdrop of the Western Ghats in the pepper belt along the Kerala – Tamil Nadu border. The protagonist of the novel is Kunjipennu, a Malayarayathi, whose life goes through a roller coaster of different phases of poverty, despair, prosperity and finally abandonment along with her husband Kochuraman. The novel maps the changing perception of land and its ownership. The adivasis believe:

'It is always us, a feeling of being one with the hills and waters, animals and men.'

He does not own any land, but the land is his, as much as it belongs to anyone else in the community. Those who are outside this inclusive way of life call it 'uncivilized'.

They take the freedom to idealize, romanticize, or distort it. (xvii)

In response to the representations of adivasi as a monochromatic figure, Narayan says, 'We are not demons lacking in humanity but a strong, hardworking and self-reliant community.'(xvii) For the novelist, who is part of such a history, it comes easily to present a part of it and create with its help the intricacies of life that history possessed. Narrating the local history the writer tries to make the past alive and integrated with the present. The novelist narrates:

"These hills were once part of the kingdom of the Karrikottir kings. The kings and

Arayars were on cordial terms. The Arayars had title like "Koramban and

"Kaanikkaram." There were many Arayar in the king's army. They were strong and

sturdy people by birth. The chief of the group was called by the name Thala Arayan.

Then during the reign of a week king they quarreled. To safeguard his kingdom and

throne, the king brought Pillas from Nanjinadu in Venad. The Pillas were cunning

strategists. The Arayar lost the battle" (118)

Narayan as an adivasi writer is not happy with the representation of his people by many non-tribal writers

in their writings. He states the following in the interview "We want to be understood ... and allowed to live with dignity" which spells out his intentions:

The tribal was the asuran/the kaattaalan (demon). In Hindu mythology the demons are variously called rakshasan, nishacharan, asuran and the connotative significance of being uncultured who had to be killed by a diety wielding a shoolam (trident) or a savarna (uppercaste) of divine parentage. There were a few of us who wanted to resist such biased representation. We wanted to tell the world that we have our own distinctive way of life, our own value system. (Narayan 208-209)

Firstly, there are many positive aspects of tribal life that are ignored and overlooked by writer who wrote about them. Narayan wants to highlight those points by describing them in detail and from an insider's point of view. Secondly, tribal people have been taken advantage of and abused by different agencies. He wants them to let them allow for self-determination and to let them live a life of respect and dignity. He elaborately narrates the rituals, myths and world view of the people. Narayan's writing has been deeply influenced by his lived experience and memories. He says, "I began to write the novel, drawing on my childhood memories, my grandfather's stories and the rituals that he performed..." (xvii) G.S.Jayshree has rightly pointed out in her introduction that "It gives us an insider's view as Narayan chronicles the changes that take place in the lives of the inhabitants of the foothills of the Western Ghats as they negotiate the interests of modernity"(xvi). .

The novel *Kocharethi: the Araya Woman* revolves around a tribal family. As the story goes, Ittyadi, the old man decides to marry off his beautiful daughter, Kunjipennu to Kochuraman much to the disappointment of Narayan, the customary groom. Kochuraman , a handsome boy from another village loves her and Kunjipennu also loves him. The novel is at one level about their love story and how they struggle and set up their family and lead life in their hills and fields. Though the novel narrates the story of an Araya family, it is about the entire community with its different aspects in a changing socio-economic and cultural context, that has been undergoing transition

with the advent of modernity. One of the examples is the decision to marry Kunjipennu to Kochuraman breaking social customs.

Kochuraman is a loving and caring husband. His passion for Kunjipennu is never ending all through the novel. He breaks his back to work hard on the land promised as their share by Ittyadi. Kochuraman represents the next generation of the adivasis with a more sophisticated method of offering medication. He had severed all ties to religion that the traditional form of medication carried with it. He focuses his attention on the use of various herbs and other natural products, the fat of animals to cure wounds, sprains and diarrhoea. (xxiv)

The Araya people dwells in the forest and the land they cultivate on is cleared in each season to prepare it for farming. Kochuraman and Kunjipennu live in a tree house (erumadam) near their cultivated land, guarding the crops while occasionally being threatened by wild elephants and boars. Kochuraman guards the crops risking his life, impressing Ittyadi. Paapi and Kunjadichan get jealous that his sister and her husband are now living in a land which is rich with crops and with a better and bigger house for them to live in. Their life progresses as they survive a time when the village in the valley and neighbourhood suffer from small pox and a bad harvest of their crops- mainly pepper coconut, tapioca, yams and areca nut. After small pox severe drought hits the Araya lands. As they are not skilled in irrigation techniques their crops dry and land is parched. In extreme heat the forest catches wild fire often and fire destroys their dry crops and the houses built in the middle of the crops. Kunjipennu's house catches fire and even though the neighbours run to help them both, Kochuraman and Kunjipennu are seriously burned. Their son Kunjikuttan dies in the fire causing his parents to fall into a period of depression. The Arayar go through severe poverty. Many buy rice and provisions from the shops in the valley on credit and in return they are asked to pay with their pepper in the next season. Since Arayar don't know how to read, write or count the money lenders cheat them with fake credit accounts demanding more money and pepper than they actually owed. The poverty of the community is ruthlessly exploited by moneylenders, landlords, the businessmen and the police and gradually this unholy nexus of the upper classes and upper castes results in the alienation of the Arayans' lands and those resisting are beaten into submission.

Most of the Araya men find solace in toddy drinking to forget their struggles. Alcoholism hits the community as another danger.

By the next season of pepper Kochuraman and Kunjipennu are able to move back to their newly built house. Kochuraman and Kunjipennu cultivate their land once again with pepper vines. Kochuraman starts the habit of drinking toddy as he starts making money. He clears some more forest land and cultivates other crops as well since it is safe to depend on more than one crop in case the price drops for one particular crop. As Araya hills prosper in the harvest season many upper caste men reach to exploit them. The forest guards demand tax and other bribes from Arayars saying that their land actually belonged to the Travancore King and the temple of Lord Ayyappa and hence tax is to be paid.

Pattathil Kunjunni Pilla, the in charge of Sastha temple and Devaswam comes with his men to get tax from Arayars. Kunjunni Pilla demands one third of the yield of the pepper each Arayan as tax for 'Lord Ayyappan's land'. If anyone fails to pay he uses his men to beat them and get the money. Apart from the tax Kunjunni Pilla also demands contributions for temple festivals from Arayars even though Arayar are not supposed to enter the temple for being low caste. Kunjunni Pilla uses police to beat and threaten Arayar if they fail to pay him money.

Christian and Muslim traders cheat the Arayars with false weighing scales and other tricks to get their pepper. Kochuraman somehow manages not to fall prey to the cheating traders. Kochuraman becomes the richest man in Arayar with his hard work and wise moves in trades. Yet he too is not free from the extortion of the upper caste from Kanjar (the nearest town in the valley). Many village goons like Ottathengan Devasia and Chetty (Pappan Pilla) attack and rob the Araya men as they travel back to hills with money they got from selling pepper. Some Araya women are raped by these goons. Kochuraman gets a young boy named Kunjerukkan as his right hand to save himself from the attacks of the goons. In one of the incidents Kunjerukkan nearly kills one of the goons and somehow manages to escape from their clutches along with Kochuraman.

The forest authorities come to claim that the land of Arayar is Travancore state property and cut the large trees like rose wood and teak from their land and destroy the farm and houses of Arayar. Finally Arayar

meet Kandathil Krishna Pilla, a rival of Kunjunni Pilla, as a last resort. Krishna Pilla helps Arayar in every way he can. He bails out the Arayar who were illegally arrested by the police who took bribes from Kunjunni Pilla. He also tells the Arayar that the land in which they live on is neither the King's nor Ayyappan's to pay tax. Kandathil Krishna Pilla becomes the protector of Arayars by helping them to file complaint in the court against the extortion they face from 'civilised upper caste'. The *tahasildar* confirms, 'The hills and the forest do not belong to any Dewaswam. Arayan and Uruli do not own the land they live on. But the royal decree permits them to live there and cultivate the land. And no one has been authorized to collect taxes from them.' (135)

Realising that lack of education is the real reason why Arayars get exploited Krishna Pilla sends an aashan named Kochupilla to Araya hill to start a kalari to educate Araya children. With Kochuraman's help Aashan starts Saraswathi Vilasam Kalari near Kochuraman's house and almost all Araya children enthusiastically begin to learn to write and read. Aashan advises Kochuraman on how to cultivate land and how to sell the crops at a good price without getting cheated. He also advises Kochuraman not to drink and waste his hard earned money in toddy shops. Kochuraman sends both of his children to kalari and after that he sends them to school in the valley as per the instructions of Aashan. Aashan told the Arayar,

It was important that they learned to read and write. Knowledge was the greatest wealth. Thieves could not take it away; the more you gave, the more it became. Have you not heard that? It is not enough that your children learn to cultivate tapioca and yam and climb trees. They should study, become confident, wear good clothes, get government jobs... (147)

The novelist, as a responsible member of his community, presents his women with a lot of responsibility and understanding which other non-tribal writers lacked; they viewed tribal women from an unrealistic angle. In contrast to others description of tribal women as people of easy virtue and therefore succumbing easily, Narayan's women characters are strong and assertive. "An Amethi girl would not hesitate to attack the man who tried to molest her: she would even slit her own throat to thwart him"(11).The

experience and awareness of the writer also inspire him to give a solution to his people. In the novel the solution seems to be education. The establishment of a school in the village marks the beginning of another social transformation in the community. Kunjipennu and Kochuraman send their daughter Parvati and son to school. Parvati later gets through college and soon gets a job in Ernakulam as lower division clerk in the Excise department.

It is during this time the Pentecostal Church and CMS (the Protestant Church) try to convert many low castes including Araya and Pulaya to their religion in return to favours like legal protection by the British from the extortion of other upper caste men and the men of Kings. Some Araya members convert to Christianity but Kochuraman and his family remain the same as they know that conversion to Christianity doesn't make any difference in the treatment they get in the society. Later in the novel, when Kochumadhavan meets Padmanabhan, he asks him, 'Are our people Hindus or Christians? He then continues that his people get their jobs not as Christians, but as Mala Arayar. Then came the question;

"Who are Mala Arayar? Even the gazette notification does not mention their religion" I said, "Friends, it is me... we believe in the Hindu religion and culture. But there no records to prove it. We are the lot forgotten by man and God alike. We continue as a blot, an error... If an Arayan goes to church he is called a Christian. But when it comes to education and employment he reclaims his Mala Araya heritage (200)

The novel thus marks an important point in the documentation of the unique life system that is slowly fading into history. As a creative writer Narayan prefers the role of one who observes, represents and attempts to reconstruct the history of the adivasis's negotiations with the force of modernity in Kerala.

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