

SURVIVAL STRUGGLE AND SELF IDENTITY IN NARAYAN'S *KOCHARETHI - THE ARAYA WOMAN*

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Kocharethi is the debut novel of Narayan. He belongs to the Malayarayar tribe and is considered Kerala's first tribal novelist. The novel is later on translated in English by Catherine Thankamma. The novel depicts the history, traditions and the true lives of the tribal community. The book was about a protagonist and her family, their struggle for land and challenges to preserve their myths and customs. This novel explains about the malayarayar community and its experiences that inhabit the Western Ghats of central Kerala. The work depicts the oppression faced by the tribes to various socio-economic and political realities. The presence of colonial domination, bureaucratic greed, freedom struggle, survival struggle, and struggle for native identity could be seen throughout the novel. The innocence of the people was clearly depicted in the novel. The land was not separable as they are the first inhabitants of their own land. They were strong hardworking and self-reliant as an individual and as a community. One part of the novel was filled with particulars of beliefs, rituals, rites and customs of their community. Modernism was unknown to them but Man and God were integral to each other. Apart from the life style of the malayarayar, the picturization of the landscapes and the sources of herbs, natural products, their method of medication were specially explained in various occasion.

The central plot or the idea of the novel stresses on the suppression, survival struggle and self identity of the people in the malayarayar community. They did not know even simple calculations like adding and subtracting. The community depended heavily on food and crops. Pepper was the most sought after commodity. The main problem they faced was the lack of irrigation. They had to depend completely on seasonal rain. The traders often cheat them as they did not give a fair price for the forest products obtained from the malayarayars. They were subject to other modes of exploitation too. Taxes levied on them were too heavy. They were required to pay tax for the right to live and cultivate on the land owned by the king as well as the British colonial administration. They were living in their own land as a tenant. Even after the hard work, they lost their family, land and identity. Some of these consequences and failure of traditional sources forced them to conversion of their religion. The novel Kocharethi especially explains about the life of the young Araya woman Kunjipennu and Kochuraman and their family as well as the community. The author clearly portrays the entire above said struggle, identity, suppression, colonization through the characters. In between the struggles in the life of the arayars Kochuraman and Kunjipennu were in search of better education and employment opportunities for their community children for creating a better generation. But this also marks an important point in the documentation of a unique life style and the close communion with nature slowly faded and distanced from the older tradition.

Indian English Literature gradually develops from the ancient traditional form to the modern form of writing. Now Indian writing in English has gained a worldwide acceptance and recognition. The Indian English writers write with an Indian flavor which suits the Indian mode of feeling and expression. Gradually all major literary genre, prose, poetry, drama and novels developed. Though novels had its origin in the recent past Indian writers in English by their genius, they changed the old form of writing through successful narrations, newer themes and techniques.. Novelist like Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Salman Rushdie, Vikaram Seth, Manju Kapur, Amitav Ghosh, Anita Nair, Shoba De and many others have contributed much to the growth of novels. But India history has a story telling gift from the days of Rigveda and Upanishads. K.S. Ramamurti, a critic says, “Fiction in English written by Indians was even its earliest phase decidedly superior to the fiction on Indian written by British writers’ atleast as literature, if not as literature in English” (50).

The real stories of contemporary life are dealt in the novels of Indian writers. Themes of freedom struggle, gandhian philosophy, nationalism, indianess, exploration of identity, oppression, experimentation of self, escapism, gender discrimination, psychic trauma, migration, and east – west conflicts are dealt in the novels of Indian writers. Theories like post colonialism, structuralism, orientalism, post modernism and psychological theories emerged and are used in practice. Indian English Literature originated as a necessary outcome of the introduction of English education in India under the colonial rule. Srinivasa Iyengar says that: “The modern Indian renaissance began with the Indians who write in their mother tongues in conscious imitation of great English models” (37). In India, English has created new experimentation in the field of Indian writing. The ranges of English have expanded, as the varieties within a variety have been formed. The rise of the novel in India was not purely a literary phenomenon. The novel, the genre of imaginative literature which gives artistic form to the relationship of man and society was conspicuously absent till the mid nineteenth century. A critic named Agarwal says that “A novel by and Indian writer demands direct involvement in values and experiences which are valid in the Indian context” (260).

Indian tribal literature upholds each of its rich traditions. The notable information about tribal literature in India is that, it has always been delivered orally; however, things have taken a fresh turn in the present century, with written versions. The tribal writers from various parts are coming to light. However, the scenario was quite different in the ancient periods, with Indian tribals delivering literature sticking just to word of mouth. The number of languages in which Indian tribal communities have been expressing themselves is breathtakingly huge.

Tribals in India have indeed taken to writing now-a-days. Many tribal languages now possess their own scripts or have taken recourse to the state scripts. Approximately four decades ago, when Dalit literature started pulling the nation’s attention, tribal writers also came into the limelight. During the last 20 years the various tribal voice and literary works have started making their presence felt. Thus, Kocharethi from Kerala stormed the readers. The last two decades have established that Indian tribal literature is no longer only the folk songs and folk tales. The other genres like the novel and drama too flourished. Literary conferences regularly provide a platform for tribal writers. At present there exists a successful understanding among tribal literature.

The present work is on **Narayan’s Kocharethi – the araya woman**, the debut novel of Narayan who belongs to the Malayarayar tribe and is considered Kerala’s first tribal novelist. The novel is later on translated in English by Catherine Thankamma. **Kocharethi** is given the

Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award in the novel category for the year 1999. Narayan is also a recipient of many other awards including Thoppil Ravi Award; Economist Crossword Book Award. Narayan starts his literary career by writing a few short stories. Apart from **Kocharethi**, the other novels are **Ooralikkudi(1999)**, **Chengarum Kuttalum(2001)**, **Vandanam(2003)**, **Aaranu Thlkkunnavar(2006)**, **Ee Vazhiyil Aalere Illa(2006)**, **Thiraskrutharude Nalea(2010)**, **Manasum Dhehavum Kondu Njan Ninnea(2010)**. The Short Story Collections are **Nissahayante Nilavili(2006)**, **Pela Marutha(2006)**, **Kadhakal Narayan(2011)**, **Narayante Theranjedutha Kadhakal(2012)**, **Narayante Kadhakal(2013)**. The present novel **Kocharethi** depicts the history, traditions and the true lives of the tribal community. The book was about their customs. This novel explains about the malayarayar community and its experiences that inhabit the economic and political realities. The presence of colonial domination, bureaucratic greed, freedom struggle, survival struggle, and struggle for native identity can be seen throughout the novel. The innocence of the people is clearly depicted in the novel. The land is not separable as they are the first inhabitants of their own land. They are strong, hardworking and self-reliant as an individual and as a community. One part of the novel is filled with particulars of beliefs, rituals, rites and customs of their community. Modernism is unknown to them but they relate themselves with nature. Apart from the life style of the malayarayar, the picturization of the landscapes and the sources of herbs, natural products, their method of medication are specially explained in various occasion.

The central plot or the idea of the novel stresses on the suppression of malayarayar community. They do not know even simple calculations like adding and subtracting. The community depends heavily on food and crops. Pepper is the most sought after commodity. The main problem they faced is the lack of irrigation. They depend completely on seasonal rain. The traders often cheat them as they do not give a fair price for the forest products obtained from the malayarayars. They are subject to other modes of exploitation too. The main themes such as alienation, betrayal, difficulties, joys and sorrows are faced by the tribal community of malayarayar.

The novel **Kocharethi** especially explains about the life of the young Araya woman Kunjipennu and Kochuraman and their family as well as the community. The author clearly portrays the entire above said struggle, identity, suppression, colonization through the characters. In between the struggles in the life of arayers, Kochuraman and Kunjipennu are in search of better education and employment opportunities for their community children for creating a better generation. But this is also marks an important point in the documentation of a unique life style and the close communion with nature slowly faded and distanced from the older tradition. The story gives the clear picture of the central characters and the other characters that face problems of psychological exploitation. Narayan portrays how these characters analyze their self and try to escape the suppression in the novel. The present article mainly deals with the themes namely Exploitation, Survival struggle and Suppression and Self Identity.

The conception of exploitation is the treatment of human beings as mere objects. It also refers to the use of people as a resource with no consideration and using the other for their own personal benefit. Exploitation can also be said as taking something off a person or a group that rightfully belong to them in an unjust or cruel manner. In the novel most of the tribal characters are haunted with dreadful memories, mental oppression through natural hazards as well as from the higher authorities. Kunjumundan one of the characters sells his pepper, straight from the vine after his hard work. The payment is delayed by the traders and finally the date is fixed. Kunjumundan and his son meet Mothalali, a trader on the fixed date. His is given money by the

trader and asked to count it. Soon after they get the money, the father and the son tries to leave. Just then a group of stranger entered the room and asks for the money. Kunjumadan says, "This is the payment for the pepper I sold to Pareethu mothalali. We're not thieves' (104). But the intruders try to wrestle the money from them. Kunjumundan and his son are in a desperate condition to save the money. But they start to attack. No one is there to support them, even the policemen. The tribal people in the hills face several problems in various ways. They are given the false importance by the traders when they see the cashew nuts and peppers on the hills. The traders haunt the houses of malayarayar to get the valuable food products which they get from their hard work.

Another incident is about the central character Kochuraman, hard working man who met a trader Pareethu who fix a deal for the whole crop and given a token amount. With lesser knowledge about the values of the crops Kochuraman accepts the money feeling uneasy, but his inner mind thinks that he is doing something wrong. At the same time a strange excitement fills his mind. He asks the trader to pay the entire amount after the pepper is weighed. A person in the toddy shop says "The poor Arayar! They toil hard on the land, but they don't know anything about weights; they can't count or calculate. The merchants cheat them with their crooked weighing balance and weighing sticks. Kochuraman overheard this conversation in the toddy shop. He began to tremble. He wiped the sweat on his neck and lifted his mug" (102).

The Arayars are God-fearing people. According to them Man and God are integral to each other. They are willing to do any work for the temple without demanding the payment. The person who gets the support from the authorities enjoys the rights conferred upon them by some maharajas and demands the work from the arayars. Pattathil Kunjunni Pilla is a big man in that area demands the share of tax from the arayars and has the license to seize those who do not pay the tax. The arayars owes to give a sack of pepper as tenant dues to Kunjunni Pilla. Even the forest authorities come with their implements to destroy the coconut palms and plaintains and their dwellings with the help of the contractor. According to them it is government business. Taxes levied on them are too heavy. They are required to pay tax for the right to live and cultivate on the land owned by the king as well as the British colonial administration. They are living in their own land as a tenant. Even after the hard work, they lose their family, land and identity. Some of these consequences and failure of traditional sources force them to convert their religion.

Survival Struggle and Self Identity is another problem faced by arayars. It gives an idea of battle, fight or to move about, so as to escape from something confining or to go or progress with difficulty. Their main duty is to safe guard their identity as well as their land. The arayar works and struggle hard to survive in their land. The arayars need to protect themselves not only from the higher authorities but also from the animals which destroys their crops. The animals like elephants; wild boars enter the field and destroy the crops. "Well, if the elephant and wild boar come and go, there won't be anything left of the paddy" (17). The elephant can appear at any time and destroy the crop. Kochuraman struggles and tries to protect the crops from the wild animals. There is a huge maruthu in the middle of the cultivated land. He builds' erumaadom in the hard tree as a look out to watch the animals. Once an elephant has sighted grain it will not leave without eating it. Kochuraman is able to save the crop through his struggle and hard work. It is like a headache for the arayars to protect their crops from animals and birds. During the night Kochuraman needs to protect the fields from elephants and in day time the birds and wild fowl come to eat the ripened grain. This show, how the arayars struggles hard for their survival.

They understand knowledge about calculation and outside world is necessary and important for their living. With the help of Krishna Pilla who acts as a protector of the arayers has given advice to Kochuraman and others to give education to their children. He sends an Aashan Kochupilla who is a teacher. Kochupilla stays there and starts teaching the children to read and write. He says, “I m an Aashan who teaches children to write, I know the Puranic stories and the Neethisaram. I don’t have any money. I have a son but his wife does’nt like me. So I left the place. I’ve known Kandathil Krishna Pilla for a long time. He is the one who told me about you’ (142). With the help of the teacher the children in the hill learns to read, write and to do calculations. Parvati, daughter of Kochuraman and Kunjipennu goes to school with other children. The people in the hill does’nt want their grown up daughters to continue their studies. But Parvati says, “I want to study. To study and study and become a magistrate” (155).

With great struggle Parvati continues her studies against her father’s advice. After she gets a job she uses to send some amount of money to her parents. Then she gets married to Padmanabhan whom she is in love against their parent’s wish. Kochuraman and Kunjipennu are upset thinking about her daughter. They think that, they are cheated even by their daughter. Kochuraman frequently visits toddy shop and Kochuraman experiences bouts of tiredness and stabbing pain in the stomach. He never tells anyone about it. Medicines bring no relief to him, so he increases his intake of arrack. Another day he experiences a terrible stabbing pain when he drinks arrack. It is so severe that he could not take a single step. He is admitted in the hospital. Padmanabhan and Parvati visit the hospital and offers help to them. Kunjipennu takes care of him in the hospital and when she leaves for home she is horrified to see the yard. Banana trees, sweet potato, yam everything is eaten by the cattle. She borrows money from Pathrosu Nanaaru twice, each time making an imprint with her left thumb on a piece of paper.

Then Kochuraman is admitted in the Medical College Hospital. But both of them are unaware of the treatment, operation, doctors and hospitals. These people are unaware of the fact in the outer world. Their mind is filled and attached with nature and God. They plan to leave the hospital before the operation date is fixed for Kochuraman. At last they climb down the stairs and runs away from the hospital. “Kochuraman let out a tired moan. Conscious of each one of the irregular heartbeats, Kunjipennu drew him closer, wondering where to go. If...before they reached...no...ente thaivame....She sobbed...again” (207). Throughout the novel it is clearly seen that Kochuraman and Kunjipennu look forward to improve the life of their children through education. Therefore they work hard to earn. Pepper becomes their identity, through which they earn and get respect from the traders. They learnt simple calculations for selling pepper. It plays an important role in the life of arayers. Giving better education to their children the arayers become happy. But they realize the generation gap between them and their children. Even though they try to make changes in life, they are not able to move forward to modernity by leaving their real identity, their land, culture, nature, tradition etc.

It is an attempt to read the analysis of oppression, sufferings and frustration of Kochuraman, Kunjipennu and other characters in the novel, their constant thinking of escape from the horrors of life. In order to escape from the hoarse reality of life, which tortures them, the characters try to escape into different activities, especially Kochuraman. The important theme of survival struggle, self identity, and exploitation runs from the beginning to end.

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