



Cultural disintegration of tribal community: A study of Narayan's Kocharethi: The Araya woman

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Abstract

In contemporary times, tribals face issues of cultural disintegration in mainstream culture. It resulted in the problem of an identity crisis. Culture and society change over time due to exposure, invention, experimentation, and change in the surrounding environment. The tribal communities in India are also no exception. There is a lot of controversy regarding the cultural transformation of tribal communities in India. The tribal people are facing problems from both inclusion and exclusion from the dominant cultures of the country. In contemporary times, tribals face issues of cultural disintegration in mainstream culture. Writers from the different strata of marginalised sections of Indian societies have tried to raise their voices for their respective communities against the hegemony of the mainstream through writings.

Keywords: tribal, culture, communities, disintegration, transformation, modernisation

Introduction

Culture and society are dynamic. Culture and society change over time due to exposure, invention, experimentation, and change in the surrounding environment. The tribal communities in India are also no exception. In a tribal society, the most imperative factor is the unity of the members of the tribe and their absolute compliance to the ruling of the elders as well as the gods and goddesses. This has gone astray when some of them acknowledge the values brought to them by the outside forces like modernisation, globalisation, the intervention of non-tribals, and the activities of Christian missionaries. This leads to an increasing outspokenness toward Western thought and religion and allows for the ultimate exploitation and assimilation. There is a lot of controversy regarding the cultural transformation of tribal communities in India. The tribal people are facing problems from both inclusion and exclusion from the dominant cultures of the country. In contemporary times, tribals face issues of cultural disintegration in mainstream culture. It resulted in the problem of an identity crisis. Exclusion from infrastructure, health and education, etc., has led them to a situation where they find it difficult to cope with the outside world in the present-day situation. The present paper highlights the cultural disintegration and transformation of a tribal community in the novel *Kocharethi*, written by Narayan. This paper aims to put the Novel *Kocharethi: The Araya Woman* in the social context. It also aims at providing a background to the novel by giving a profile of the writer and the situation he confronted as he wrote the novel. Indian tribal literature holds each of its age-old rich traditions. The tribal literature in India has always been delivered orally; however, things have changed with raising awareness to preserve the oral literature in written documents. The tribal writers from various parts are coming to light. The situation was quite different in the ancient periods, with Indian tribals delivering literature sticking just to word of mouth. Indian tribal communities have expressed themselves in so many languages. Tribals in India have taken to writing nowadays. Many tribal languages now possess their scripts or have taken recourse to the state scripts. Narayan is an Indian author from Kerala, best known for his debut novel *Kocharethi*. It was initially written in Malayalam. Most of his fiction deal with the lives of the tribal communities of Kerala. Originally, Narayan belongs to the Malayarayar tribal community and is considered the first tribal novelist of Kerala. Through the lives of its protagonist, the novel depicts the history, religious life, culture, and traditions of the Malayarayar tribe in Kerala. The story was critically acclaimed, and it won the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award. The noted writer Mahasweta Devi has appropriately remarked that,

"*Kocharethi*, one of the first tribal novels, is a remarkable work"

The English translation of the novel *Kocharethi: The Araya Woman* was done by Catherine Thankamma and published by the Oxford University Press in 2011, and won the Economist Crossword Book Award in the Indian language translation category for 2011.

Cultural Transition of Tribal Community

Narayan avoids the pitfalls of romanticisation and the now-classic postcolonial move of making the misery of the marginalised the theme in *Kocharethi*. 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. From the story,

we understand that the novelist depicts a society that has been undergoing a transition with the advent of modernity. One of the examples is the decision to marry Kunjipennu to Kochuraman breaking social customs. It is a novel about cultural disintegration and the hidden poetry of tribal lives. The story of the Malayaraya Adivasi community is primarily focused on the lives of Kunjipennu and her husband, Kochuraman. The story is set in the first half of the twentieth century in the Western Ghats, in the border area of present-day Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Kocharethi opens as ethnography, minutely detailing the lives and customs of a community. In the early stages, the characters' individual lives are subsumed under the collective biography, but they acquire greater textual flesh-and-blood as the story proceeds. It tells about the community's transition to modernity that requires them to abandon older ways of living and whose transition is rarely voluntary. Instead, it is imposed on them through poverty, outside forces, and dubious and discriminatory models of development that only benefit the upper-caste landlords and the corrupt state machinery.

The novel runs in 19 chapters, loosely describing the Malayaraya lifestyle, rituals, beliefs, and the story of its protagonists. In the pre and postcolonial era, the turmoils the Arayar had to face in history became the story's primary focus. The novel depicts the history, traditions and authentic lives of the tribal community. The book was about a protagonist and her family, their struggle for land and the challenges of preserving their myths and customs. This novel explains the Malayaraya community and its experiences that inhabit the Western Ghats of central Kerala. The story is about the oppression faced by the tribal people to several socio-economic and political realities. The colonial domination, bureaucratic greed, freedom struggle, survival struggle, and the struggle for native identity could be seen throughout the novel. The innocence of the people is depicted in the story. The land was not separable as they were the first inhabitants of their land. They were strong, hardworking, and self-reliant as individuals and communities. The first half of the novel is filled with the beliefs, rituals, rites and customs of a tribal society.

The novel Kocharethi especially explains the life of the young Araya woman Kunjipennu and Kochuraman and their family and the community. The author portrays the struggle for survival, identity, suppression, and colonisation through the characters. In between the battles in the life of the Arayars, Kochuraman and Kunjipennu were in search of better education and employment opportunities for their community children to create a better generation. But this also marks an essential point in the documentation of a unique lifestyle, and the close communion with nature slowly faded and distanced from the older tradition.

Kunjipennu embodies the cultural change in the novel as she refuses to marry her maternal uncle's son. Instead, she falls in love and marries Kochuraman. In a disaster — their home and only son burn down in a forest fire. They face several challenges like poverty, drought, and torrential rain torment the entire community as every Araya slides deeper into debt and drinks. Kochuraman is no exception. They understand knowledge about calculation and the outside world is necessary for their living. With the help of Krishna Pilla, who acts as a protector of the Arayars, he has advised Kochuraman and others to give education to their children. He sends a man named Aashan Kochupilla, who is a teacher. Kochupilla stays in their village and teaches 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 doesn't 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".

With the teacher's help, the children learn to read, write, and do calculations on the hill.

The arrival of a teacher in the village marks the start of another transition in tribal life as the Araya children start to go to school. The people on the hill don't want their grown-up daughters to continue their studies. But Parvati says,

"I want to study. To study and study and become a magistrate".

Parvati, the daughter of Kochuraman and Kunjipennu, goes to school with the village's other children. She gets through college and finds a good job in Kochi. She marries against her family's wishes and slowly breaks her connections with the community where she grew up. Kochuraman, whose drinking career has wrecked their lives, now falls ill and has to be treated in the city. Kunjipennu is forced to go as well. Parvati's husbands and friends support the hospitalisation proceeds, but both Kochuraman and Kunjipennu discover that he requires surgery and, mortally scared of modern medicine, escape from the hospital.

The community is forced out of their traditional skill-sets and labour practices by poverty. Education and acculturation shift Parvati out of the community and into city life, but this is a choice she makes self-consciously. Modern modernity's close associate, class-consciousness, also arrives, compounding the community's problems. Christianity's arrival alters the life of several Arayas. With Independence comes the brown Congress Party Saheb, as a democratic republic erodes the power of the local king, substituting one exploitative mechanism for another. 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".

Narrating the local history is another strategy of the writer to show the social transformation within the community. Through this, he tries to make the past alive and integrate with the present. The novelist narrates:

"These hills were once part of the kingdom of the Kariakottir kings. The kings and Arayars were on cordial terms. The Arayars had title like "Korambanand "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 weak king they quarrelled. To safeguard his kingdom and throne, the king brought Pillas from Nanjinadu to Venad. The Pillas were cunning strategists. The Arayar lost the battle" (118).

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.

The arrival of colonial modernity changed the perspective of tribals, destruction of the old value system and the onset of a new one created an identity crisis among tribes of this region. So long Kochuraman, the medicine man, had always used animal fat to treat ailments. But now, he resorts to soda water and moves to medical college for treatment.

"Kochuraman underwent blood, urine and x-ray tests. The doctor told Padmanabhan that Kochuraman's blood was low. They would wait for two weeks as he had to undergo a major operation... the duty nurse gave Kochuraman a tablet and a syrup and left."

In this way, we find that the transition in the belief system of tribes uplifts their culture in the new world.

Conclusion

Narayan makes a conscious attempt to show his community as a distinct community with a unique form of cultural practices. He elaborately narrates the rituals, myths and world views of the people. The novel also deals with issues related to tribal women, sexuality, marriage, pregnancy, childbirth, etc. The slow erosion of cultural identity, the absence of agency for some sections of society, the increasing erasure of various communities from the supposed democratic space of citizenship, and the questionable route 'modernity' and 'development' take. Their effects on men and, differently, on women are all woven into Narayan's novel.

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