

**A study of the Socio-cultural milieu of the endangered Malayarayar tribe as presented in Narayan's *Kocharethi The Araya woman***

**Reneeta Anna Robert**  
III B.A English  
&

**Dr. Annie Kuriachan**  
Associate Professor, Department of English  
Women's Christian College  
(Autonomous)  
Chennai

**ABSTRACT**

The Indian Constitution has come forward with various reservations for safeguarding and promoting the interests and rights of the Scheduled Tribes in various spheres and thus enabling them to join the national mainstream. The Malayarayar tribe, concentrated in the hill zone of Idukki and Kottayam districts in Kerala is one of the recipients of this incentive which have in fact disrupted their unique identity established through religion and occupation. Narayan, the author of *Kocharethi: The Araya Woman*, through the lives of Kunjupennu and Kochuraman talks about the history, traditions and toils of the Malayarayar community in order to assert the identity, tradition and unique culture of the tribe. This paper will study the socio-cultural revival with regard to the traditional practices, pride and ownership of land and identity of the Malayarayar tribe, for which, the approach of the analysis of the novel is based on the theory of Postcolonial Studies and specifically of neo-colonialism intersecting the identity, culture and land of indigenous tribes. The scope of the study wholly focuses on the oral traditions mentioned in the novel. Thus the project gives a detailed analysis of the anguish felt in the Malayarayar tribe about the intolerance of the dominant community over the land and customs the tribals own. The project also documents the lives and traditions of the nearly decimated Malayarayar tribe in order to reassert their significance in mainstream society. The study also leaves scope for deeper study on the Malayarayar tribe and also other endangered Indian tribes and marginalised people on their struggle to survive in a neo-colonised society controlled by the dominant class of people wielding power, wealth, authority and influence.

**Keywords:** Narayan , Kocharethi, Culture , Tradition, Colonialism, Indigenous

## A study of the Socio-cultural milieu of the endangered Malayarayar tribe as presented in Narayan's *Kocharethi The Araya woman*

“As Robert J. Samuelson puts it “...Globalisation is a double edged sword. It’s a controversial process that assaults national sovereignty, erodes local culture and tradition and threatens economic and social stability” (Dixit 29). For the mainstream society, globalisation has its own benefits in terms of trade, employment opportunities and the per capita income. Globalisation gives the society an international perspective through the exchange of culture and various other ideas. However, Globalisation affects tribals in a very different way. It had not only brought out a division amongst them as the urban educated lot and the “poor, uneducated credit-constrained, informal and agricultural sector tribals” (Dixit 32) but also had created an impression that westernisation has an upper hand in comparison to the tribal culture and traditions. A tension has arisen in society where tribals and the lives are perceived to be lacking in sophistication and social veneer. “In the multicultural society and state that tries to accommodate the contrasting imperatives of equality and diversity, the tension seems to continue” (Shweder et al, 44). This tension has led to an erosion of the culture and traditions of the indigenous people by these traditions being trivialised and laughed at in the process of acculturation.

The people with less control over power and development were dominated by the dominant powers. The element of influencing the mass psyche was a predominant concept in colonialism which also influenced the culture. Thus, the concept of cultural globalization gained momentum, which referred to the exchange of ideas, meanings and values. The dominant powers used the same as a weapon to control the economy. Although colonialism is not visibly prevalent in any part of the world now, the same can be seen in the nation which has a mainstream society and where the minorities are ruled over. As stated in the book *Engaging Cultural Differences*, Article 29 of the Indian Constitution protects the interests of the minorities living in any territory of India to have a “distinct language, script or culture of its own” and also the right to conserve the same. Disarray is found in the Article 44 of the Directive Principles of the State which “endeavour to secure for the citizens a uniform civil code throughout the territory of India” (Shweder et al, 45). The tensions between the provisions reveal the motives of imperial power where “power becomes as unnuanced a determinant of thought as control of the means of production” (Shweder et al, 45). The rapid advancement in technologies and the strength of capitalism and with the rising power of neo-colonialism has created a favourable condition for the erosion of natural resources from the territories of fragile tribal people. Thus, the indigenous community is juxtaposed with the alien capitalist relations and cultures with unbearable results, putting their cultural survival in jeopardy. Thus, they suffer the “sacrifice of collective identity, historical and cultural heritage” (Dixit 35), which adds to the magnitude of the tribal displacement. The novel, *Kocharethi The Araya Woman*, shows instances of colonial dominance in the form of forest officers who have an upper hand over the inhabitants of the forest. They are acknowledged as the ‘*Thambrane*’ (your lordship) by the tribals as they rule over the tribe and impose laws and thus become “the lords (who) have come to mark the boundary” (Narayan 88). The Arayars were ordered to live a life detached from the forest and to abstain from cutting trees and engage in hunting “You should not cut down many trees. Do not kill animals. You should collect the forest produce and bring them to the range officer regularly. We (forest guards) are

the ones who have been deputed by the maharaja to safeguard the forests” (Narayan 88). “For indigenous peoples, their cultural heritage is the blood running through the veins of their communities, allowing for the survival and transmission of their cultural identities to future generations” (Lenzerini 131). Restrictions in their daily activities and diversions them from their lifestyle that are imposed on them are some of the grueling reality Narayan tries to project in the novel. “I don’t care they are male or female, but a hundred of you should be there at Injathotti tomorrow. The boundary should be completed this week ...” (Narayan 89). This shows the ignorance of the literates to look down on the indigenous with contempt and attitude. Narayan mentions this hatefulness towards his community by the dominant society, which is an everyday happening.

“The threat to the identity of the tribal communities has brought the question of their linguistic and cultural identity to the fore” (Dixit 22). No attention is paid to foster their distinct identity, culture and traditions, as it is ironical when the so called dominant class of the State, tend to look at the tribal community as exotic and indulge in the bureaucratic exercises to promote what they call the tribal folk culture. But there are discrepancies in what they portray the culture to be as Narayan said “...Creative writing was in the hands of the elite upper classes ... it was always a negative picture ; he (the adivasi) was depicted as apathetic , unable to react to injustice or worse , inhuman or sub – human vicious...” (Narayan 208).

Narayan’s attempt to culturally revive what his tribe owned can be said to be a natural reaction of a person who holds his identity with supreme worth. The novel, *Kocharethi The Araya Woman* is a compilation of the history and culture of the Malayarayar tribe, rising up to the challenge of preserving the tribe’s beliefs, myths, rituals, social customs and belief systems.

The novel, *Kocharethi The Araya Woman* is a preservation of the tribes self. It is a self-representation of the Malayarayar tribe whereby “The collective, social self , fructifies when ‘ aggregates of people who essentially share a common culture , and interconnected differences’ underline their distinction from all the others” (Sen 44). The Malayarayar community is represented for its oneness and how they depend on each other to survive. The people helped one another in their daily activities and though of pride and self sufficiency with contempt. “Is there a man on this hill who can claim he can fend for himself?” (Narayan 70) is a questioned rose in the novel. Through the characters and events, Narayan highlights the essence of togetherness which is predominantly significant in their tribe. The landscape, traditional practices, beliefs and customs correlate to the harmony of the tribe.

As Casgrove writes in the book *Indigeneity, History and Landscape*, ‘Landscape is a way of seeing the world that has its own history , a history that can be understood only as a part of wider history of economy and society’” (Sen 46). Landscape means the physical or geographical which is constituted by land, water and forest. “Landscape involve interactions between the present and the past, and give a sense of identity at individual, local, regional and national scales”(Sen 47). The Malayaryars depended on the forest for their livelihood. They sowed rice, planted pepper, yam, tapioca and various other crops. The novel revives the history of the landscape where the people worshiped the soil and celebrated the *peranirekkal* (filling up the godown) ceremony, celebrated in association with harvest:

“Ittaydi placed the bundle on the leaf , smeared sandle paste over it and hung it up , signaling the house was well stocked .

Soon, bundles of paddy lay piled on the veranda. The women would now start their back – breaking work. They would thresh the bundles with their feet to separate the grain and the shoot,, sift the rice husk and hay, boil and dry the grain , and then crush it into rice ...”(Narayan 27)

The novel also looks at the social life of the Malayaryans where they depend on a *Vaidyan* (Ayurvedic Doctor), who use medicinal heads from the soil for his treatments. Narayan also asserts on its efficiency through the character of Kochuraman who excelled in such treatments. Narayan gives the reader a glimpse of the lifestyle of the people who chewed on areca nut and betel most of the time and lived according to the rules of the clans and married according to its norms. The Malayarayars have four clans “*Valayillam, Poothaniyillam, Modalakkattillam, and Nellippullillam...* Someone belonging to *Modalakkatu* can marry from either *Valyaillam* or *Nellipulli illam*. *Poothani* and *Nellipulli* can marry from *Vala*” (Narayan 15). Each Malayarayar household had a particular deity, every deity had its own significance and each had a special liking to certain objects. The Arayans feared the curse of the Gods and believed natural calamities are a sign of the anger of the spirits and so they always performed rites to please them. Man and God are believed to be integral and existed along with each other and they also vouched for the enduring link between medicine and religion. Narayan gives visible assertion on the unique identity tribe can be determined by what they share and how they differ from others through that unique entity.

Identity is a collective term which includes aspects of one’s willingness to associate themselves to a particular belief, traditions and culture, thus feeling comfortable of what they experience and undergo. According to the book *Identity in the Postcolonial Paradigm: Key Concepts*, cultural identity, can be defined as the individual’s realization of his in the spectrum of cultures and the persistent behavior directed on enrollment and acceptance into a particular group. Thus, cultural identity is considered to be a construct consisting of a countless number of sides. So of the factors of cultural identity are racial, social, ethnic, gender, religious, languages, etc. “... Creation myth, as preserved in Adivasi collective memory, depicts their consciousness of self and distinct way of life as it fructified around the space they inhabited” (Sen 57). Asoka Kumar Sen argues that myth is not just a fictional narrative, but a place where the tribe’s historical past is recorded. As Gyan Prakash observes “even as the past is constantly reinterpreted by the oral traditions, it is done by referring to certain constant elements” (Sen 57). The Arayans also have “many stories” (Narayan. 117) of their origin. The author familiarises the readers with one of a popular story of their origin where the hills were

“ once a part of the kingdom of the Karrikottu kings . The kings and Arayans were on cordial terms ... During the reign of a weak king they quarreled ... The Arayar lost the battle, in those days it was a common practice to kill the enemy. Those Arayar who survived fled to the hills and the forests. After a while they came to be called Mala Arayar- Arayan or king of the hills” (Narayan 118).

To understand the role of community in representing the knowledge of self, their creation myths, legends and traditions have to be studied as these also become means of recording experiences, feelings and self-identification. Narayan preserves his community's identity through documenting their traditions. There are references to *eetappera* (outhouse) , "a one room structure to which a woman withdrew when she is menstruating or about to give birth... during those days, she would not enter the kitchen, would not appear in the front yard of the house or touch anyone ... Food would be brought to the *eetappera* and served on a leaf ...she would also carry a scythe" (Narayan 34). There are also mentions of *Thirandu* Kalyanam (a symbolic marriage after a girl starts a period; her maternal uncle's son ties a thali, a symbol of marriage) which took place on the seventh day of first menstruation and also *Thalikettukalyanam* ( tying of *Thali* around the neck) on its ninth day. Marriage alliances were arranged only through negotiations between the elders of the clan. There was no system of tying a *thali* in the past , instead of which the bride and groom ate from the same leaf to signify the unity. *Mundukodukkal* or *pudavakodukkal* (gifting of clothes) was a mode of sanctifying a union. The rituals following a death are also mentioned where "Pula-the period of isolation was to be observed for fifteen days. During that period it was taboo to touch weapons. They (close relatives) would not enter cultivated land, visit dwellings of kinsfolk, use oil, perform any rituals or appear before idols. Liquor and women were strictly forbidden" (Narayan 81). The rituals and beliefs pertaining to delivery are also mentioned. There was a practice of *pettinukonduvaral* (pregnant woman was brought to her natal home during the seventh month of her first delivery) where the pregnant woman's sister-in-law would take her home with basket of sweets. The third chapter of the novel documents the ceremonies and rituals followed when Kunjupennu was having her first baby. The ritual of unwrapping the rice to decide the safety of the child, the ceremony to determine the sex of the child was some of the rituals before the child was born. "The midwife Mundiyyamma would not eat food on the day she helped deliver the child. But she welcomed a bowl of toddy"(Narayan 37) .

There are also mentions of *Pedithallu* (a ritualistic act performed after the birth of a male child), which compulsory if the child is a boy. The *nedumpala*(palm frond) would be held upside down and beaten against the ground to dispel fear while women ululated in accompaniment , thus making the boy valiant. There are also mentions of *choroonu*(eating of rice) day where the child is given rice for the first time. Rituals, myths and traditional practices ratify the concepts according to which social life is given its due importance through culture. They are material and symbolic and negotiate between the individual and the collective. The cultural practices and traditional customs practiced in harmony amidst the Malayarayar community is the evidence of the collective pride for their community whereas individual pride over their identity is also asserted where every person understands the relevance and meaning of what they identify themselves with

At various instances Narayan asserts the significance of these traditions and religious practices and is portrayed as something that cannot be done away with; "Arayans have a definite custom" (Narayan 10) "Why do you talk that way? In the past , no one dared to arrange an alliance that went against clan links" (Narayan 15) "people don't care about these things anymore" (Narayan16) the customs melted in their blood in such a way that they were followed for no

particular reason . “There was no particular reason for having the ceremonial feast at night; it was just a custom”(Narayan 28). The tradition emphasised itself even in their eating habits “beef was a taboo for the Mala Arayan. Arayar would not even drink water from homes where it was cooked. Tradition decreed that it should be so” (Narayan, 35). The intrusion of modernity has led to many instances of “flouting customs” (Narayan 55) which was totally unaccepted in the community. These instances show the clash of the forces of traditions and the compulsions of modernity.

Thus the study is a detailed account of the Malayarayar community’s need for recognition and acceptance, by breaking the prevalent misconceptions around them, emphasising on their different traditions and customs and giving them an identity. This leaves a deeper possibility for the study of the various endangered Indian tribes and marginalised people that are stamped under the foot of power, wealth and authority. The endangered tribes and marginalised people in India are those whose rights are never accepted by the dominant community, as a result of which their identity is put to question.

Closer to Kerala, the Kurumba tribe of Tamil Nadu, lives in the Nilgiri area at the junction of the Eastern Ghats and the Western Ghats. They occupy the thickly forested slopes, and foothills of the Nilgiri Plateau. The 1971 Indian census counted 12,930 Kurumbas. In 1981 there was a fall in number of the Kurumbas to 4,874, as reported in the Nilgiri District ,according to the article *Kurumbas*

The Kurumbas have subsisted as hunters and gatherers. They lived in jungles, on the edges of the plateau. However, the increasing population and deforestation of the present time has lead to the transfer of the Kurumbas to lower elevations of the plateau and to live by working on tea or coffee plantations. The traditional practices which once had embraced the community has now paved way to conversions to Hinduism and Christianity.

In addition to the tribes of Kerala, there are many more tribes in India that face extermination due to flawed governmental policies. The Rabari, are an indigenous tribal caste that primarily live in the states of Gujarat, Punjab and Rajasthan. Even though the exact origin of the tribe is unknown, it is believed that they migrated to India from Iran via Afghanistan through Baluchistan about a thousand years ago according to an online article *Rabari People of Northwest India* by Linda Heaphy.

The plight of various tribes, under the dominant power emphasises on the importance for cultural revival of the tribes, where they are brought back to the normality of life, according to the members of the tribe. Narayan, through his novel *Kocharethi The Araya Woman* has paved a way for the scope of such a revival when his tribe’s beliefs and practices were explained in an intensive manner. The study thus documents the essential entities that give identity to the Malayarayar and also leaves scope for the further study of more tribes and cultures that are on the verge of extinction and that need revival.

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