

**Tribal, Cultural Identity and Development in Narayan's *Kocharethi* -
*The Arya Woman***

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Abstract

It is widely seen that Indian society is vast and complex including multiple communities and cultures. The tribals are the most important contributors towards the origin of the Indian society. But due to lack of education, documented history and awareness, their culture has been misinterpreted and assimilated with others under the label of development. It pulls them at periphery and causes the identity crisis. In this article I focused on tribal who are facing a serious identity crisis despite its rich cultural legacy. This study is related to cultural issues, the changes, the reasons and the upliftment of tribal culture with a special reference to the Malayarayar tribes portrayed in Narayan's *Kocherethi*.

Key Words: Tribal, Culture, Identity, Development and assimilations.

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The conflict between cultural identity and development is major issue in tribal society that is emerging as a focal consideration in modern Indian literary canon. The phrases 'Culture' and 'development' which have not always gone together, or been worked upon within the same context. Culture distinguishes one group or category of people from another. It locates man in history and links him with his roots and heritage that help him to adopt various primordial traits such as mother tongue, belief, arts, law, morals, customs and rituals, characteristics of social ethos. Due to deep-rooted lineage man attracted to his tradition and identified as the psyche of a person or a group or a community. Every community of society has their own distinct culture, history and literature. It is considered that those who have recorded and documented history are blessed with rich literature. But what about those community whose identity has been erased from the history? Whose root has been cut down from the past and culture is misinterpreted. I am talking about tribals, the original inhabitants who are a history in themselves and their culture which has been origin of literature but always misinterpreted by dominant class and the history which was never documented.

Tribal people have their own distinct language, cultures and social and political institutions that are very different from those of mainstream society. Though tribal literature has been in oral form for a long time yet their culture is still alive. Tribal have not been given adequate place in the history of established literary canon due to cruel strategy of mainstream and social discrimination of class, race and gender. For which their literature could not come at global level. Tribal people are being evicted overnight from the natural recourses such as water, forest, land in the name of development, branding them encroachers at other and exchange of useless pauper elsewhere. Although the names like Sabari and Nishadraj (Guha) in *the Ramayana*, Ekalavya in *The Mahabharata* are accepted as a great tribal character yet there is lack of consciousness to furnish their own experiences. Apart from these classical texts, various writers from non tribal community depicted different aspect of tribal life in their writings but often romanticised their culture. The colourful mosaic of tribal culture, their exotic customs and rituals, their apparel and adornment, their song and dance have been the centre of attraction for the eminent writers of India. Culture and history have power centre in their corpus. Tribal group are consciously or unconsciously distanced from the power centres. They are scattered here and there and lack cohesiveness and strength. The social

organisations in which tribals are imprisoned like slaves and bond labourer by the conspiracy of upper elite class that always tried to keep them outside the established literary canon. However, they struggle for emancipation. The expansion of postcolonial discourse and creative consciousness has encouraged the tribal people to be aware of their rich spiritual and cultural legacy coming out from the painful blunders of the past.

Michel Foucault's *Archaeology of knowledge* (1979) provides analytical method to describe the history of thought with new way. In this way, the death of colonialism has given birth to political awareness and freedom of expression to unfold the ever muffled voice. Result is that, numbers of tribal writers are coming into limelight writing about their own lives and experiences. It shows that the tribal writers are asserting a distinct tribal identity through their own consciousness. Emergence of this consciousness has inspired them to know their own culture, history, language and geography and unfold the conspiracy of misrepresentations as a problem of present day discourse. They are trying to investigate the politics of representations such as (who represent whom and why), so that they can project themselves and their culture at global level with ethical view.

Narayan, a tribal writer from south India is one of them who wrote the novel, entitled *Kocharethi* that is first Malayalam novel to be written by a tribal about his community and experiences.

Naturally, he expresses his concerns, anxieties, and anguishes in his writing. Who are we? What is our culture? What is our history etc...? questions like these hunt in the mind. Narayan has quest for identity of his community. He explores the past and struggles for future to save his culture. His tremendous work *Kocharethi*, the first novel in Malayalam by an adivasi is a historical intervention where, far from being the object of history, the tribal become its subjects. The novel explores the connectedness of the past, present and future. The half of the novel is an ethno historian's delight, with particular of beliefs and ritual unique to a set of people who live in a close communion with nature. The second half of the novel is a painful narrative of personal loss. It is first fictional attempt to reconstruct the history of tribal's negotiation with the forces of modernity in Kerala.

In the novel, Narayan unravels fifty or sixty year entwined with his own life situations. He deftly challenges the biased representation of the tribals in contemporary cinema, television and publications. In his interview with Catherine Thankamma, Narayan says that,

“One reason was the growing realization that creative writing was in the hands of the elite upper classes; the communities portrayed in those writing belonged to these classes. The adivasi when represented, appeared as a monochromatic figure; like the *rakshasan* or *nishacharan* of mythological stories, it always a negative picture;” (Thankamma 2011:209)

He further says that,

“There were a few of us who wanted to resist such a biased representation. We wanted to tell the world that we have our own distinctive way of life,

our own value of system. We are not demons lacking in humanity but a strong, hardworking and self reliant community.” (Thankamma 2011:209) *Kocharethi* is the first book – length creative reconstruction of Tribal history from south India. Adivasis are believed to be the first inhabitants of the land. The term ‘Adivasi’ refers to the fact that they were the first inhabitant of the particular region. Narayan does not attempt a historical analysis of tribal as an outsider, but from his own experience.

According to him, there are thirty- two groups of adivasis in Kerala. Narayan belongs to the group known as Malayarayers . ‘Mala’ is the Malayalam word for hill and ‘arayar’ to ‘archer’ meaning ruler. It is possible that the Malayarayar as a clan enjoyed control over the western slop of the ghats. In the introductory part of the novel, it is mentioned that;

“The Travancore Cencus Report (1901) describes Malayaryans as a class of hill tribes” (Thankamma 2011: xix).

In the novel, Narayan focuses on the transition of culture as connectedness of past, present and future which uplifts in the process of assimilation with another culture by new advancement. He has portrayed three stories of same family of Malayarayers tribes in three generations. Ityadi Arayan is the representative of first generation. His son, daughter and daughter in law, respectively Kunjadichan, Kunjipennu and Kochuraman represent next generation of tribal community. While Parvathi, daughter of Kunjipennu and Kochuraman represents third generation of particular community.

Through the process of belief in treatment system, Narayan describes the changes which occur in their culture. Arayar have their own system of treatment which was centred on religion and nature. When Ityadi’s wife Chirutha suffered from intense fever, it was his father Valiyamundan who was a Mantravadi, treated her but her life could not be saved. In Kochuraman’s generation, there was a more shophisticated method of offering medicine. We do not find him resorting to incantations anywhere in the novel. He focuses his attention on the use of various herbs and other natural product like the fat of animals to cure wounds. When Kunjipennu developed a dangerous rash on being poisoned, Ityadi tried unsuccessfully to heal her with ash and incantations. But he failed to cure her. His failure marks a moment when the traditional practices call for a change and Kochuraman’s entry into the scene herald this change.

“Kochuraman collected certain roots and leaves from the forest, ground them into the paste, mixed it with warm water and gave it to the women to smear on Kunjipennu's body ” (Thankamma 2011: 14).

Arrival of colonial modernity changed the perspective of tribal, destruction of old order and on set of new, created an identity crisis among tribal 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 doctortold Padmanabhan that Kochuraman blood was low. They would wait for two

weeks as he had to undergo a major operatio... the duty nurse gave Kochuraman a tablet and a syrup and left.”(Thankamma 2011:203)

In this way, we find that Transition in belief system of tribal uplift their culture in new world. Apart from this, Narayan deals another aspect of tribal life of this community. He commences on their wedding rites. It is always marriage between cousins-Kunjadichan marries Pappy, his first cousin. His sister’s marriage is arranged with Kochuraman, an outsider but everything has to match- *illam*, *Mura*, etc. Aryan girls are not hesitating to kill those who try to molest them or they will commit suicide.

Identity for the Arayans is associated with their proximity to nature or land. their address are by tree, stones like Varikkamakkil, Elanjimootil, etc. they live in harmony in their environment. When they reap, they pray asking for forgiveness for cutting the crop. Moreover, education plays an important role in social change. It may help conserve traditions and culture and produced intellectual personalities to document the history and culture. In the novel, it acts as an agent of change and become an operative force in introducing social changes, it arises a hope of a new dawn, new values and practices that are adopted, new languages are learnt. The first wave of the independence struggle reaches Arayakudi too, through school. Although, they fail to understand that the kings no longer rule. But with the advent of a new government, the tribes get free education that collapses old system and sets new one and due to his intellect, Kochuraman Vaidyan becomes a respectable Arayan. Parvathy decides to marry the man of her choice, dashing all her father’s hope but at last they are able to admit Kochuraman in the Hospital and recover his life. With the educated and employed couple, they enter in a new phase of hope and happiness.

Thus the paper based on the premise that is linked with the issue of reconstruction of reality and the issues concerning the quality of tribal life in the rapidly changing environment. In short, tribal writers are not against the modernisation but against the modernisation with increasing effect of westernisation, eroding identity and the cultural value of tribal society.

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