

**Hybridization of the European novel form with ethnography in Subaltern
narratives: Analyses of Narayan's *Kochuarethi -the Araya Woman*.**

Dr. Ancy Eapen

Research Supervisor

School of Humanities & Social Sciences Jain Deemed-to-be University

Palace Road, Bangalore

Email: ancyeapen2012@gmail.com

Abstract

Kochuarethi: the Araya Woman is the first novel to be written by a person belonging to an indigenous tribe in Kerala. The writer Mr. Narayan, is from the Malayarayar community that inhabits the hills of the Western Ghats in central Kerala and is presently a postal employee in Ernakulum. His novel, which was written originally in the Malayalam language in 1998 was translated into English by Catherine Thankamma and published almost ten years later in 2010. It was translated into Hindi in 2009, titled *Phaadin*. The novel is about the tribal community or adivasis as they are called. This is a novel of about 207 pages which has been by a Malayarayar himself, who wished to tell the world about his community because it was being misrepresented by in popular culture. The novel uses the framework of a story in order to mediate the culture, ethos and sociology of this tribal community which is almost on the verge of losing its identity and ethnicity in the modernization drive of twentieth- century- India, particularly Kerala. Although the novel portrays the socio-economic realities of the period between the early 40s and 60s, as well as the issues surrounding colonialism, this paper is an effort to trace the anthropological facts about the Malayarayar given in Narayan's novel. In recent interview he says thus: "many of the incidents in the book are based on real incidents that I remember or what I garnered from my elders' experiences.." This paper attempts to draw out the ethnographic details from the narrative, and in the process make a claim for the text to be considered also as an ethnographic novel.

Keywords: Ethnography, Literature, Subaltern narratives, Malayarayar.

It was in the 1980s that the discipline of Anthropology recognized potential overlap between ethnographic writing and literary artefacts as falling within its legitimate sphere of inquiry. Clifford and Marcus in their work *Writing Culture* (1986) acknowledged the challenge to the established boundaries between ethnography and fiction. The basic concern of these authors need to be considered, as increasing texts are being crafted in a particular style and style determines content. Ethnographies are texts, and as texts it contains ethnographic data and theoretical conclusions. Ethnographies, therefore should be read as specific forms of fiction. Recently, anthropologists acknowledged that the reverse is also possible: popular fiction could be studied as a form of ethnography (example Banks 1990; Ortnor 1991; Tallman 2002). Some

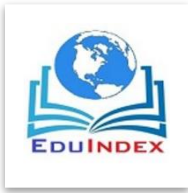
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novels contain detailed ethnographic descriptions and analytical statements about social realities. Ortner (1991) goes so far as to claim that American novelists are ethnographers and their readers access the sociological validity of their novels just as much as their aesthetic value (Laterza125).

The novel was born in the West and its rise is the product of many factors and it is rooted in the cultural revolution of Renaissance, extending through the Enlightenment (Watt1957). However, after its birth, the genre has become increasingly popular in many countries beyond the Western frontiers. Writers, world-wide have appropriated it and adapted it to suit their voices and the socio-cultural contexts in which they are embedded. In the postcolonial era, novels have oftentimes performed political function of vindicating the distorted representations of colonized subjects coined by outsiders (Ngara1985). Narayan himself has admitted that his motivation for this literary endeavor was specifically a novel which was serialized at around the 1990s and which gave a negative picture of the Adivasi (tribal). He admits in an interview that there were some like him 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 system. We are not demons lacking in humanity, but a strong, hardworking and self-sufficient community”(Thankamma 2011:209).

Kochuarethi is the first creative writing that attempts to reconstruct Tribal history from South India. Adivasis are believed to be the first inhabitants of the land; the word “Adivasi” itself means ‘first inhabitant’. The Introduction to the novel has been written by G.S Jayshree, who acquaints us with some facts regarding the indigenous communities in Kerala. We are told that there are thirty-two groups of adivasis in Kerala of which the novelist, Narayan, belongs to the group known as Malarayarans. ‘Mala’ is the Malayalam word for hill and ‘arayar’ means archer, or ruler. The Travancore Census Report of 1901 describes Malarayarans as a class of hill tribes (Intro xix).

Tribal communities have their own distinct culture, social and political institutions which differ from mainstream society. Their literature has been oral since a long time, yet their cultural beliefs and practices have been sustained down the ages. Writers from ‘outside’ the community tend to romanticize the tribes and their culture. Society has always kept these indigenous communities in bonded labour and exploited them in every way. They have always occupied the margins of society. However, with the expansion of postcolonial discourse and creative consciousness the indigenous communities everywhere have become aware of their cultural heritage. This has manifested itself in aesthetics of marginalized communities all over the world be it the Africans, Latin Americans, Asians, Aborigines, or Maori. Michel Foucault has mentioned this in *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1989). Foucault talks about the new consciousness which makes people aware of their history, culture, beliefs etc.

Subaltern narratives often resort to a departure from the pure literary content and mix other disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, history into the literary text. We see an increasing blurring of boundaries as far as discipline is concerned. This narrative style is seen in the novels of Amitav Ghosh, Salman Rushdie, Bharathi Mukherjee, and Chinua Achebe among others. We

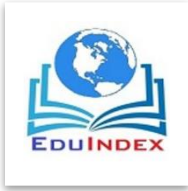
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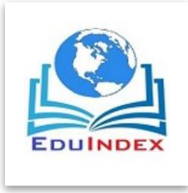


see in the novels of these writers a hybridization of the European novel genre with ethnography, sociology and history. This is also seen in Narayan's novel *Kochuarethi*. This is one of the reasons for its recognition alongside the novels of the above mentioned writers of the twentieth century. Though there are many fictional works dealing with the lives of the aboriginal population in Australia or Canada, *Kochuarethi* is the first book-length creative reconstruction of Adivasi community life from south India (Introduction xviii).

Malayarayars is one among the thirty two groups of adivasis in Kerala. It is possible that this tribe enjoyed control over the western slopes of the Ghats. The land occupied by this tribe originally belonged to Poonjar or Puniyat Rajas. It was around 1749-50 that King Marthanda Varma annexed these territories to his kingdom. European anthropologists have been the first to make a taxonomical listing of their physical features, living conditions and classified them under the unifying rubric of 'tribe.' There was a great degree of distortion in the exercise as the British sought to explain customs and practices that were unfamiliar to the Europeans. The procedure of decennial census taken during the colonial period was an attempt to build a system of records that could identify each tribe and their demography in later years. The Travancore Census Report of 1901 describes Malayarayans as 'a class of hill tribes, who were little more civilized than the Mannans, and have fixed abodes in the slopes of high mountain ranges...They are superior in appearance to most other hill tribes, but are generally short in nature. Some of the Arayans are rich, and own large plots of cultivated grounds. They seldom work for hire, or carry loads' (quoted in Thurston 1975:3871).

Narayan has used the genre of novel to talk about his community: culture, language, beliefs, etc. In order to bring out the period in the history of the community, Narayan has portrayed three stories of the same family over three generations. Ittyadi Arayan is the representative of the first generation. He is the *velichapad*¹ and *mantravadi*² who uses prayers and incantations to drive away bad spirits and heal people of their ailments. He occupies a very important position in the community. His son Kunjadichen, and daughter Kunjipennu and their respective spouses Paapi and Kochuraman represent the second generation. Parvathi, the daughter of Kunjipennu and Kochuraman, Shankaran her brother, represent the third generation. Through this family, Narayan attempts to convey ethnographic details, cultural ethos, political positions, and exploitation of this group. The novel can be seen as consisting of two parts. The first part focuses more on ethnographic details which the writer wants the readers to know. The second part deals more with the story of the men and women in the community, about their success and failures, personal losses and the struggles of their existence due to their lack of education which renders them an easy prey to dishonesty by traders.

The novelist goes to great lengths to depict the many rituals and customs that was observed by the Malayarayars in connection with birth, marriage, death, fertility, harvest, diseases and most important events in life. In the first part of the novel Narayan gives a description of the handing down of the father's position and occupation to the son. Ittyadi's father, Valiyamundan, became bedridden and everyone felt that no amount of prayers and incantations would revive



him back to life. “Ittayadi performed the ceremony of showering grain and rice and received the *vechasrayamoorthikal* ³ which were the deities that protected the clan, from his father” (Kochuarethi 2). Since Ittyadi was the eldest son of his father, he had to take over the position his father occupied and the relatives were happy.

Rituals are ingrained in the cultural ethos of ethnic groups and are passed on from one generation to the next (Intro. xx). One of the most conspicuous customs was connected with the female’s periodic monthly cycle. When a girl started her menstruation, she would be mad to stay in a special house called *eettapura* ⁴ where she would spend her seven days from the onset of her menstrual cycle. She was prohibited from going outside this house. She would not be allowed to enter the kitchen, cook food, or even touch anyone. The customs and taboos becomes more strict if she is the daughter of a *velichappadu* as was the case of Kunjipennu. The taboos are connected with the common belief that mysterious dangers and spirits lurk around a menstruating female and hence she has to be protected. She is also asked to carry a scythe to protect herself during this time. Another myth related to the female’s monthly cycle is the crying of a particular species of bird called *theendari* bird. In the novel, Kunjipennu experiences the onset of her monthly cycle immediately after hearing the cry of this bird.

There were many interesting customs and rituals that were followed for a woman’s pregnancy and child-birth. The novel describes the experience of Kunjipennu: “One day without warning, the labour began. Paapi took Kunjipennu to the ‘eettapura. ’Kunjadichan, her brother, hurried to get the midwife Mundi while Kochuraman, her husband went to pluck the herbs he had located earlier”(37). The midwife would undertake a fast for the day when her services were required. However she would be treated to a bowl of toddy. It was customary to observe *valayma* (birth pollution) for sixteen days after childbirth. It was the girl’s family who had to bear the expenses of the first delivery .On the seventh day she would be take a bath and a sumptuous meal served to her along with gifts. Pollution related to childbirth had to be observed by close relatives: for seven days no one could take oil baths, drink toddy or eat meat. Religious worship by appearing before deities, offering gifts to deities, or performing rituals were also prohibited.

Narayan gives us an idea of the rituals surrounding death and the funeral rites among the Malayarayars. Cooking fires would not be lit in the house where a death had occurred. The house would first be swept in the northerly direction, after which the dead man’s children and his relatives together would bathe the corpse and place it on a plantain leaf in the front yard near the door, with the head facing the east. A wick would be lit and placed near the head. Friends and relatives would bring along with them a length of cloth, which they had to place over the dead body. Funeral rites would be performed by the eldest son. Relatives would show their respect by placing pinches of rice, *vaykari*, on the mouth of the corpse and the eldest male among the gathered people would pour oil into a cupped leaf and place rice and grain in it. He would then dip a jackfruit leaf in the oil and sprinkle it on the children, nephews and nieces who were to observe death– related pollution known as *pula*. The body would be buried in a pit and covered with leaves. The son had to chant prayers and put fistful of mud followed by all the relatives.

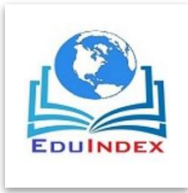
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After the prayer, everyone helped in filling up the trench with mud. All those who partook in the burial ceremony would bathe in the stream, before leaving. Close relatives would share a meal of rice gruel the following day. 'Pula' would be observed for fifteen days, and during this period they would not enter cultivated land, perform any rites, or appear before idols. The men had to abstain from liquor and women. On the fifteenth day, a ritual bath would be taken, that was followed by a ritualistic festive meal on the sixteenth day for relatives and friends.

Anthropological details regarding the origins of the Malayarayars are given through the conversation between characters in the novel. For instance Kunjunni tells Kocheepa that Arayars are not slaves (117). Regarding their origins it is said that these hills were once part of the kingdom of Kaarikottu kings. The kings and the Arayars were on cordial terms. There were many Arayars in the king's army. The chief of the Arayars was called ThalaArayan. During the reign of a weak king the Arayars quarreled with the king and the king brought another community called Pillas from Venad. The Pillas were cunning strategists. The Arayar lost the battle and for fear of being killed by the victorious side, the Arayars who survived, fled to the hills and forests. After a while they came to be called Mala Arayars, Arayan or king of the hills. (*Kochuarethi* 118). The novelists uses characters as spokesmen for ethnographic facts about this community. For instance, in a conversation between two people, one of them is heard saying: "...the Arayar.. are not socially backward in any way. They are nature's children, strong and healthy"(118).

Narayan has drawn material from his own experiential knowledge. Reflexivity plays an important role in providing factual details in this work of fiction. The literary narrative is firmly anchored in ethnography. He has made use of the characters for ethnographic purposes. There are literary portraits that focus on posture, physical aspect, clothing and distinctive behavioral traits that enhance the realistic effect of the ethnographic novel. Character serve another purpose in such novels: it allows the ethnographer to expose the particular view of subjectivity and inter-subjectivity in the society under study. The multiplicity of stylistic devices available for the construction of a character makes such construction a flexible tool that can serve the context-specific needs of the ethnographer.

Contrary to what has been said by Eriksen (1994) about fiction novels, the ethnographic novel presents theoretical statements in a form that allows them to be examined and evaluated. According to Vita Laterza, plot assumes a central role here. By placing events, descriptions, and dialogues in a certain succession, plot can be constructed as a progression that reflects the dialectical development of the basic theoretical arguments of ethnography. In this novel, plot works as an organizing structure for the constitutive elements of the text. The plot connects the literary and ethnographic elements in such a way that the two complement each other for the ultimate purpose of theory making. The novel with its emphasis on writing, compels the ethnographer to think thoroughly about the relationship between form and content.

In the final analysis we can conclude that Narayan's novel *Kochuarethi* becomes an example of a unique hybridization of the classic novel and the new writings from the

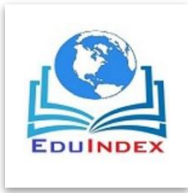
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postcolonial countries. The literary narrative goes beyond story-telling to give a true portrayal of a particular community in South India. In this aspect, Narayan's novel resembles Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958): if Achebe is focused on the Igbo community to which he belonged, the South Indian writer from Kerala gives an ethnographic portrayal of his Malayarayar community. Just as Achebe uses the genre to mediate the culture and society of the Nigerian community, Narayan uses the novel to render a true representation of the Malayarayars in Kerala.

Endnotes

1. Velichapad is like a Shaman: one who performs the rituals necessary to propitiate the divine spirits and ensure that they protect members of the clan.
2. Mantravadi is one who knows magical rites.
3. Vechasrayamoorthikal refers to the deities that protect the clan.
4. Eettapura is a house into which a woman retreats during menstruation as well as during childbirth.

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