

A Saga of Loss: Representing Native Ethos in Narayan's *Kocharethi*

Limna.P

Assistant Professor, Govt.Arts&Science College, Kondotty
limnab4u@gmail.com

Abstract

Nativism as a theoretical term received its present popularity in the last decade of the twentieth century. According to Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin nativism is a 'term for desire to return to indigenous practices and cultural forms as they existed in pre-colonial society'. Indian Tribal Literature is replete with nativistic images. To create nativistic images, postcolonial writers use myth and legend as well as folklore and oral traditions of their own cultures. The present paper "A Saga of Loss: Representing Native Ethos in Narayan's Kocharethi" examines the nativistic elements in Kocharethi and what it means to be living as a tribal in their own land.

Keywords: Nativism, postcolonialism, Tribal Literature

The term "Nativism" in simple terms means asserting one's own culture. In India, it was Balachandra Nimade, a poet-Novelist-critic who advanced the term 'Nativism' to start a nationwide literary movement emphasizing India's many regional languages and cultures, a movement which is now widely recognised and challenged. Unlike American Nativism, which is essentially anti-migrant, Nativism in India can be called a progressive form of indigenism as it has an urge for cultural self-respect and autonomy. Bill Ashcroft and his co-authors define it as "a term for the desire to return to indigenous practices and cultural forms as they existed in pre-colonial society" (Ashcroft 143). Nativism reminds the generations, present and future, of the pre-colonial past that the Eurocentric agents, including literature, have tried to erase from the minds of the colonized. To seek the past in the whitewashed tombs of past, native civilization is a horrendous task as one needs to look for clues, in bits and pieces, in the history that unfortunately tells more about the European and his story. One of the very few methods by which one can revisit the past is literature from that era or contemporary writings that document that period. A nativist selects the theme as a verbal action with a specific moral angle in the context of multi-faceted relation between the individual and the community. And in keeping with the action oriented theme, he organizes the novel through the medium of language. The novel thus becomes the vehicle of thought.

The Adivasis of India, also known as the scheduled tribes, present an intriguing case. Time has not much told about these people and there has been a strong tendency to marginalize them and they were even considered as uncultured. As far as the tribals are concerned they do not have written literature. It was during the nineteenth century that printing and publishing literary works became well established in India. Until then literature existed mainly in oral traditions. There were no written documents about the tribals of Kerala until recent centuries. Tribal songs and legends originated from primitive tribal psyches. They have been preserved and passed on through generations, orally. In fact this type of literature

may lose its original qualities, while transmitted to generations. Today the tribals have started voicing their issues. Earlier, they were only able to speak what they were taught to speak. But now they are armed with pen. They have an increasing awareness of their identity also. The tribal writings try to give an awareness of the conspiracy by which the mainstream has tried to keep them outside the wall of civilization. Tribal writing seeks to destruct the established canonical enclosures and it unlocks the rich, silenced cultures. Along with this there is a creative re-appropriation and self presentation of their problem.

Modern tribal literature has often been discarded by the mainstream Indian literature in English. It is only recently that writers and critics have turned their attention towards these neglected souls. The surprising fact is that these writers wrongly present this ancient form of literature as a “new movement” in the literary field. Tribal literature has a unique feature that it is uncontaminated by colonial consciousness. They add their rich mosaic of cultures to the mainstream literatures. In *Painted Words* (2002), the first anthology of tribal literature in India by G.N.Devy, he explains that tribal languages are mainly in the spoken form but they are slowly acquiring scripts and they are developing written forms of literature.

Tribals in India have taken to writing now-a-days. Recently Narayan, a tribal has written a book about his community Malayarayar entitled *Kocharethi* (herein after cited directly in the text), which has gained much attention because it was the first book written by a tribal about their community. It was first published in Malayalam in the year 1998, after ten years of search for a publisher. *Kocharethi: the araya woman* is the translation of this book by Catherine Thankamma. *Kocharethi* is recognized as a landmark piece in Malayalam literature. The novel depicts the history, traditions and sufferings of the tribal community that lived in the mountain folds of the Western Ghats in the early twentieth century.

Narayan wanted to portray the lives of his community as it is which was often misrepresented in the works of non-tribal writers. The book is about the rich culture of tribals and their challenge to preserve their culture. It is the story about a culture on the verge of change. While reading *Kochareti*, we are taken to a world totally different from our long acquaintance with Indian literature or regional literatures. Here, we are introduced to an alien world which had been in darkness until then. Thanks to post-colonialism and its introduction of the ignorant or marginalized cultures within the larger framework of literature. Through tribal literature, a history which remained buried in history for long years become documented. All these writings try to ‘set right’ the deliberately distorted native life.

The first half of the novel focuses on the rituals, beliefs and social codes of the natives and the second half is a painful narrative of personal loss. By applying different strategies and ways of picturing native people, Narayan tries to bring the life of natives closer to non-native readers.

Kocharethi is story of kochuraman, the medicine man and his wife kunjipennu. The story begins with the subtle illustrations of the tribal life and then moves on to the life of Kunjipennu. Kunjipennu marries the orphaned Kochuraman though he is belongs to a different clan. Marriage in arayan community is done in accordance with *illam* and clan traditions . But Ittyadi Arayan marries off his daughter to Kochuraman, the medicine-man whom he had great admiration.

The innocent tribals didn't have the idea that land was a “property” and that they could be alienated from it. The natives worship their land as it is their bread winner. Land was something which was inseparable from their collective consciousness. In *Kocharethi* when ittyadi sees a part of the forest land he decides to give it to his daughter and her husband.

“Ittyadi had intended to give that land to his daughter at the time they had cleared that part of the forest. He mentioned it casually as he took a break from work one day: “This is for my Kunjennu and her man.” (Narayan23)

The hunting proficiency of natives is detailed in the novel as it an inevitable part of their lifestyle. The graphical description of elephant attacks provides a visual treat to the readers. Gopalan says, “Ssheda! If the Mala Arayan doesn’t go hunting what will the poor pig and forest fowl do? Commit suicide?” (44). Kotha saves her husband Kadutha by killing a bear that was attacking him and thereby proves the immense courage of a tribal woman. The natives had proper understanding of the nature of soil and in order to increase the soil’s fertility they used crop rotation. “After two consecutive seasons of growing paddy, the fertility of the land is lost and only pepper remains ...” (8)

Kocharethi is rich in elaborate description of the tribal rituals and practices. A unique set of rituals marking birth ceremonies, marriage customs and funeral rites were observed by the Malayarayers. Women were considered as impure during their menstrual days. A woman had to stay in the *eettappera* when she had a period or when she gave birth to a child. Myths and rituals of these tribals serve to create a specific sense of identity to an individual as belonging to a particular family, community or language group. The new generation has utter disregard for some community based rituals. Kunjadichan says: Do you feel anything, brother-in-law? ‘Once father dies, I’ll dig out these idols and throw them in the big stream.’ Kochuraman though a modernist in his outlook keeps up with the tradition of Arayas. He does not accept cooked beef for his medical services. Kunjipennu also is against eating beef as it is against their clan tradition. She says, “Don’t forget that my father is a velichapadu. If the souls of the elders are displeased then consequences will be dangerous” (36). Marriage in arayar community is done in accordance with *illam* and clan traditions. They don’t demand any dowry for marriage. They live in close connection with the nature and they give offerings to their deities for they believed that by pleasing the deities their lives will be flourished. The intimate link between the tribals and the nature is highlighted throughout the novel. Arayers believe that the forest is pure and they are afraid of the wrath of forest gods.

Kocharethi is a story about a community who are in an age of transition. This is obvious when Kunjayichan discusses the matter of his sister’s marriage with his father.

Ittyadi sat silent for a while then said: “Kunjayicha, we have a custom. Should we be the ones to break it?”(To which Kunjadichan replies)

“Oh, who cares about customs these days!...” (15)

With the coming of colonizers and mainlanders things fall apart. Destruction of the old order and the onset of a new one create identity crisis. The merchants in the village make benefit out of their lack of knowledge and experience. The innocent tribals’ lack of education makes them highly susceptible to cheating by the merchants and forest rangers. The Arayar viewed every trader who came up the hill with suspicion. Kunjadichan says:

‘That Nanaar’s a big cheat; brings along all kinds of discarded stuff from the market- dry useless tobacco and rotten fish from God-kows-where.’ ‘Umm. He knows he can charge any exorbitant price; we’ll pay. I haven’t seen Kunja Methan for some time now. Doesn’t he come anymore? Maybe he’d dead’.(18)

Kunjappan fights with Kocheepan and his men when they try to pluck pepper from his land.

‘If you climb up my vine I’ll break your head. Don’t be foolish. That’s the steward. ‘Umm. Which steward?when the Arayar were dying of hunger no

dog came this way. When they heard the Arethi's belly's full they come sniffing. Pullu thambranmar! Phoo! Kunjappan spat contemptuously.... 'I don't care if i die. Climb if you dare, you dog.'(130)

Tribal life and struggle is highlighted throughout the novel. Passivity is a strong characteristic amongst the tribals and they allow themselves to become victims of the harsh treatment of mainlanders. They have to suffer silently as no one comes to their rescue. The chapter 'Fire Consumes All' gives us an elaborate description of the pathetic plight of Arayas when tragedy strikes them in the form of fire and Kochuraman loses his son Kunjikuttan as well.

People were screaming and shouting from everywhere. When grass on the hill slopes dried up, some rascals from the plains would set fire to it, not minding the consequences. Kunjipennu felt her lips go dry... everything seemed to grow dark. She could not speak. She realized that the shouts and screams were those of her own people- desperate cries of Arayan and Urali as each one tried to save his home and belongings. Let ruin come upon the family of the one who did this'. Kunjipennu cursed. (60)

Life for these tribals is a never-ending series of confrontations which never ended in victory and it goes on like that. Small pox ravages them due to their ignorance of modern medicine.

As time passes by arayers become aware of the importance of education in resisting the exploitation by the settlers. Kochupillai, the teacher leads them into the light of letters. But the educated new generation discards the araya tradition and embraces the new change. As Meena T Pillai points out "Education as a necessary ploy for moulding homogenous identities came packaged with the label promising equality and liberty. But the subaltern aspires for education in order to be liberated from the land and its woes. *Kocharethi* is filled with the new subaltern dream of a government job" (Pillai n.pag.). The last part of the novel focuses on the life of Parvati, the Kocharethi. Kochuraman's daughter Parvathi is representative of this new generation who fails to acknowledge her own people by getting education. Education and acculturation moves Parvati out of the community and into city life, but this is a choice she makes self-consciously. Parvati elopes with her lover thus breaking all the expectations and hope that her family had for her. She breaks the connections with her community to start a new life with Padmanabhan. Her parents though initially reluctant however welcome their daughter's decision.

Kocharethi reveals the slow acculturation of the native into the economy, culture and politics of the nation state. Narayan has brilliantly captured the nuances of this transition in the life of the natives. The feudal lords, the king, british raj are symbols of the various stages in this transition. Cut off from the main stream society of Kerala, the tribals were unaware of the social and political changes that were happening in Kerala.

' Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru is our Prime minister.' 'Then is Kanthi our king? Keshavan thought for a while before answering the question. There was no point in telling them too many things. They would not understand. They were too simple; their doubts arose from ignorance. 'There were Maharajas and emperors in India at one time. But now they do not rule. The people's representations are the rulers.... Those kings who refuse join the India Union will be dealt with by the Internal Affairs Minister Sardar Patel with an iron fist. The king of Thiruvithamkoor too cannot escape this fate.'(Narayan 163)

Kocharethi articulates Narayan's anger, pain and angst for their community being misrepresented in the writings of non-tribals and settlers. In an interview to the translator Catherine Thankamma, Narayan says:

The adivasi, when represented, appears as a monochromatic figure, like the rakshasan or nishacharan of mythological stories. It was always a negative picture; he was depicted as apathetic, unable to react to injustice or worse, inhuman or subhuman, vicious. (Thankamma 208-209).

Narayan is a writer in a period of transition. He is involved far more in the world of struggle in our country, while dealing with serious issues of his own community. *Kocharethi* reveals the rupture of the continuity of traditional Malayaraya community. Narayan welcomes modernization but warns his community on losing their ethnic identity and cultural heritage under the clutches of modernization. Through *Kocharethi* Narayan defines for himself and his community a unique cultural identity.

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