

Writing as Resistance: Reflection of the Tribal life

Soumita Adhikary

Abstract

Misrepresented in the pages of history, the adivasi community suffers from lack of substantial acknowledgement. The dwellers of hills and forests have suffered marginalization under each dominant group that has governed them from the center/state. As they dwelt away from the center, their life was never celebrated, also their struggle remained unregistered. Narayan, through his landmark work - *Kocharethi: The Araya Woman* in Malayalam literature, documents the tribal life of Malayarayar who inhabit the Western Ghats where they border the districts of central Kerala. Narayan's canvas is a vast representation of the tribe to various socio-political changes, the dominance of the landed gentry, the colonial domination, change of religion under the influence of the Christian missionaries, the advent of technology and modernization in Independent India.

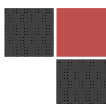
Keywords: agency, tribes, representation, modernity, socio-cultural scenario, suppression, resistance.

Writing is considered as a powerful weapon. In South Asian countries like India which owned a rich oral literature, written scripts were rare and the power of writing was limited to a few. The class that learned and wrote became powerful. The communities who only had oral literature and were not introduced to reading and writing considered writing as ‘magical’. Certain signs and symbols contained sounds and carried knowledge, was beyond their comprehension. Thus, the dominant group was in possession of a magical power that differentiated them from the primitive group. Reading and writing is the hallmark of literacy. A literate person should be able to read and write. Thus, formulating a myth that a ‘society’ is civilized only if it consists of literate people. This clarifies the reason behind the consideration of the tribal and *adivasi* societies as uncivilized, overlooking the fact that they were devoid of the magical touch of reading and writing. Somehow this myth is inscribed in the society from the early stages of the commencement of literacy. In the *Domestication of the Savage Mind* Jack Goody asserts that the power of logical thinking develops with the development of writing. Thus, theoretically oral societies lacked logical thinking due to the lack of the art of writing. The concept of writing was unknown to the *adivasi* community in South Asia until 50 years ago. They relied on voice and memory. To them voice is life embodied, that is instant without any adultery or manipulation. Derrida has argued that the spoken word is primary and natural, while writing was seen as secondary, representational and supplementary. This privileging of the spoken word, or, ‘logocentrism’, as he calls it, is nothing but “the most original and powerful ethnocentrism” (Derrida, 3). The tribal community has always faced severe judgment on the preconception of the values and standards of their culture –especially regarding their language, behavior, customs and religion. To voice against such ethnocentrism, authors like Narayan rose from the community, and penned down the glorious struggle of the tribal life which is otherwise painted gloomy and dark.

Throwing aside the bourgeois narratology which lacked the apt documentation of the lives of the *adivasis*, Narayan adopts new historiography, sensitized to the undertone of despair and determination in the *adivasi*’s voice, the voice of a defiant subalternity committed to writing its own history. *Adivasis* are idealized as uncivilized and seen as monochromatic figure, like a demon, a savage being in mythological stories. Such myths instigate a general belief in the society of the distorted image of the *adivasis* being uncivilized and demonic. Narayan being a part of the *adivasi* society took up the charge of promoting and presenting the authentic picture of this section of the society.

The word *adivasi* has a significant meaning in Sanskrit. Compiling two words – *adi* meaning ‘beginning’, ‘origin’ and *vasin* meaning ‘dweller’, the word literally mean - original inhabitant. Although being the early inhabitant of lands, their identity has been disputed and their autonomy disrupted during the British colonial period in India and not yet restored. They still form a major part of India’s geographical identity but unfortunately remain unacknowledged and neglected by the elite section of the society. The center fails in imparting them their right of inclusiveness, rather becomes the source to push these underprivileged section towards the outskirts of the margins. The center enjoys the light of modernity, knowledge and development but fails to supply veritable resources of these amenities towards the margins which remain dark with its dearth.

Narayan, doesn’t limit the novel as a mere fiction but efficiently employs his memory and experience to create a perfect picture of the lives of the Arayar community. The narration is not linear but contains a joyous record of the culture, lifestyle, and



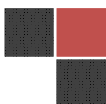
beliefs of the community. Their struggle for livelihood and their regular hardships are well documented by Narayan. The narration surrounds three generations and portrays the life of the adivasis from their primitive life to recent time. This presentation of the gradual change in their socio-economic and cultural identity is the essence of the novel which revolves around the life of the protagonist Kochuraman and his wife Kunjipennu.

Kunjipennu and Kochuraman are perfect symbols of a tribal woman and man. The Arayar woman Kunjipennu was beautiful, brave and hard working. She assisted her father at field and helped him in cultivation. It is praiseworthy that she didn't fail to access her freedom of choice and married Kochuraman, breaking away the norm of marrying within one's own community. She bravely voiced her protest of distaste towards Narayanan, who pursued her for marriage, rather marries Kochuraman, the man of her choice. The novel doesn't fail to glorify the courage of the tribal women. The subtitle *The Araya Woman* hints that the novel centers female valour.

Kochuraman, was an orphan, brought up in hardships. He learned the art of traditional medicine and treated people with herbs and other concoctions. Excelling in the practice of medicine, he became a famous 'vaidya'. Kunjipennu and Kochuraman begin their married life with hard work and owned a prosperous household until the fateful fire burn their lives. Their only son Kunjikuttan dies in the fire leaving them devastated. Both Kunjipennu and Kochuraman suffer critical burn but somehow recover with time. However, by the time they recover emotionally and economically; the landlord and forest officers established their authority over the hills. The freedom of cultivation and free livelihood ceases with the upcoming pangs of development and modernization.

The effects of modernity and development on the tribals are questioned in the novel. Certain changes were hurled upon the tribal people in the context of modernization. The Travancore Government at the instance of the British Colonial administration advanced for raw materials in the hills which were until then virgin land only inhabited by the Aryars. The modernization and development projects of the Government to construct shipbuilding and Railway tracks required ample amount of teak wood. Narayan points out in the novel that valuable woods were targeted to be exported abroad, "The forest officials came again, with the overseers. They numbered all the hardwood trees like rosewood and teak that belonged to the crown and stood in the clearings around the Araya dwellings" (Narayan 121). The hills were the storehouse of wood and thus became the primary target of destructive incursion. Invasion in the hills was not only the onset of silently mutilating the greenery of the hills but also a disruption of the lives of the Arayar community settled there. Trees were cut and lands were taken from the Malarayars and leased out to European planters. Narayan narrates the seizing away of lands which the Arayars have painfully mended and nourished. The trees bore fruits for them but were madly cut down for commercial purposes. This enraged many Arayars, the ones who revolted were beaten up by the authorities and put into jail on the ground of disrupting the Government's progressive work. As soon as technology or urbanization touched them in the form of the British Government's project of expansion of land and territory, their livelihood was threatened. They become helpless sufferers in the hands of the dominant.

The novel also stands as a social critique with subtle polemics. Exploitations incurred in the pretext of development by the combining hands of the state and its appointed guardians like: moneylenders, landlords, the businessmen and the police; who



are naturally allied to each other. The Aryans were bullied and trapped into debts by the landlords and moneylenders. Their lands were seized and trees were cut down to promote development of industries, roads and railways. The landlords enjoyed dominant position while threatening the lives of the poor Arayans. Kunjunni Pilla, send his goon Kocheepan and his men to hills. After reaching there they started to pluck pepper from the yards of the Arayas like Kunjikela. They threatened Kunjikela that the pepper being taken was his due to the landlord, “Each one of you has to pay one-third of the pepper you produce as lease dues. You haven’t paid the arrears for three years, so we’re going to pluck all the pepper. The police too will be arriving soon” (Narayan 129-130). Kunjappan states that during their devastated state the landlords or their goons never bother to visit the hills, but when their fields are filled with harvest, they come to plunder and take away their shares. He prohibits Kocheepan from entering his field or climb his trees to pluck pepper but suffers a slap from Kocheepan. Charged with anger Kunjappan swings his chopper to hit Kocheepan but accidentally slashes another man’s arm. Kocheepan report of the incident aggravates Kunjunni who immediately rushes with Kocheepan to the police station. Hard punishment was now lurking over the Arayas because:

The officer-in-charge of the police station listened to all that Kunjunni had to say. After all, it was Kunjunni who arranged various services for the policemen including toddy and women. Moreover, he was a big man in that land. The police could not refuse. This case could not be ignored. (Narayan 131).

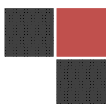
Aryans who revolted were taken into custody because they lacked the knowledge of their rights, lacked the support of the state and were devoid of any powerful alliance. They suffered physically for revolting against the officials, also their families were threatened and their valuables and lands were taken away.

Living in this dark dense forest of simplicity and ignorance threatened the lives of the *adivasis*. They had to cope up with time and fast growing modernization and technology encroaching margins. The primary reason behind their torment and suffering was their lack of education. Moneylenders like Mothali tricked the poor *adivasis* on this ground. Kunjumundan and his son were paid less for their pepper but were unable to realize it.

Father and son argued over it for a while. Kunjumundan realized his son was no better than himself –he did not know how to count. It was easier to assume that the promised amount had been given (Narayan 104).

To enlighten the minds and ward away the miseries of the Arayas, the need for knowledge in the form of education emerged.

Suffering made the Arayars realize the importance of education, because only this ‘powerful’ weapon would help them to come out of their dark destiny. Under such dire circumstances and need for education, we find the miraculous entry of the Divine figure of Kochu Pilla Aashan. Aashan’s arrival kindled a ray of light in Kochuraman’s heart. He thought that, “The advantages of knowing how to read and write; the miseries his people faced because they lacked that knowledge... When he thought the number of children who would get to study, Kochuraman asked: ‘Aashan, could you stay on this hill and teach our children to write?’” (Narayan 142). The miraculous entry of the Divine figure of Aashan was equivalent to the arrival of God himself as a protector. With a resolution of ‘Dispelling Darkness’, Aashan accepted Kochuraman’s request of staying



at his home and teach the children of the village. Both of them visited the village and collected children to teach them the art of reading and writing. Knowledge, hitherto in the tribal community was but in oral form which failed to fulfill their chances of upliftment. They realized that, “To know what was happening in the world, oral learning was not enough. You needed to know to read and write” (Narayan 143).

Enthusiastically they built a “*kalari*: ‘A house where children are taught’” (Narayan 144) and named it ‘Saraswati Vilasam Kalari’. Narayan points out that in such a world of ignorance the establishment of a knowledge imparting unit was similar to a “small hand-held wick... been lit in the heart of the hill” (Narayan 145). Students were given *karim palm* to write upon them. They considered the *kalari* as a sacred place and learnt rapidly under the guidance of Aashan. Aashan taught them beyond letters, the way of good conduct, grooming and behavior. Many a times he visited the home of his students to check upon their learning. He trained his students excellently in studies, enabling many of them to join government schools for higher education.

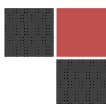
One of Aashan’s successful students was Kochuraman’s daughter Parvati who joined a government school, excelled in her education and fetched job as a lower division clerk in the Central Excise Department at Ernakulam. She became an earning member of her family, sending money-order each month to Kochuraman. She became a symbol of excellence in her village, “Some women came to see Parvati who carried the tag of being a women employed in a town. They wanted to know about life in the town –the living conditions, office, job, the glamour of urban life” (Narayan 188). She had transformed herself from a mere tribe girl to an educated-employed woman. Her mother noticed her transformation –

She seemed to have become fairer. Her thick glossy black hair was gathered up into a thick knot held firmly in place with a pin. Silver anklets, slippers that had a gold-coloured line on them, a gold-plated watch with a black strap on her left wrist, a ring...(Narayan, 188).

She became a symbol of awe and inspiration in her family as well as many in the village. But her marriage with Padmanabhan, against the wish of her father, brought a rift between father and daughter.

Apart from narrating the lives of the central characters Narayan also records the changing socio-cultural scenario of Malayarayar. Narayan doesn’t fail to register the slow erosion of cultural identity of the *adivasi* community due to the coming of the Christian missionaries. Their camouflaged motive of spreading Christianity along with a powerful empire is screened behind their preaching of uplifting the *adivasis*. The *adivasis* who have been exploited and subjugated by the landlords, moneylenders and bore the brunt of the British Empire found rescue under the wings of the missionaries. The missionaries approached the villagers with a promise of protection:

Listen elders, sisters, you and your families should join our group. We’ll come again. There are no Arayar in Melukavuor Iruvapura. They have all been baptized and become believers. Now local leaders and their goons do not trouble them. India is ruled by the English king. We have become the citizens of that king. Whatever be our needs we tell the estate superintendent of Malankara Estate, Mathai Saar. Saar will tell the Englishman. (Narayan 150).



Provided with a sheltered life of a better home, education and money; they left their age old religion and tradition to embrace Christianity. Many got baptized and registered themselves with new names and identity. Surprisingly not all surrendered under the drastic torment and suppression. Many retained their tribal identity and searched for new ways to sustain. Narayan registers that not all adored and accepted Christianity when it was introduced to the *adivasis*. We sense the fear of losing one's identity lurking intensely in Kunjipennu's heart when she heard the word '*Venthikothu*' (mispronunciation of Pentecost). On being informed that the missionaries have arrived at her father's house, she ran to check whether he was going to convert his religion and learn "the other veda". Although she witnessed a large gathering of missionary preachers and the villagers, she was relieved to find that her father was not in the league to accept or convert into the other religion. Even her husband, Kochuraman was firm to be devoted towards his own religion and never divert from it, which brought a sigh of relief in the heart of Kunjipennu.

David Hardiman while discussing about the influence of religion, opines that,

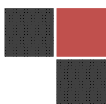
religion is seen as a political resource which is 'used' by unscrupulous leaders to manipulate the peasantry for their own selfish ends. 'Religion', it is argued, 'is important for peasant consciousness not because peasant consciousness is inherently religious, but because religion is part of the ideological superstructure (Hardiman, 10).

The introduction of Christianity by British missionaries to the tribes in the novel, preaching and converting their religious faith indicates the political interest of colonization, not only of the land and its people but also of its culture. Thus, it becomes important, that Kunjipennu and her tribe stick to their religion, because religion apart from being their faith in divine was also a strong force binding the community, and a common ground for their identity as a whole.

Kochuraman feels a sense of loss when his friend Kunjaapan informs about his change of religion. He excitedly tells Kochuraman, "My name has been changed. We got baptized. Now my name is Daniel; the wife's name is Chinna, the children Issac and Anna" (Narayan 154). Kochuraman recalls Kunjaapan's valour when he fought bravely against a gang that attacked him and Kunjerukkan. His withdrawal from the community robs them of a chivalrous soldier and a promising protector.

Apart from romanticizing the Arayars, Narayan also criticize their ignorance. Kochuraman is a *vaidya* but fails to analyze the adverse effect of drinking which ultimately wrecks his life. He falls ill and accompanied by Kunjipennu gets hospitalized in the city. With the support of Parvati's husband Padmanabhan, and his friends, Kochuraman's treatment advances in the hospital. Things move smooth until Kunjipennu is told that Kochuraman requires a surgery. Unaware of the advancement of the modern medical procedures she gets terrifically scared. Waking ailing Kochuraman from the hospital bed she reveals the horror to him,

They'll do operashum on Wednesday morning'.
 'What!' Kochuraman sat up shuddering. He got off the bed.
 They tie up your arms and legs and cut you up live, just like that'.
 'Who told you?'
 'That's what they did to Kunjappan. Let's go. (Narayan 207)



Although weak in body and spirit Kochuraman along with Kunjipennu elope from the hospital to avoid the surgery. Reaching a safe distance, they realize the horror of the situation. Devastated by fate, Kochuraman falls on Kunjipennu's shoulder, realizing that death is approaching fast. Narayan abruptly ends the narration and leaves the interpretation of the fate of ailing Kochuraman and devastated Kunjipennu to the readers. Standing on the road Kunjipennu hopes against hope about reaching home with Kochuraman to procure peace.

Undoubtedly the novel stirs our emotions and instigates fear and pain towards the end. The uncertainty of Kochuraman and Kunjipennu's life towards the end of the novel hints at the community's ignorance towards modern technology and adjustment with urbanization. It gives us the account of hardships the tribals face in their day-to-day life. According to popular perspective they were merely a group with indigenous culture and perspectives, who lived in the margins. The tribals were perceived as humans to be kept in margins and thus forced towards isolation. Narayan's novel resists the romanticisation and misrepresentation of the tribals as misery struck community but celebrates their culture, life, achievements and struggle which remained unacknowledged. Tribals like Kochuraman and Kunjipennu endure all the sufferings considering it as their fate, but writers like Narayan realized that they lacked agency and not fate. Thus, gathering his spirits, Narayan took up the resolution to use writing as his equipment and register his voice, which became the synecdoche of his tribal community.

Works Cited:

- Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, United States of America: John Hopkins University Press, 2016.
- Goody, Jack. *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977.
- Hardiman, David. *The Coming of the Devi*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987.
- Narayan. *Kocharethi: The Aryan Woman*. Trans. Catherine Thankamma, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011.

