

# Life Under Oppression; Portrayal of the Life of Malayaraya Community in the Novel ‘Kocharethi’

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## Abstract

The article explores the marginalisation, resilience, oppression, and struggles faced by the Malayaraya community, which is one of the ancient, marginalised tribe in Kerala, who were initially responsible for the rights to the Sabarimala Temple. The novel *Kocharethi: The Araya Woman* written by Narayan and translated by Catherine Thankamma showcases the everyday life of the Malayaraya tribe and the survival of the people who is ruled under the authority like the existing ruling parties and politicians. The work also shows how the life of such indigenous tribes are controlled and influenced by the dominant power structures. It also shows the life of women who belongs to marginalised communities as well as patriarchal society. This article throws light on the theme of Dalit literature in the Novel.

Key words: Kocharethi: The Araya Woman, Malayaraya, Dalit, marginalised communities

## Introduction

*Kocharethi: The Araya Woman* is one of the prominent works in Malayalam literature written by Narayan, a writer who belongs to an indigenous community in Kerala. It was originally published in the year of 1998, and later was translated to English by Catherine Thankamma. The novel explores the life of the protagonist, Kunjipennu and her husband Kochuraman.

Those people were highly depended on nature and forest for food, livelihood, and medicines. Later their peaceful life was intruded by the outsiders and politicians. They were taking for granted by using them as labourers. This shows the existing power structures in the society and how people without power or authority are used by the powerful people and politicians. The novel also portrays the life, culture and struggles of the indigenous Malayaraya community of Kerala who highly rely on forests for their survival. It highlights how modernization effects the traditions of the tribe and the gradual transformation. Thus, it aligns with the ideas of Dalit literature through the marginalised voices in the novel. Dalit literature focuses on the life, struggles and experiences of the marginalised Dalit community all over the world. The marginalised communities find a platform to speak through literature.

Literature acts as the voice for the voiceless. Even though, years of fights has brought several changes in the perception of how the Dalit people are viewed, these communities are still considered as a group out of the mainstream society. Dalit literature challenges the works written by the dominant upper caste writers in the Indian context. As it focuses on the marginalised communities, it often deals with the themes such as identity crisis, exploitation, marginalisation, survival, and resistance.

Dalit literature theory has evolved as many theorists expressed their struggles through their works. One of the major prominent theorists who fought for Dalit rights is Sharankumar Limbale. In *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*, he rejects the aesthetics of upper caste literature. As the notions of traditional literary standards deeply aligned with imagination, beauty and fiction, prioritising fantasy over social reality Dalit literature theory cannot be judge by traditional aesthetics of upper-class literature. Limbale argues that unlike upper caste aesthetics, the aesthetics of Dalit literature can be understood from the portrayal of themes like resistance, reality, and collective experience (Limbale 1-2). Every single line in the novel talks about the vulgarity exist within the caste hierarchy. The novel does not romanticise tribal life, instead it gives the real picture of displacement, poverty, and oppression faced by the community in different circumstances.

### Dalit Literature in *Kocharethi: The Araya Woman*

According to the concept of Dalit literature theory, the works should be written on the everyday life and struggles of the people or characters. *Kocharethi: The Araya Woman* thus aligns with this concept as it talks about the everyday struggles of the oppressed community such as loss of land, lack of education, hunger and poverty, displacement and the intrusion of landlords and politicians. The displacement that the community go through can be seen as the denial of the basic human rights, privacy and security that strengthen Ambedkar's idea of caste as a system of graded inequality (Ambedkar 36). The life of people in *kocharethi: The Araya Woman* also mirrors the humiliation and exclusion faced by the tribal community who are often neglected by the dominant mainstream society. This exclusion makes them denied access to the power, respect and resources which can be considered as the denial of basic human rights. The pain in which the characters go through is both physical and emotional.

The constant displacements that the characters in the novel go through reflects the structural violence. They are denied of proper education and considered as uncivilized, backward classes by the mainstream society. Even though these people are trying to build connection with the mainstream society, they are treated differently. These instances in the novel reflects the harsh reality of the Dalit community, which makes the novel a social document rather than categorising it as a fiction. The novel is not written under the basis of a true incident, but it showcases the actual life of the people who are considered as the backward community.

*Kocharethi: The Araya Woman* can also view through another important concept in Dalit literature, which is self-representation. This concept argues that life and struggles of the Dalit community should be represented by themselves rather than represented by dominant caste people, thus the novel *kocharethi: The Araya Woman* is a best example for the novel of self-representation. The novel is the actual voice of the Malayarayas speaking for themselves. The everyday life of the malayaraya community portrayed in *Kocharethi* is one of the effective ways of using self-representation. The normal activities such as birth, collecting and preparing food, rituals, farming, collecting the cure for illness from the forest, death and many other experiences are not viewed through an outside gaze. The author also use language as a key feature to explain self-representation in the novel. Language plays a crucial role in documenting the Malayarya life and creating an identity for the tribal people. Narayan uses the local language, idioms, and phrases to add flavour and to make the work authentic. The use of authentic local language and terms without translating the phrases into more simpler terms to make it accessible to larger group of audiences makes the work stand out and preserve it as a historical document. Thus, it aligns with Dalit literature theory's key features. The use of local language also conserves the cultural identity of the Malayaraya community. The characters in the novel, *Kocharethi: The Araya Woman* acts as the collective voice of the marginalised community rather than an individual voice, especially the character Kunjipennu. The female protagonist Kunjipennu's life depicts the life of the women in Malayaraya community. Her struggles and resilience show the everyday problems of the whole women community in marginalised tribes. It shows how women are ignored by men from their own community and are used for the benefits of men without considering their feelings and emotions. They are doubly marginalised by the society, first as a woman and then as a person who belongs to Dalit community. This makes their life even more difficult in various ways.

In *Kocharethi*, simply being born into the Malayaraya community means a person will live in marginalization throughout their life. This is an important element of Dalit Literature Theory, which states that oppression is inherited, not chosen. This situation of the tribe can relate to Sharankumar Limbale's idea that Dalit life is always suffering, as caste, and community-based hierarchies determine an individual's social standing even before they are born (Limbale 37). Malayaraya children are born into poverty, isolated in the forests and are socially invisible, which exemplifies the reality of the Malayaraya community. From infancy, Malayaraya children do not have access to education or healthcare and cannot move toward a better social class. Because of this, their birth is not associated with celebration or greater opportunities. Instead, they add another burden to the family who already cannot afford to care for themselves. The most telling sign of this system's neglect is how Malayaraya children have no institutional support but instead are supported through many forms of traditional and family structure and social Welfare. Therefore, Dalit Literature asserts that this form of systematic and institutional neglect is not by accident, but rather built within the structure of Indian society. In the novel, new life or birth does not mean new possibility, but it represents the ongoing historical injustices that every child inherits, such as hunger, back-breaking labour, and fear of losing their home through displacement. This view coincides with B.R. Ambedkar's assertions regarding structural

exclusion as a means of recreating social inequality from generation to generation. Malayaraya children do not have the right to dream as repeatedly articulated by many Dalit autobiographies.

In *Kocharethi* Land is a fundamental feature for dignity, identity, and survival. In the novel the Malayarayas are the forest, dependent tribal community who have lived off the land for ages but do not own it by law. This circumstance brings forth one of the major themes in Dalit literature, dispossession. Dalit theorists argue that economic exploitation is initiated by denial of land and resources which in turn makes the marginalized communities dependent and devoid of power. The Malayarayas have an intimate and ancestral association with the land, but the state only acknowledges documented ownership. Coming outsiders with legal papers declare ownership of the land and the community with their presence feels insecure. This reflects the past in which Dalits and Adivasis were displaced due to land laws imposed during colonial and postcolonial periods. Ambedkar observed that lack of land was among the most severe forms of oppression. Having no land, communities become devoid of independence and are compelled to go for exploitative work. In the book, the Malayarayas turn into wage laborers on land, which was their source of livelihood at no cost. This transition from being owners to laborers is a demonstration of the systemic oppression. Dalit literature very often depicts loss of land as both a physical and psychological trauma. Land can also relate to memory, rituals, and identity. The loss of land is considered as equal to losing the cultural roots. Limbale points out that Dalit writings are testimonies of these losses, and their purpose is to challenge the dominant narratives which conceive displacement as development. In the novel people are manipulated by the mainstream dominant society, saying that displacement can lead to development. The uneducated tribal people easily fall for the trick played by the dominant community. They think that, if they move from their ancestral land that would benefit them as well as their land. This instance shows the favours that the legal system has towards the powerful people. As the Malayaraya community in the novel lack education, resisting against such acts are impossible. They lack the ability to think and act against the injustice shown towards them. Thus, denying land ownership in the novel is not just an economic issue, instead it represents the loss of Malayaraya identity and dignity, erasing a whole history of the tribe and a long-term oppression that the tribe must go through.

In the story of *Kocharethi*, the forest has a dual function. On the one hand, it sustains the Malayarayas. On the other hand, the forest also keeps them isolated. The dual function that the forest has in the story underscores another relevant aspect that is found in Dalit and Adivasi literature. This aspect has to do with survival in smaller spaces. A reading of Dalit literature may reveal how these sections of society are often constrained within certain surroundings, such as slums, villages, or forests, that limit their potential. The forest becomes the restrictor, impeding access to education, health, and politics for the Malayarayas.

Geographical segregation implies exclusion. At the same time, the forest is not portrayed as negative either. Contrary to the main narrative that portrays forests as wild and ancient, *Kocharethi* portrays the forest as nurturing. What this means is that this challenges the existing notions and is more aligned with the Dalit aesthetics that cherish indigenous knowledge and experience. Yet, the control exercised by the state on the forest gradually converts this heaven into a prison for the Malayarayas. The limitations imposed on the utilization of the forest make their mode of living, considered illegal by the forest department. Malayaraya people are treated as aliens in their own home. The Dalit theory argues that laws are instruments for the alienation of people, not for empowerment or rendering justice to them. The forest thus turns out to be a metaphor of conditional existence. Through the presentation of the forest as a protector as well as a confiner, *Kocharethi* presents the paradox of the existence of the marginalized. While life is assured, liberty is not. This adds greatly to the link between the novel and Dalit philosophical thought.

Another strongest reflection of Dalit oppression in *Kocharethi* is the exploitation of Malayarayas by landlords, settlers, and officials. They are used as cheap labour, often unpaid or underpaid. This reflects the exploitation of labour based on the caste system in Dalit literature. The Malayarayas are exploited solely for their physical labour, not for being human beings. Their labour is unseen and unrewarded. The exploited bodies are consumed by the system and are deprived of dignity by the Dalit writers who pen this reality again and again. Those in power, instead of safeguarding society, stand by their side. There emerges a bias by the institution itself. Ambedkar talks of this kind of institution, which has laws beneficial for the upper class only. The Malayarayas seldom raise protests publicly. This is because their silence is the result of fear and dependence. It is true that Dalit literature considers the silence not as weakness, but as the outcome of oppression. There exist resistances, and they exist in the form of delicacies. Such exploitation underscores the problems of economic inequality, inequality of power, and the struggle for hierarchy.

Through this authentic documentation of the problem, *Kocharethi* serves the purpose of a social document described by Limbale.

Health is one of the major wealth for humans. Without health no one can achieve their goals or fix to a stable happy life. In the work, health of the people is another major concern. Proper healthcare and medical facilities are unavailable for the Malayaraya community. They are even denied access to medical support, which make them depend on non-professional care for pregnancy, illness, injuries, and childbirth. The people themselves handles all the risky cure methods, which later leads to the loss of many lives. This denial of proper medical support can be classified as a form of violence shown towards the marginalised community. Abandoning these basic needs for the tribal groups proves the clear distinction exists between human beings. Lives of people who holds power are valuable to the government, but the lives of poor and backward people are worthless according to the mainstream society. This work shows that suffering has been normalised as the people accept the death of their loved ones silently without raising their voice against the injustice happened to them. Marriage in *Kocharethi* is largely viewed from an economic perspective rather than a romantic or personal one. This is because the economic conditions prevailing there have forced such a view onto the people. In the case of Kunjipennu, her marriage reflects how those groups that have been socially excluded consider marriage as a means of ensuring stability rather than being emotionally fulfilled. Dalit literary theorists suggest those social institutions like marriage serve a different purpose for oppressed communities than for people belonging to privileged societies. Marriage, in the case of Kunjipennu, piles up more of the heavy load that she already carries instead of providing her with the security of being cared for. She must keep on working hard, she must keep on taking care of the household, and she has to keep on supporting the emotional strain that her marriage imparts to her. This is in line with Ambedkar's criticism of social institutions whereby, instead of offering protection to the marginalized, they deepen inequality. Marriage, in the case of Kunjipennu, is not the one through which she can attain a better social status but rather adds to her already substantial burden. Most of the Dalit literature is about women who suffer even after their marriages because of poverty, patriarchy, and lack of support systems. In the case of *Kocharethi*, Marriage becomes a place where women can continue to build the strength of endurance, not a place to be empowered. The novel thus proves that early marriages in the marginalised communities are the symbol of economic instability and not a part of their culture. Narayan, the author of the novel points out that marriage is a means of survival and exposes the fact that poverty can influence people's relationships.

The marginalisation that Dalit people face can also be viewed through the Cultural assimilation. It is the most painful experience of the Malayaraya tribe in the story of *Kocharethi*. Cultural assimilation implies being forced to abandon one's own culture, beliefs, language, and way of life for the individual and the community to survive in the shadow of an oppressing entity. The Malayaraya tribe, in the story, although not commanded to abandon their culture, are coerced into the act by social, political, and economic pressures, which become an efficient manner of oppression. At the beginning of the novel, the Malayarayas follow their own customs and practices but later gets disrupted by the outsiders. They have certain practices involving the forest. All the customs and beliefs of Malayaraya are considered superstition and ignorance by dominant society. Their belief in the spirits of the forest and traditional medicines are laughed at and rejected. Schools, officials, and religious institutions indirectly inform them that their mode of life is uncivilized. This engenders shame and doubt in themselves. When a community begins to feel ashamed of its own culture, oppression becomes internal as well as external.

Loss of culture is closely related to economic pressure. After the loss of forestland, the Malayarayas depend on wage labour provided by dominant groups. In order to secure work or avoid harassment, they are forced to adjust their behaviour, dress, and beliefs. Food habits, traditional clothing, and rituals are slowly forsaken. Cultural change here is not a free choice but a condition for survival. This is how oppression works by way of economic dependency. Culture, birth, marriage, and death, and the certain gods they worship, often referred to as spirits, whose association with nature is very close. Songs, oral tradition, and community practices enable the Malayarayas to preserve their history and values. The Malayarayas experience this sense of identity and belonging because of these practices, but once they encounter external civilization, their practices are labelled inferior and primitive. Religion is another method of assimilation in *Kocharethi*. The religions that have dominance make their way into the Malayaraya community and refer to their beliefs as primitive.

Adopting their religions either in forms of conversion or imitation is termed as getting better. Despite adopting other beliefs, Malayarayas are not made equal in society. This indicates that in assimilation, equality is not achieved but

rather lose what they already have. The erasing of their culture is strongly criticized in the theory of Dalit Literature. Through the novel, Narayan preserve the truth of experience in his writing by noting down all things about Malayaraya, their rituals, language, and belief system before they disappear. Narayan's act of writing itself challenges society. In this case, the example demonstrates the oppression not only encompasses the lack of wealth and hardship but also the loss of identity and dignity. If the community cannot remember who they are, they will lose collective power and confidence because they will no longer remember who they are, and the Malayarayas are made to think they must forget who they are to survive. In *Kocharethi*, cultural assimilation is depicted as a gradual and agonizing experience instead of an immediate one. Thus, it poses a more menacing threat since it looks like a natural course of events that cannot be prevented. Cultural assimilation makes an important statement against assuming that modernization is always a positive phenomenon. Therefore, the phenomenon of cultural assimilation by force, as happening in the novel, is a very strong representation of oppression of the Dalits. It represents how the majority society has its own influence over land, labour, as well as memory, beliefs, and identity.

Silence and invisibility of the Malayaraya community from the mainstream history and public records are another focus of concern in the novel. Such forms of oppression may not always be physical or visible but are highly deleterious. In this novel, Narayan showcases how the Malayarayas have toiled, suffered, and survived generation after generation but fail to find any place within the records of official history, government records, and public memory. They are missing from school textbooks, historical documents, and official stories about progress and development. No one hears the tale of their struggles, loss of land, poverty, hunger and exploitation. Forest laws, development projects, and governmental policies are made on behalf of the absent voices and experiences of Malayarayas. Such invisibility could well hint that Malayarayas either do not exist or are simply not worthy of existence. Narayan raises this kind of silence as a powerful form of oppression, in which the community is denied recognition and dignity. Everywhere in *Kocharethi*, Narayan centres his narrative on common experience, labour, families, sickness, rituals, and mere survival. Such experiences are hardly sufficient in the by mainstream histories. Narayan upsets the common perception that only kings, administrations, and majority peoples make histories. His novel establishes the fact that Malayarayas have also made their histories, which remained unrecorded. The book discloses how the projects and forest policies impact the Malayarayas without including them as stakeholders. The co-optation of forestlands by the government, land redistribution, and imposition of policies are done without consulting these stakeholders. The displacement and suffering caused to these people are mere aftereffects in these projects. Narayan illustrates how these projects and policies make the Malayarayas invisible while empowering major communities.

Silence also extends at the social institution level. Wherever the Malayarayas feel discriminated against or feel that they have been done wrong, there is nothing or nobody to hear their complaint. Their cry remains in their society because their voices are ignored. They understand that their voices will not make things different therefore, silence is a reality of their existence. It is the experiences of women which Narayan's role as a writer assumes importance in the above case. By his act of writing the novel, he reveals the voice of those people who remained unnoticed by the page of history. The appearance of the novel becomes a platform on which the Malayarayas are brought into notice for the first time in the history of India. Narayan does not voice those Malayarayas authoritatively, but rather, he allows them to voice themselves while going through the experiences. Their work, pain and sacrifice are never recognised even among their own people. *Kocharethi* is the best example to show that the act of storytelling has become an act of resistance. Through memory, oral traditions and the details of everyday events, Narayan constructs a history that has been otherwise unrecorded.

## Conclusion

The paper focuses on Dalit literature theory in the novel *Kocharethi: The Araya woman* written by Narayan and translated by Catherine Thankamma. It explores the various struggles and discrimination faced by the marginalised communities all over the world through the lives of the protagonist Kunjipennu and her husband Kochuraman. By viewing different Dalit theorists and critics by various concepts they have shared on Dalit literature make the readers aware about various social concerns. This paper proves that discrimination based on caste is not something that should be left unseen, but something that should look deeper into. Caste is not a choice but something that is inherited and

escaping from it is a myth. The work *Kocharethi: The Araya woman*, opens the eyes of the readers through its strong portrayal of questioning Dalit Identity.

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