



1. Rupam Kumari
2. DR. Vipin K. Singh

Echoes of Defiance: Unveiling Tribal Resistance in Narayan's Kocharethi, The Araya Woman

1. Department of English , 2. Associate Professor- Central University of South Bihar (Bihar), India

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Abstract: *In the realm of literature, the act of resistance emerges when the crushed identities inhale the spirit of rebellion and choose to speak up for themselves. For the Indian soil, resistance is not a new phenomenon. Despite enduring several invasions, the Indians have never turned into passive receptors; instead, they have actively participated in shaping and adapting to the changes. During colonial rule in India, the Adivasi, belonging to the lower strata of society, were labeled as tribes and marginalized into distant ethnic and social groups. They were referred to by various names such as adivasi, aboriginals, jungle, and other terms used throughout the country, which contributed to their loss or misrepresented identity. These multiple designations reflect the complex process of imagining "the other" that existed within a gray area. The arrival of missionaries, accompanied by education, served to strengthen the voices of the tribes against the dominant forces. However, it is unfortunate that their voices have been largely absent from mainstream history. Their struggles and efforts have been systematically erased, neglected, or even misrepresented, enabling their narratives to be molded according to the taste of the colonizers. Only a handful of conscious writers have dared to pen down the truths of these tribes, with Narayan being one of them.*

The aim of this paper is to study Narayan's work, specifically "Kocharethi," and shed light on the circumstances that led the tribes to resist. It will also explore the various forms of resistance exhibited by these marginalized communities and the subsequent consequences that followed. It also brings into light, despite attempts to suppress their voices, their resistance echoes throughout, leaving lasting imprint. Additionally, issues of land possession, insecurity, and lack of awareness will be critically examined. However, it also emphasizes that resistance from ego and revenge can lead to devastating consequences. The study sets the tone for the exploration of tribal resistance in Narayan's literary work.

Key Words: Tribes, misrepresentation, resistance, marginalization, suppression, marginalized communities.

Witnessing rapid development in science and education worldwide, countries came closer to the skills of reading and writing. However, in India, these skills were introduced by the colonialists and were initially confined to the privileged class due to the prevailing caste system. The tribal communities faced two major obstacles to their upliftment: the oral tradition, which led to the loss of their history over time, and their nomadic settlement in the deep, dark, and unknown parts of the jungle. These factors created a divide between the tribes and the rest of Indian society, obstructing interactions and leading to the tribes being looked down upon as illiterate and occupying the lowest strata of society. It was only in the late twentieth century that a few tribes began equipping themselves with reading and writing, using it as a means of expression and articulation within the dominant culture. This newfound awareness of their identity and how they were perceived in the national context marked a significant turning point. Narayan, through his literary contributions, plays a crucial role in depicting the multifaceted aspects of tribal communities, shining a light on their rich cultural heritage, struggles, resilience, and defiance.

In the novel "Kocharethi," Narayan takes readers on a captivating journey into the world of the Malayarayar tribal community inhabiting the forests of Kerala. His writing delves deep into their intricate social dynamics, traditions, and the challenges they face amidst a rapidly changing world. What distinguishes Narayan is his unwavering commitment to portraying the authentic voices and experiences of these marginalized communities, going beyond superficial stereotypes and challenging prevailing narratives. His narratives expose societal injustices and invite



readers to empathize with the often overlooked or marginalized. In his storytelling, Narayan weaves together childhood memories, his grandfather's stories, and the rituals he observed. His aim is not only to present a true picture of the tribes but also to question and reframe the existing narratives. He was inspired to write "Kocharethi" after a conversation with a friend who posed the question, "Why not write our version?" Narayan embarked on his own version of writing, drawing from his personal experiences and cultural heritage. The title of the novel emerged later in the process, encapsulating the essence of his narrative.

Resistance and Suppression- Resistance and suppression are inherently intertwined concepts that exist within the realm of power dynamics. Power operates as a force that seeks to establish and maintain control, while resistance emerges as a counterforce to challenge and disrupt that control. As Foucault argues, power is not solely repressive but also productive, shaping and influencing social relations and structures (Baaz et al). The relationship between resistance and suppression highlights the constant struggle for power and the complex dynamics that unfold within social, political, and cultural contexts. The writer skilfully explores the theme of suppression imposed by dominant powers, highlighting their attempts to interfere with the identity and space of the tribal communities. As a result, these tribes were left without a distinct and recognizable identity. However, it is through acts of resistance that the tribes find space and reclaim their lost identity. The novel vividly portrays instances where the tribes face threats from authoritative bodies, "I don't care whether they are male or female, but a hundred of you should be there at Injathotti tomorrow" (Narayan 89). The description clearly alludes to the presence of British authorities, further reinforced, by the mention of the police coming with handcuffs to take the tribes away (90). This depiction underscores the oppressive nature of the dominant powers and the urgency for resistance as a means of asserting their rights and preserving their cultural heritage.

The dominant section frequently employs religion as a tool to exert control over the tribes, manipulating it for their own benefit and exerting full authority over their lives. This exploitation of religion as a means of control is evident in the novel, where the writer highlights the oppressive tactics used by the dominant powers. The arayer were made God-fearing people. They used to pay compensation for destroying lord Ayyappan Garden. They have even been assigned to contribute to temple festivals. They altogether pay one-third of the cash crop to the dominant class. This instance from the novel exposes the manipulative nature of the dominant section, who exploit religious practices to subjugate and regulate the tribes, thereby exercising complete control over their existence. Resistance, rather than mere action, serves as a powerful tool through which tribes assert their existence and challenge dominant powers. However, it is important to acknowledge the complex nature of perception and interpretation that accompanies acts of resistance. The representations of resistance play a crucial role in understanding the tribes and their internal struggles. The novel explores various forms of resistance, including rebellion, protests, asserting autonomy over one's own life, silence as a form of resistance, challenging social norms and systems, using gestures as a means of communication, and seeking justice.

Moreover, the novel delves into the inner conflicts faced by tribes, both as a collective and as individuals, as they strive to reclaim their rightful space. The tribes depicted in the narrative resist the domination of feudal lords and colonial masters, highlighting their determination to resist oppressive forces. However, it is important to note that not all members of the tribes embrace or conform to the changes brought about by modern technologies or religious conversion. The novel presents a nuanced exploration of resistance, showcasing the diverse perspectives and responses within the tribal communities.

Writer's Writing as a Mode of Resistance- Narayan's deliberate choice of the pen as a medium for resistance reflects his belief in the power of words and literature to challenge misrepresentations of tribal communities. Drawing inspiration from the famous quote "pen is mightier than the sword" by Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Narayan recognized the potential of writing as a tool to confront his adversaries, particularly those who believed they had exclusive rights



to literature (209). In an interview, he expressed his intention to counter the powerful enemy who propagated oppressive ideologies by adopting the same weapon they used - writing.

By adopting a new historiography that departed from bourgeois narratology, which often lacked accurate documentation of tribal lives, Narayan aimed to challenge the criticisms and preconceptions surrounding the Arayer community. Throughout history, the Arayer community had faced scrutiny and judgment based on biased perceptions of their values, cultural practices, language, behavior, customs, and religion. Narayan acknowledged the representation of the tribe in his interview with the translator, Catherine Thankamma in the epigraph of the book:

The adivasi when represented and appeared as 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 sub-human, vicious, . . . He existed for the sole purpose of being defeated and/or killed by the forces of virtues and goodness, represented by the upper caste (208).

Through his own experiences and personal encounters, Narayan sought to subvert these one-dimensional and dehumanizing portrayals. While he may give the impression of indifference to such issues, a closer reading reveals his role as a perceptive and observant writer who seeks to represent and challenge prevailing narratives rather than directly intervene. He aims to reshape the images and perceptions surrounding tribal communities, offering a more nuanced and authentic portrayal that captures the complexities of their lives. Narayan's choice to wield the pen as a means of resistance reflects his commitment to using literature as a transformative force. He endeavours to give voice to the silenced, challenge oppressive narratives, and offer alternative perspectives that disrupt the dominant discourse. It is through his writing, Narayan confronts the misrepresentations and stereotypes imposed on tribal communities, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and accurate understanding of their identities and experiences.

Analysis of Narayan's Kocharethi- Narayan's critical work, *Kocharethi: The Araya Woman*, serves as a documentation of Malayarayer's life, an individual living in the Western Ghats bordering Central Kerala. Through this novel, Narayan explores the profound impact of various factors such as feudal systems, colonial domination, religious changes brought about by Christian missionaries, technological advancements, and modernization on the tribal communities. The narrative spans three generations, shedding light on the struggles for survival and the nuanced dynamics of suppression and resistance, with the central focus on characters- Kunjipennu and Kochuraman. Each character in the novel offers unique insights into the human psyche, representing different expressions and responses to their shared circumstances. The story unveils multiple layers of oppression and resistance, painting a socio-political portrait entangled with the presence of colonial powers. The novel does not shy away from addressing the challenges faced by the tribes as they navigate these complex issues. It highlights their resistance against traditional systems, modernization, religious transformations, feudal lords, and colonial masters.

Kunjipennu, one of the protagonists, stands as a defiant figure who refuses to conform to certain traditional customs and beliefs. She challenges the traditional notion of marrying someone from the same clan chosen by the male members of her family. Determined not to compromise her emotions, she rejects the proposal of Narayan, a distant relative who wishes to marry her. Despite the social pressure, Kunjipennu resists her actions, retreating to the kitchen or the southern side of the house when Narayan visits. She expresses her dissent not only through gestures but also through her voice, engaging in verbal exchanges with Pappi, a form of resistance against societal expectations. While sharing the same socio-cultural background as her sister-in-law, Kunjipennu differs in her approach. She chooses to resist rather than passively submit, as evidenced by her declaration that she would go to extreme lengths, as she mentions: "They'll find me at the foot of some eastern cliff, my head cracked into hundred pieces" (3). The moment she realized that her gesture was not enough for her to resist. She uses her voice and her expression that even Narayan could not deny and had to admit, "she looked like Kali". It is a hint to Hindu mythology, where women



at times take the Kali avatar to face their enemy. In the novel too when Narayan tried to accost her privately, she retorted back angrily: "An arethi girl would not hesitate to attack the man who tried to molest her; She would even slit her own throat to thwart him" (11). Being a woman, she goes against the old tradition and holds the hand of the man for whom her heart beats. In a moment of defiance, she holds the hand of the man she loves, challenging traditional gender roles.

Kochuraman, another significant character, similarly challenges tradition by taking matters into his own hands when it comes to marriage. In the absence of someone advocating for him, he independently approaches the father of the girl he desires to marry, refusing to be constrained by societal norms. Both Kunjipennu and Kochuraman exhibit a resistance that deviates from traditional customs, leading to happier and more fulfilling lives. When he did not have anyone who could ask for his hand for marriage. Therefore, he decided to ask the girl from her father. He defended himself to Narayan on being questioned "That's why I decided to do it myself" (10). Their successful marriages are the result of their brother's prioritization of finding them suitable matches based on compatibility rather than blindly adhering to customary practices.

However, while these characters defy traditional customs, they also struggle to fit into the rapidly approaching modern cultures. Technological advancements and urbanization, particularly the British Government's land expansion projects, pose a threat to their livelihoods and cultural heritage. Despite the introduction of education among the tribes, it falls short of providing comprehensive support. While literacy and basic numeracy skills are taught, the intrusion of modern technology disrupts family life and erodes their cultural practices. This is evident in the experiences of Kunjipennu and Kochuraman. Their lack of familiarity with modern medicine and technology creates fear and uncertainty, leading them to reject surgery and prefer natural death instead. The novel showcases the significance of social awareness and adaptability in the face of change. While resistance to change may not always prove beneficial, creative and open-minded resistance can lead to positive outcomes. The narrative evokes emotions of fear and pity, highlighting the tribes' struggle to adjust to the drastic changes imposed upon them. Ultimately, the novel emphasizes the need for a delicate balance between preserving cultural heritage and embracing progressive transformations. It appears that tribes were neither able to follow their traditional customs, nor did they fit into the modern cultures that were approaching rapidly. Technology and urbanization touched them in the form of the British Government's project of expansion of land and territory, their livelihood has been threatened. They were just turned into mere victims of modernization. Even the arrival of education in their hills could not do justice. Although it has made the Tribes to read, write and do some basic calculations; it has robbed the peace of family and their culture. This can be seen with the characters belonging to the third generation- daughter and son of kunjipennu and kochuraman. Kunjipennu resisted the socio-cultural norms of the society that were prevalent during her time. But when the same resistance is shown by her daughter, she is not able to welcome it wholeheartedly. Their complete ignorance of modern technology made their life miserable. When kochuraman was admitted to the hospital and kunjipennu gets to know the surgery and its nuances; their life at once turned upside down as they were completely unaware of modern medicine, and they got terrifically scared. Kunjipennu reveals the horror she could feel "They'll do operashum on Wednesday morning'. 'What!' Kochuraman sat up shuddering. He got off the bed. They tied 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" (207).

In her article, Soumitra Adhikary observes: "Although they were weak in body and spirit, they chose to flee from the hospital to avoid surgery"(349). Instead of dying in the hospital they choose to die naturally. This very act shows their certitude towards nature. Further, the writer observes: "that the situation stirs our emotions and instigates fear and pity towards the end of the novel. The uncertainty of the protagonist hints at the uncertainty of the Tribes' ignorance towards modern technology and adjustment with the drastic changes" (Adhikary349). Social awareness plays a vital role in their life as it decides their compatibility with the coming changes. Change is the law of nature one



can never escape oneself from it. Change itself is not painful but one who is unwilling to accept the change leads to painful experiences. Not every resistance to their change proves better for them but one should welcome creative resistance.

Different Forms of Resistance- Resistance operates on multiple levels in the novel, encompassing organized direct confrontations and indirect forms of resistance through behaviour and cultural practices. These two forms of resistance cover a broad area and operate on a much deeper level and are observed through the consciousness of the characters, their gestures, mimicry, and disguises. Only a few characters in the novel demonstrate awareness of their actions and refuse to surrender to the dominant forces. Notable characters with consciousness include the old man in the restaurant, Kochuraman, Kunjipennu, and Kunjerukkan. In the next generation, Parvati, Madhav, and Padmanabhan also exhibit willpower and determination inherited from their parents. Instances from the novel portray the old man in the restaurant is conscious of his identity and refusing to be insulted by Chetty. When Chetty tries to silence him and snatches his toddy mug, the old man resists and asserts himself, declaring "yes young men I'm old enough to be your father" (109). Parvati, of the next generation, expresses her strong desire to study and is aware of how to convince her parents, showcasing the determination that she has inherited from her parents, as she says: "This is Parvati, Maruthunkal Kouchuraman and Kunjipennu's daughter. I've inherited their determination. I'll decide myself" (155). Madhav joins satyagraha groups to resist the colonial masters and raise awareness among his people about the prevailing situations.

The novel also serves as a critique, shedding light on the prevalence of exploitation in the name of development. The British masters form alliances with the state and its appointed guardians, including moneylenders, landlords, businessmen, and the police. The Arayer people are bullied and trapped in debt, and even their forest, the sole source of their survival, is usurped for development. It is only the forest "that could guarantee them freedom from hunger" but they have been hurled down from that place (68). The state authorities pursue their motives without regard for consequences, uprooting trees and destroying dwellings without prior notice, reducing the forest to a wasteland. This very act has turned up many Arayer groups. The authorities have even nullified their existence as one of the officials mentions: "This is government business no one told us there were dwellings and settlements here" (123). This incident has ignited a fire in the blood of the Arayer. Kunjadichan directly confronted them with his gun. Even his family confronted them with scythes, sticks, and stones. Kocheepan faced them boldly as he mentions: "I don't care if I die. Climb if you dare, you dog" (130).

Direct resistance often leads to violent situations. However, there is another form of resistance that are indirect in nature and is primarily governed by behavior and culture. The consciousness of the characters provides insight into their recognition and helps them judge their actions. Self-consciousness prevents complete subjugation and fosters self-awareness among the tribes. Awareness allows them to navigate society and understand its ways. The novel has ample instances that help the Arayer to understand themselves better. When Hassan counted Kunjadecha's loan and charged him with sixty rupees that is yet to be paid. His conscience pricks him, he was not able to understand, thus he questioned himself "Had Kunja Motali cheated him" (104)? This very act of self-questioning is a sign which shows his awareness as he was able to understand the deceptive nature of merchants. This very incident has also created awareness among the other members of the tribes; they start to look at outsiders with an eye of suspicion and doubt. Even the women were able to deduce the information from their talks and started to doubt as "Steward says the forest and hills belong to Ayyappan? The forest Officers said it all belongs to Maharaja? How can that be, aakri" (117). All these instances in the novel help the Arayer people better understand themselves and challenge against the odds. Illiteracy makes the tribes vulnerable to manipulation and deception, creating fear when dealing with debts and reminders in the market. After enduring attacks from the privileged class and facing threats from the authorities, the tribes realize the need to unite to preserve their existence. They draw analogies between



jackals in the forest, who kill to satisfy hunger and so-called civilized men in the plains, placing the latter even lower than the jackals. As one of the tribes mentions: "The Jackals in the forest killed only to appease its hunger. But civilized folk in the plains were different" (147). Resistance in the novel takes various forms and operates on different levels. The consciousness of the characters plays a significant role in their resistance, enabling self-recognition, evaluation, and assertiveness in the face of exploitation and change.

Resistance and its Effects- Resistance plays a pivotal role in individuals' quest for recognition and claiming their rightful space. However, it can have both positive and negative impacts, as depicted in the novel. Kunjipennu, a strong-willed woman, exemplifies this notion when she confronts the nuances of rejecting Narayan's proposal. Despite her initial happiness upon meeting Kochuraman, all her coyness evaporates in Narayan's presence. She boldly rejects him, asserting "that hope will turn sour see this sickle? You won't touch me while I am alive. This is Varikkamakal Ittyadi's daughter, don't forget" (11).

Kunjipennu's courage stems from her willpower and contrasts with what her sister-in-law might have done-being submissive. Narayan's failed attempts to win her heart result in upheaval within him, leading to revenge driven by wounded pride. Despite Kunjipennu's justified actions, Narayan's ego fuels his desire for vengeance, causing suffering as he silently inflicts blisters on her body. This incident highlights the destructive potential of resistance within a community, underscoring the need to draw a line to ensure constructive resistance for the betterment of humanity, as resistance without a just cause can devolve into suppression.

The Arayer community, treated as the "other," has been marginalized to the lowest stratum of society. In "Being Adivasi," G.N. Devy notes their refusal to adopt and internalize new paradigms, resulting in their being marked as "primitive" and "indigenous" not only by colonial rulers but also by other sections of Indian society (Devy) They have endured deprivation of basic necessities and rights enjoyed by the privileged, including being considered untouchables, barred from entering upper-caste houses, drawing water from the same well, and entering temples.

However, their resistance has opened the eyes of those in power. Kunjunni pilla adeptly manages the situation by granting the Arayer certain rights previously denied to them. He allows them to enter the Thambran's courtyard, sit on the veranda, and drink water from the well but forbids them from touching someone from the upper caste. This act of resistance not only provides the Arayer with space but also garners them respect, representing a form of constructive resistance.

Conclusion- Resistance holds immense significance for marginalized groups. However, it is crucial to recognize the delicate distinction between resistance and suppression. Unjustified violence and unnecessary aggression must be avoided, as they only contribute to the destruction and perpetuate further forms of oppression. Those who resist should exercise caution and strive to adopt constructive approaches. It is imperative to cultivate understanding and extend dignity to tribal communities. As the writer themselves yearns to be comprehended and afforded a life of dignity, it becomes evident that empathy and respect are essential in fostering a harmonious society. We can collectively work towards a more just and inclusive world by embracing constructive resistance and treating all individuals with dignity.

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