

ECOLOGICAL EXPLOITATION AND CULTURAL EROSION IN NARAYAN'S KOCHARETHI

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21417132>

ABSTRACT

This research paper examines the dual phenomena of resource exploitation and cultural erosion in Narayan's landmark Malayalam novel, Kocharethi: The Araya Woman. As the first prominent "insider" narrative of the Malayarayar tribe of the Western Ghats, the novel serves as a critical postcolonial and eco-critical document. The study utilizes Rob Nixon's theoretical framework of "Slow Violence" to argue that the tribal community's displacement is not a singular event of physical eviction, but a protracted process of environmental and social disenfranchisement. The analysis is divided into three primary investigative spheres: the Biocentric Harmony of the presettler era; the Mechanics of Exploitation through market-driven pepper trade and state-mandated land titles; and the Cultural Erosion manifested through the generational schism between the protagonists and their daughter, Parvati. The study concludes that the "progress" of the anthropocentric state is inextricably linked to the systemic erasure of indigenous identity and the commodification of sacred landscapes.

KEYWORDS: *Ecological Exploitation, Cultural Erosion, Tribal Identity, Indigenous Culture, Environmental Degradation.*

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I. Introduction

For much of the twentieth century, the Adivasi (indigenous) communities of Kerala were relegated to the margins of Malayalam literature. When they did appear, it was through the “external gaze” of urban, upper-caste authors who viewed the tribal subject as an exotic relic of a “noble savage” past or a tragic, helpless victim of primitive ignorance. Narayan’s *Kocharethi: The Araya Woman* shattered this literary status quo. As the first novel written by an Adivasi author in Kerala, it provides what can be termed an “insider’s cartography”—a map of the Malayarayar tribe’s world drawn from the lived experience of its own soil. Narayan, who spent his life as a postmaster and a member of the community he describes, does not write as a detached observer. His narrative is a visceral documentation of “Slow Violence,” a term coined by scholar Rob Nixon to describe a “violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space” (Nixon 2). In the Western Ghats of Narayan’s narrative, this violence is not a single, explosive event; it is a gradual erosion of autonomy. This paper argues that the tragedy of *Kocharethi* lies in the transition from biocentric harmony to anthropocentric displacement. By tracing the lives of Kochuraman and Kunjipennu, Narayan demonstrates that the systematic exploitation of forest resources and the state-mandated education of the youth are two sides of the same coin: the erasure of a people. Through this insider perspective, the novel reveals that when the umbilical cord between a community and its ancestral land is severed, “progress” becomes merely a polite synonym for cultural disappearance.

II. Biocentric Harmony and the Language of the Soil

Before the intrusion of the market economy, the Malayarayar lived in a biocentric world—a framework where humans are not the masters of the earth but merely one thread in a complex ecological web. Kochuraman, the protagonist, embodies this Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK). His identity is inseparable from the Sahyadri hills. Narayan establishes this deep ecological bond early in the novel, describing the hills as living entities:

“To them, the mountains were not just rocks and earth. They were the abodes of their ancestors, the spirits that guarded their crops and their lives. Every peak had a name, every stream a story, and every tree a spirit that had to be appeased before it was felled.” (Narayan 14)

This relationship is defined by reciprocity rather than extraction. Kochuraman’s expertise in herbal medicine is not a commercial skill but a spiritual calling. When he searches for roots or medicinal bark, he

approaches the forest with a sense of permission. However, this biocentric peace is fragile. The arrival of the “Sarkar” (Government) and the settlers from the plains introduces a new, anthropocentric language—one of “property,” “taxation,” and “revenue.” The forest, once a shared home, is redefined as “unclaimed land” or “state property.” This linguistic shift is the first step in resource exploitation; by renaming the forest as “timber” or “acreage,” the state strips it of its sacredness and prepares it for extraction. The introduction of the Patta (land title) fundamentally altered the tribal psyche. Once the land was “owned” on a piece of paper, it became something that could be mortgaged, sold, or stolen. The biocentric bond—where the people belonged to the land—was replaced by a model where the land was a commodity belonging to the individual.

III. The Mechanics of Exploitation

Resource exploitation in Kocharethi is depicted through the predatory nature of trade. The shift from a subsistence economy (growing what you eat) to a cash-crop economy—specifically the cultivation of pepper for the market—is the primary engine of the tribe’s downfall. The most symbolic moment of this exploitation occurs when the traders from the plains arrive. Narayan writes:

“The merchant had two sets of weights. One was heavy, for when he bought the pepper from the hill-folk; the other was light, for when he sold them the salt and cloth they desperately needed. Between these two weights, the sweat and blood of the Malayarayar were squeezed out until nothing remained but debt.” (Narayan 58)

The “slanted scale” is a physical manifestation of the systemic injustice faced by the Adivasi. The merchant is not just stealing spice; he is stealing the biological labor of the tribe. Because the Malayarayar are illiterate in the “numbers” of the plains, they are easily trapped in a cycle of debt. Furthermore, Narayan highlights how natural disasters are weaponized by the market. After a devastating forest fire destroys Kochuraman’s home and crops, he is forced to take “credit” from the moneylender. This debt is a “ghost” that haunts the family for decades. The resource being exploited here is no longer just the pepper—it is the human body and the future of the Adivasi. Every berry picked already belongs to the merchant before it leaves the vine. This reflects the “unholy nexus” between the trader, the moneylender, and the police, all of whom work to ensure the Malayarayar remain in a state of perpetual debtpeonage.

IV. Cultural Erosion

Ecological loss is inevitably followed by cultural loss. As the Malayarayar lose their land to debt and settlers, they also lose their children

to a “civilizing mission” that demands the erasure of tribal identity. Parvati, the daughter of Kochuraman and Kunjipennu, represents this heartbreaking transition. After receiving a modern education in the city, she returns to find her home unrecognizable:

“She looked at the smoke-stained walls of her parents’ hut and felt a rising tide of disgust. The smells that had once meant home now smelled of poverty and ignorance. She realized then that she could no longer speak the language of the hills; she had learned the language of the city, and it had no words for the spirits her father worshipped.” (Narayan 102)

This internalized colonialism is the ultimate victory of the anthropocentric world. By educating the Adivasi child in the language of the settler, the state ensures that the child will view their own parents as “primitive.” Parvati’s shame is a form of cultural amputation. The dialect of the Malayarayarrich with names for spirits and medicinal plants is replaced by a “standard” Malayalam that has no room for the forest’s nuances. The “Resource” being extracted here is the memory of the tribe. As Parvati moves toward the city, she carries the family’s hopes, but she leaves behind their history. The gap between her and Kunjipennu is a civilizational divide created by the displacement from their ecological roots.

V. The Final Flight

The novel’s climax in a city hospital serves as the final confrontation between the tribe and the anthropocentric state. In the hospital, Kochuraman is stripped of his status as a forest-healer and reduced to a failing biological machine. Narayan describes the sterile atmosphere of the ward as a prison:

“He longed for the smell of damp earth and the sound of the wind in the reeds. Here, there was only the smell of chemicals and the cold, hard eyes of the doctors who spoke of him as if he were already a corpse.” (Narayan 184)

The decision of Kochuraman and Kunjipennu to flee the hospital is an act of Environmental Reaffirmation. They realize that in the city, they are merely “cases” to be managed. Their return to the hills, though they are old and dying, is a desperate attempt to reconnect with the biocentric world before it vanishes. It is an assertion that human dignity cannot be measured on a merchant’s scale or managed in a clinical ward.

VI. Conclusion

Narayan does not offer a romanticized victory. The resource exploitation has been successful, and the cultural erosion has left the next generation disconnected. However, Kocharethi stands as a witness to the “Slow Violence” inflicted upon the Western Ghats. Through the story of

one family, Narayan proves that the destruction of the environment is never just about trees; it is about the destruction of a human way of being. As the protagonists climb back toward their ancestral peaks, the reader is left with the realization that the “progress” of the plains is built entirely upon the ruins of the hills.

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