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## **Reconstructing Narratives: Intersectional Feminism in Kocharethi's Exploration of Gender, Power and Tradition**

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### **Abstract:**

This research paper seeks to examine the novel ' *Kocharethi-The Araya Woman* ' by Narayan, through the framework of intersectional feminism. It attempts to highlight how gender, tradition and patriarchy are intimately connected. *Kocharethi*, with its traditional, tribal, setting, is an ideal work for this study, which looks at the multi-faceted intersection of gender, oppression and privilege. The paper uses close reading to analyse power dynamics, patriarchy and the exercise of agency by women in traditional settings to challenge existing societal norms. Intersectional feminist theories are applied in the study to understand how gender intersects with other social factors to influence access to economic and social opportunities.

Intersectional feminist readings are critical because they can be used to highlight narratives of resistance and change and to overturn long-standing oppressive practices. The paper hopes to provide greater insight into lived experiences still faced by contemporary

women from marginalised communities and the challenges presented by multiple intersecting identities that exist in the social structure.

**Keywords: Intersectionality, Feminism, Social, Gender, Tradition.**

## **INTRODUCTION:**

" *Kocharethi-The Araya Woman*" is the seminal work of the tribal author Narayan, set in 20th-century Kerala. Set among the slopes of the Western Ghats, it tells the story of the people of the Malayaryar tribe, to which Narayan himself belongs. Although not an autobiographical novel by any means, the novel relies both on the author's memories as well as on missionary accounts and ethnographic details, to reconstruct the lives of the community as their insular lives are disrupted by the growing tide of British colonialism, and the arrival of exploitative traders who financially ravage the economically ignorant *Adivasis*. The novel follows the story of a young Arayar couple, Kochuraman and Kunjipennu, as they face the tribulations brought on by natural calamities, traditions, social customs, and the encroaching outside world. Key themes in the novel include the possession and dispossession of land, indigenous belief systems, the impact of colonialism, and intergenerational conflicts. *Kocharethi* is richly detailed with the customs, traditions and rituals of the Malayaryar, which allows the reader to understand social structures, power dynamics and gender roles within the community. This paper, framed by intersectional feminist theory, aims to prove that the characters in Narayan's *Kocharethi- The Araya Woman* embody a variety of complex intersecting identities, which include gender, socio-economic status, and indigenous identity, which influence their experiences amidst the social changes brought by British colonialism. The study investigates how the once insular Malayaryar social structure is disrupted by external influences, and how this impacts various characters. The paper explores how Narayan's characters employ agency and resistance in response to intersecting forms of oppression, thus shedding light on their adaptability in a changing world.

The term intersectionality was first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, to better understand how various facets of social identity overlap to compound the resulting privilege or oppression. According to Crenshaw, "*Intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects.*" According to sociologist Patricia Hill Collins, systems of oppression operate through these reinforcing intersections of gender, class, ethnicity etc., which she calls 'the matrix of domination.' Since its origin in 1989, the term has found use far beyond gender studies and is now considered critical to understanding the position of an individual in the social hierarchy. Intersectionality encompasses various social dimensions, such as age, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, and ethnicity. Pioneers of intersectionality, including Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks, emphasize the importance of the fact that individual experiences are shaped by social locations. Additionally, intersectional feminism also considers the *difference* between women, rather than treating them as a homogenous group. It acknowledges the uniqueness of individual experiences while recognising broader oppression patterns. The key to an intersectional feminist study is understanding that gender never operates in isolation. Gender instead interacts with other social categories, contributing to the holistic social experience. The Indian feminist movement was extremely slow to adopt an intersectional approach to women's issues, with feminist narratives being restricted to educated, upper-class, upper-caste women. The voices of marginalised sections, including Dalit and tribal women. This research uncovers instances where traditional gender roles are subverted by female characters in Naryan's novel to challenge normative structures. Intersectional feminism is used to go beyond the singular perspective of gender to understand how power is exerted and maintained through multiple dimensions within the novel. It also helps to identify moments of resistance and agency within the novel, while highlighting the challenges faced by various characters. This analysis seeks to offer insights into the larger social and cultural contexts of *Kocharethi*, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the

themes within the novel. Application of intersectional feminist theories to literary texts can help us understand how women from marginalised communities challenge patriarchy, reshaping narratives in favour of social justice. At its core, "Kocharethi" weaves a captivating narrative that reflects the intricacies of a traditional society and examines the deeply intertwined connections between gender, power, and tradition.

As a novel about a tribal community in the 20th century, *Kocharethi* is a text steeped in custom and tradition. Narayan goes into almost painstaking detail, elaborating on the various rituals and beliefs among the Malayarayar. The lives of the Arayar are dictated by clan norms. "Things had to be done without flouting illam and clan traditions" (*Kocharethi*, 9). Women were expected to take care of the household and children. The home belongs to the woman, which is when she becomes a *karnavathi* (*Kocharethi*, 30). Although their position cannot be considered entirely subordinate to men, they are still bound by traditional gender norms and are subject to male authority. According to Malayaryar folklore, "It is in the woman's mind that suspicion and jealousy first take root" (*Kocharethi*, 52). The Arayar myth, narrated in the novel, holds the woman's suspicious and jealous nature responsible for the loss of the tribe's relationship with the Gods.

In most instances, men make decisions that affect the lives of Arayar women. For example, at the start of the novel, when Kunjipennu expresses her disregard for a potential marriage to Narayanan, her sister-in-law, Paapi, says, "What's *the point in women being strong-willed? Once your father and brother decide to give you in marriage to someone, you'll simply have to go with him*" (*Kocharethi*,3). Women could defy male authority but with the pain of severe potential consequences. "If a girl disobeyed her father or brother would not hesitate to kick her to death (*Kocharethi*, 3).

Kunjipennu breaks tradition when he decides to marry Kochuraman, an orphan boy with no home. However, both Kunjipennu and Kochuraman are keenly aware of the importance

of clan norms. It is only because her father and brother agree to break custom, that Kunjipennu can marry the man of her choice. Both men and women are expected to adhere to modesty and societal expectations. Arethi girls are not supposed to talk to strangers, and Kochuraman is hesitant to approach Kunjipennu, because marriages are permitted only between certain *illams*, and are usually negotiated by tribe elders. Women have a strong sense of honour, as displayed when she rejects Narayanan and threatens him if he dares to touch her. At the same time, she also understands that her father and brother have authority over her, if Narayanan tells tales.

But the author clearly shows how the next generation is more willing to defy tradition. Ittyadi himself refuses to get remarried after the death of his first wife, Chirutha. Marrying for love is a relatively new concept among the Arayar. Cross-cousin marriages are common, and men are rough with their wives. Paapi, the wife of Kunjadichan, is shown to be jealous of the love between Kunjipennu and Kochuraman. Her character embodies the internalisation of patriarchal values, demonstrating a distorted perception of relationships and the self. Violent behaviour by men is the accepted norm.

*“Was there any girl who had not been abused or beaten by the man who had tied the thread around her neck?” (Kocharethi, 70)* The men in Arayar society are traditionally providers, builders and hunters. Kochuraman does not have a house or land of his own, which creates a challenge for the couple. When Ittyadi offers him the *theruvakudu*, or the land bordering the forest, Kochuraman refuses, because taking land from the wife's family is shameful. He faces societal pressure to prove his worth and establish a home and land. His inability to meet these expectations subjects him to a sense of inadequacy and frustration, highlighting how gender norms impose rigid standards on men's roles within the community.

Tribal beliefs serve to uphold the patriarchy in *Kocharethi*. Women are considered impure during menstruation and childbirth. During these phases, a woman retreats to an *eetappera* or shack. They are supposed to avoid contact with men and avoid entering the

kitchen. Since Kunjipennu is the daughter of a *velichapad* or shaman, she has to follow these rules strictly, as the tribal deities reside in the home. Interestingly, a similar isolation is observed by men taking part in burial rites for the dead. Childbirth, menstruation, and death are intertwined with notions of purity and pollution.

After the loss of their first child, Kochuraman and Kunjipennu have two more children, Parvathi, and a son, Shekaran. The establishment of a school in the village by Kochupilla, an *Aashan*, or teacher, opens up new possibilities for the next generation of Arayar. Education emerges as a catalyst for empowerment and change within *Kocharethi*.

The young Paravathi is popular among her friends, owing to her beauty and her father's relative prosperity. As the younger generation of Arayar grows older, they become more conscious of gender differences. Social groups automatically become more segregated, and intermingling is restricted. Some girls stop going to school after a certain age, as the parents want women in the home for household tasks. Paravathi expresses a desire for higher education, even though her mother remains sceptical of the idea. Even though the traditional rituals are followed when Paravathi begins to menstruate, she refuses to stop going to school. It is Kunjipennu, and not Kochuraman, who tries to stop her. The woman becomes the bearer of patriarchy as she engages in a battle of wills with her determined daughter. Kochuraman is aware that traditions are being broken among the new generation of Arayar. "*Kunjipennu did not marry her muracherukkan. She spent her theendari period in the southern veranda. He would lie inside the house...*" (Kocharethi, 160)

Both parents relent after advice from Kochupilla, but Kunjipennu continues to fight her daughter when it comes to breaking clan norms. For example, Paravathi removes the *kokkuri*, or thread, which represents a symbolic marriage with the *muracherukkan*. She sees it as a sign of bondage. "*Am I cattle or something to tie a rope around my neck?*" (Kocharethi, 160) Her mother sees the action as a sign of disrespect. The internalised belief that women should adhere

to prescribed norms leads Kunjipennu to question her daughter's actions and feel a sense of guilt and shame. Kunjipennu is torn between upholding traditional gender roles and allowing her daughter to pursue education. Her internal struggle reflects the intersection of her identity as a woman and as a member of the Malayaryar community, where clan norms dictate social relationships.

At certain instances in the novel, Kunjipennu seems almost jealous of the opportunities and comforts available to her daughter. She wonders if Parvathi is an *asuravithu*, a demon child, or a rebel (*Kocharethi*,161). When Kunjipennu learns from Shekaran about Parvathi giving letters to Padamanvan, she uses the opportunity to get Kochuraman to end her studies.

Paravathi's hunger strike and threats of suicide force her parents to yield. At this point in the novel, Kunjipennu seems to have forgotten her youth, and her rebellion. She had refused to marry her *muracherukkan*, even going so far as to tell her sister-in-law, "*They'll find me at the foot of some eastern cliff...*" (*Kocharethi*,3). Her daughter makes a similar declaration, "*You'll find me amid these rocks, my head bashed to bits.*" (*Kocharethi*,179)

Both generations of women similarly rebelled against tradition, except Parvathi fights for her love as well as for her education. She even dares to take a step her mother could not have entertained- elopement. Her education and job free her from the restraints of tribal society. Her job also allows her luxuries which are incomprehensible to her fellow women. Several sarees, a watch, trips to the cinema, all things inaccessible to women a generation ago. The power dynamic between Parvathi and her parents shifts when she begins to earn money. At first, Parvathi's rebellion against patriarchal norms brings her into direct conflict with her parents. Particularly Kunjipennu, who attempts to suppress her aspirations. Later in the novel, Kochuraman and Kunjipennu wait for her to send them money, and lament the fact that the amount remains meagre. As the village's only educated and working woman, Parvathi becomes a source of attraction. Her position in society challenges traditional gender roles within the



Malayaryar tribe. Her financial independence and education allow her to question age-old norms imposed by the society she grew up in. Parvathi's struggle can be seen as a representation of the larger conflict between progress and tradition, which is a recurring theme throughout the novel. Another central theme explored in the novel is the narrative of resistance and agency displayed by female characters. The novel presents instances where women challenge traditional norms, defy patriarchal authority, and seek agency. Parvathi's determination to pursue education and love showcases her defiance against oppressive practices.

Parvathi's journey serves as a powerful example of how intersectional feminism comes into play in the context of *Kocharethi*. Her gender intersects with her socioeconomic position, education, and situation as a tribal woman. Through Parvathi, the reader can understand how various social dimensions come together to influence agency and opportunities. Parvathi can break limits set by society only because of her education and subsequent employment.

Parvathi and Kunjipennu set the change process in motion by their determination to marry for love. Parvathi's decision to elope can be seen in contrast to her mother's choices, who was more constrained by society due to her lack of education.

Both Parvathi and Kunjipennu's experiences can be used to highlight the importance of intersectional feminist readings. Reading *Kocharethi* merely through the lens of gender would be insufficient to understand the challenges faced by women. An intersectional approach enables a more comprehensive analysis and emphasises the intersectional factors that come together to oppress marginalised women.

In conclusion, through the perspective of intersectional feminist theory, this paper has explored the web of intersecting identities embodied by the characters in Narayan's *Kocharethi- The Araya Woman*. The above analysis shows that these intersecting identities, ranging from gender to socio-economic status, shape the characters' experiences, even as they face the social changes brought by British colonialism. The paper sheds light on the impact of external

influences on the once-insular Malayaryar social structure. It provides insights into the challenges presented by multiple intersecting identities within the social structure and how they interact with gender, tradition, and power dynamics. By examining the experiences of women such as Kunjipennu, Paapi, and Parvathi, the paper aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of the social structures that shape the lives of women. The narrative of Parvathi's empowerment demonstrates the transformative potential of intersectional feminism in challenging oppressive practices. Through this intersectional feminist analysis, the paper hopes to contribute to broader discussions on gender equality and social justice. By recognizing and challenging oppressive practices, narratives, and power structures, there is a potential for positive societal change, not only within the context of the novel but also in contemporary settings where marginalized women continue to face similar challenges. Ultimately, this research aims to emphasise the significance of intersectional feminism in literature and its capacity to unveil and reconstruct narratives that promote equality and inclusivity. The paper also hopes to contribute to feminist narratives within Indian Literature. Historically, the Indian feminist movement has been criticized for being limited to the experiences and perspectives of educated, upper-class, upper-caste women, neglecting the voices of marginalised communities. '*Kocharethi*' challenges this limitation by delving into the lives of women from a tribal community, allowing for a richer and more diverse representation of feminist experiences. The novel serves as a reminder that feminism must encompass the struggles of women from all backgrounds and recognize the complexities of intersectionality.

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