



Unveiling Change: The Transformation of Arayar Women Through Modernization with reference to Narayanan's *Kocharethi*

Geesha G

PhD Research Scholar,
PG & Research Department of English,
Government Arts College (Autonomous),
Coimbatore 641018.

Dr. N Vijayasamundeeswari M.A., M.Phil., M.S., PhD, MBA, PGDCA
Associate Professor,
PG & Research Department of English,
Government Arts College (Autonomous),
Coimbatore 641018.

Abstract

The Arayars are a distinctive ethnic group of hill tribes inhabiting the precipitous slopes of elevated mountain ranges of the Western Ghats. They are best known for their striking appearance and greater degree of social refinement compared to other hill tribes. They have remained largely insulated from external influence. However, the advent of modernization has gradually ensnared Arayar women, compelling them to adopt foreign lifestyles. While the older generation remains steadfast in preserving traditional values, revering both their cultural heritage and the natural environment, the younger generation has fully embraced the transformations ushered in by modernization, often repudiating their ancestral customs and relationship with Nature. This study seeks to critically examine the impact of modernization on women, Nature, and their tribal culture, juxtaposing the experiences of Arayar women from two distinct generational cohorts.

Keywords: Modernization, eco-feminism, tribal women, Nature, tribal culture and supporting views of Vandana Shiva

Introduction

Women are resolute, compassionate, and ambitious beings, endowed with the remarkable capacity to overcome any obstacles in their path. However, despite their inherent strength, women continue to face myriad challenges, often being perceived as vulnerable or fragile in societal contexts. There exists within women an indefinable, profound connection to Nature, one that is rooted in deep respect and reverence. Women are often symbolically associated with Nature, both through their physical form and their nurturing feminine traits. Historically, in the name of progress, patriarchal systems have disrupted this intrinsic bond, leading to the degradation of both the environment and women's relationship with it, which can be remarked in Ecofeminism. As a result, women have increasingly been forced to seek alternative means of sustenance for their families. Over time, the forces of modernization and education have profoundly altered their lives, guiding them toward new ways of living that often involve a departure from traditional, nature-based practices. This shift reflects a broader rejection of both Nature and cultural heritage in the pursuit of a seemingly more fulfilling existence.

Modernization refers to the transformation of Agrarian societies into industrial sectors, propelled by advancements in science and technology. It is not merely a process of technological development, but also an ideological shift—one that encourages the adoption of new social structures and values. The term "modernization" was first popularized by the American scholar Daniel Lerner, and it emerged as a dominant concept in the late 18th and 19th centuries, reaching full fruition in the 20th and 21st centuries. The primary focus of modernization lies in fostering industrial growth, educational development, economic expansion, and the propagation of new ideas grounded in scientific and technological advancements. Key elements of modernization include innovations in technology, infrastructural transformation, enhanced productivity, and improved standards of living. However, as with any phenomenon, modernization has its darker aspects. It develops with its significant challenges, including job displacement, environmental exploitation, cultural erosion, and the dismantling of traditional values. At its core, modernization aims to increase productivity and maximize profit, often at the expense of social and environmental well-being.

Western patriarchy, utilizing the tools of modern science, has long exploited and manipulated women, convincing them that material wealth is the ultimate means of survival and fulfilment. The allure of modernization, with its promises of economic growth and social advancement, captivated many, leading

individuals to forsake their deeper, spiritual connection to Nature. The resulting emphasis on monetary gain has become a driving force behind environmental degradation, with unchecked resource extraction and exploitation occupies commonplace. As Vandana Shiva states in her book *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India*, "The ultimate reductionism is achieved when nature is linked with a view of economic activity in which money is the only gauge of value and wealth" (Shiva, 25).

Ecofeminism is a critical school of thought that examines the intersection of gender oppression and environmental destruction, positing that both are consequences of the intertwined systems of patriarchy and capitalism. The term "ecofeminism" was coined by French feminist and writer Françoise d'Eaubonne in her 1974 work *Le Féminisme ou la Mort*. Ecofeminism critiques the dominant patriarchal ideologies that not only subordinate women but also encourage the separation of women from Nature, fostering a worldview in which Nature is something to be exploited rather than revered. This ideological shift has led to the distancing of modern women from Nature, driven in large part by the influence of education and scientific rationalism. As a result, many women now prioritize a life of economic and social fulfilment over one that is in harmony with the natural world. This disconnection has facilitated the intrusion of outsiders into previously protected environments, accelerating the destruction and depletion of natural resources.

Western patriarchy has long sought to marginalize women's knowledge and expertise, particularly in areas related to the environment and agriculture. By systematically undermining women's traditional roles as caretakers of nature, patriarchal structures have sought to erase the value of their indigenous knowledge. As Vandana Shiva poignantly argues in *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India*, "The witch hunts of Europe were largely a process of delegitimizing and destroying the expertise of European women" (Shiva 21). These historical acts of violence were not merely about social control but about suppressing women's knowledge of the natural world. In a similar vein, patriarchal forces have repeatedly dismissed women's agricultural and forestry knowledge as "primitive" or "irrelevant," contributing to the broader marginalization of women's roles in environmental stewardship.

This paper seeks to explore the impact of modernization on tribal women through the lens of ecofeminism and to assess the subsequent effects of modernization on both nature and tribal culture. I will compare the lives of two generations of women from the Arayar community and analyse how the forces of modernization have transformed their existence.

Narayanan is a prominent writer from Kerala, acclaimed for his contributions to literature and the recipient of prestigious awards such as the Kerala Sahitya Academy Award, the “Thoppil Ravi Award”, and the “Abu Dhabi Sakthi Award”. Born on September 26, 1940, in the Kadayathoor Hills of Kerala, Narayanan hails from the Malayarayar tribal community and is widely regarded as Kerala’s first tribal novelist. Over the course of his career, he has penned eleven novels and five short stories. His debut novel, *Kocharethi*, published in 1989, is considered his magnum opus, earning him the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award. The novel has since been translated into Hindi, English, and various South Indian languages, further expanding its reach.

The English translation of *Kocharethi* was undertaken by Catherine Thankamma, an associate professor of English and an accomplished translator. Published by Oxford University Press in 2011, her translation of *Kocharethi* earned the Economist Crossword Book Award that same year. Thankamma has translated four novels to date, and her work in translating Narayanan’s novel has garnered critical acclaim for its fidelity to the original while making the text accessible to a broader, international audience.

Kocharethi chronicles the lives of the Malayarayar tribal people who reside along the foothills of the Western Ghats in mid-eastern Kerala. Set during the British colonial period, the novel traces the shifting perceptions of land and ownership among the Adivasi community. The narrative unfolds through the experiences of Kunjupennu, the novel's protagonist, her husband Kochuraman, and other members of their family. The first half of the novel presents a vivid portrayal of the Arayar community, their deep connection to nature, and the cultural practices that define their existence. From their physical appearance to their customs, every aspect of their lives is carefully detailed. In contrast, the second half of the novel turns more sombre, documenting the personal tragedies and exploitation faced by the Arayars. The Malayarayar community is portrayed as innocent and uneducated, vulnerable to exploitation by outsiders. They are subjected to unfair taxation by upper-caste landlords to cultivate their own land and are forced to pay temple taxes despite being denied entry to the temple. Merchants exploit their lack of knowledge, offering unfair prices for their produce, further entrenching the community in poverty and injustice. In the face of these harsh realities, education emerges as a beacon of hope for the Arayars, a potential means of breaking free from their circumstances. However, despite some progress through social development, the community remains resistant to fully embracing the sweeping changes modernization brings.

The impact of modernization on the women of the Arayar community is particularly evident through the lives of the protagonist Kunjupennu and her daughter Parvati. Narayanan contrasts the lives of two women to highlight the transformation brought about by modernization. Kunjupennu is portrayed as the epitome of tradition: she is a woman deeply rooted in her cultural values and community norms. In contrast, Parvati, her daughter, is a victim of the pervasive influence of education and modernization. Parvati is depicted as self-centred, stubborn, and increasingly detached from the emotional ties and communal values that once defined her life. Her education becomes a catalyst for her rejection of her heritage, as she mocks her parents' beliefs and undermines the cultural traditions of her community. Parvati's story reflects the disorienting effects of modernization, where the acquisition of knowledge does not necessarily lead to personal or societal progress but, instead, to a fracturing of traditional bonds and identities.

Arayar women play an equally vital role in their families, contributing to the economic well-being of the household in tandem with men. In this community, there exists a deep interdependence between the sexes, with both men and women sharing in the responsibilities of subsistence. Women are actively involved in every aspect of agricultural labour, from weeding and hoeing to farming and harvesting. Even after the crops are gathered, it is the women who bear the brunt of the arduous tasks, such as threshing, dehulling, winnowing, and storing the harvested grains in woven baskets. Household chores, traditionally viewed as women's domain, are integral to the daily functioning of Arayar life. Regardless of age, any girl within the community is expected to contribute to the household, with the understanding that her role as a woman entails responsibility for domestic work. The home is considered the domain of the married woman, who is entrusted with its upkeep and well-being. However, the younger generation of women, who attend school, often neglect these traditional duties in favour of academic pursuits. Unlike the women of previous generations, such as Kunjupennu, who were deeply engaged in physical labour, the modern generation opts for office work, seeking to improve their standard of living through employment in urban settings. The allure of urban life, with its promise of better opportunities and greater exposure, increasingly draws contemporary women away from their agrarian roots.

In terms of attire, the contrast between traditional and modern generations is stark. Older Arayar women typically wear their traditional mundu, a cloth wrapped around their hips, accompanied by a piece of cloth to cover the breast. This simple, modest dress is all that is required. However, the younger

generation has embraced a significant shift in their clothing choices, adopting styles that depart from their cultural traditions. Modern women now wear blouses and bodices beneath their garments, and students wear uniforms to school. Upon entering the workforce, individuals like Parvati—an emblem of the changing times—don the saree and adorn themselves with gold accessories to blend in with their colleagues. This shift in dress symbolizes a broader transformation in the social and cultural fabric of the Arayar community.

Historically, tribal girls were expected to assist their mothers with a variety of household chores, embodying traditional feminine roles marked by obedience and deference. Upon reaching puberty, they were trained in the skills necessary to become good wives and mothers, with little exposure to the outside world. Their lives were centred around their homes, their families, and the land they worked, deeply respecting the Earth and valuing its natural bounty. In contrast, the younger generation of Arayar girls, now educated and increasingly aware of the world beyond their immediate surroundings, view their roles in society quite differently. The knowledge they gain through formal education empowers them to challenge traditional expectations, and they adopt a more individualistic perspective, guided by their understanding of right and wrong. These young women are exposed to new ideas and opportunities, which shapes their approach to life and to the community.

Arayar women, particularly those from earlier generations, are renowned for their bravery and resilience. They possess the strength to defend themselves and their families against both human and animal threats. However, due to community customs, Arayar women are not permitted to interact freely with strangers; when visitors arrive, they are expected to retreat to the kitchen and remain out of sight. The younger generation, having received formal education, has broken away from these restrictive traditions. Today, young women in the community freely interact with strangers at school, engaging with them in ways that were previously unthinkable. They no longer adhere to the community's historical prohibitions but instead embrace a more open, outward-looking approach.

Moreover, the women of the older generation would typically welcome visitors with hospitality and warmth. Whether they were guests or traders traveling to the hills for commerce, the Arayar women would offer food and a place to rest, expecting nothing in return. This deep sense of communal responsibility and generosity is contrasted by the behaviour of the modern generation, who often display reluctance in even helping their neighbours. The knowledge gained through education has led many young women to adopt a

more self-centred outlook, where personal gain and individual success take precedence over communal ties and responsibilities. As a result, these women are less inclined to engage with their surroundings, prioritizing their own lives over the well-being of the community.

Marriage in the Arayar community is typically arranged by the elders, with the first preference always given to the girl's Muracherukkan (maternal uncle's son). This preference arises from their matrilineal system, where lineage and inheritance are traced through the mother. Women, however, are generally not afforded the autonomy to voice their preferences regarding marriage. It is expected that a woman marries her Muracherukkan if one exists, or otherwise, the individual chosen by her elders. Though Kunjupennu personally harbours affection for Kochuraman, she is reluctant to express it, as the customs of her community restrict her freedom. She reflects on this restriction, stating, "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.' That was the custom. If a girl disobeyed her father or brother, they would not hesitate to kick her to death; no one would challenge them or blame them for it" (Narayan 3). Since Kunjupennu does not have a Muracherukkan, her father arranges her marriage to Kochuraman. In contrast, the women of the younger generation, influenced by modern ideologies, possess a different outlook on marriage and life. They are less concerned with parental authority and more focused on choosing a partner based on love. Parvati, Kunjupennu's daughter, has a Muracherukkan named Raghavan, whom she dislikes. Influenced by education and modernity, Parvati chooses to elope with Padmanaban, a man of her desire, defying her parents' wish.

Menstruation in the Arayar community is considered a social taboo, and during menstruation, women are prohibited from participating in household activities, entering the main house, or touching anyone. Each household contains a special structure called the eettappera, where women remain during menstruation and childbirth. During this period, women carry a scythe as a protective charm to ward off evil spirits. Kunjupennu adhered strictly to these customs when she lived with her father, as she was the daughter of Vellichapad. However, after her marriage to Kochuraman, she had no choice but to remain in the corner of the veranda, as their house lacked a designated eettappera. Her daughter, Parvati, however, challenges these traditional restrictions. Despite the community's prohibitions, Parvati wishes to attend school during

her menstruation, reflecting the younger generation's departure from established norms and their embrace of modern practices.

Childbearing remains one of the most significant responsibilities of women within the Arayar community. Pregnant women are revered and treated with great care by their families. Special ceremonies honour the expectant mother, and she is sent to her natal home for childbirth, assisted by a midwife in the eettappera. After the birth, both mother and child are nurtured with herbal remedies and a natural diet to promote recovery. In contrast, Parvati, representing the modern shift in the community, does not rely on her parents during her pregnancy. Modern women now opt for hospital deliveries and reject traditional methods, embracing Western medicine over time-honoured practices.

Level of Acceptance

Modernization presents both benefits and drawbacks for Arayar women. While the younger generation fully embraces the changes brought about by modernization, often without considering the consequences, the older generation continues to adhere to the traditional norms, respecting their culture and customs. Kunjupennu and women of her generation never considered the possibility of formal education for themselves, but they now send their daughters to school, hoping that education will provide them with opportunities for financial independence and protection from exploitation. However, while they are willing to embrace some aspects of modernity, they are not entirely open to all the changes it brings. For instance, Kunjupennu insists that Parvati continue her daily prayers and disapproves of her attending school during menstruation. In order to support Parvati's education, Kunjupennu even pawns her gold chain, with the expectation that her daughter will use her earnings to improve their family's financial situation. Kunjupennu is so focused on ensuring a better life for her family that she declines marriage proposals for Parvati, demanding that she work until the gold chain is returned. The land, which they have trusted for sustenance, has failed to provide sufficient yield, and the family often goes hungry. This unmet expectation for agricultural productivity drives the desire for change.

Parvati, however, is a stark example of the transformation in the Arayar community. She shows little regard for her family or their traditions, mockingly dismissing the practices of her community. Her education empowers her to pursue her own path, and she successfully completes her studies before seeking employment outside her hometown. Rejecting traditional practices, Parvati chooses her own life partner,

marrying Padmanaban against her parents' wishes. Modernization has shaped her into a self-centred individual who places little value on her cultural heritage, focusing on her own desires and ambitions, to the detriment of the sacrifices made by her family. Here Parvathi is depicted as the representation of modernity.

Conclusion

As modernity increasingly distances itself from the environment, it is crucial to evaluate how contemporary society interacts with Nature. The above passages highlight the contrasting perspectives of two generations of Arayar women. The older generation deeply understands the value of Nature and culture, recognizing their essential role in survival. In contrast, the younger generation, influenced by modernization, fails to appreciate the importance of these traditions. Modern women, like Parvati, view agricultural work as a hindrance to a better life and seek out urban jobs in pursuit of financial independence. The older generation, however, continues to believe in the medicinal and practical value of nature, relying on it for health and well-being. The younger generation, by contrast, rejects these methods in favour of Western medicine and hospital care.

Ecofeminism suggests that empowering women and acknowledging their traditional ecological knowledge can offer sustainable and equitable solutions to environmental challenges. To address the erosion of both women's rights and environmental degradation, it is essential to recognize and value the traditional knowledge and practices that have sustained communities for generations. Education can play a pivotal role in this process, encouraging younger generations to respect and integrate their cultural values into their modern lives. Ecofeminists argue that by dismantling male dominance and patriarchal power structures, society can forge a new, more harmonious relationship with nature—one that benefits both the environment and the women who have long been its stewards. Since rapid and immense change occur in today's modern life, it acts as a double-edged sword.

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