KOCHARETHI: THE ARAYA WOMAN - A TALE OF CONVERGENCE AND DEPENDENCE OF NATURE AND CULTURE

SNEHA ANN MATHAI
Research Scholar, Christ (Deemed to be University) Bangalore, India

ABSTRACT
Viewed dichotomous in regards to the relationship between humans and their environment - ‘Nature’ and ‘Culture’ are the two anthropological categories that even today are understood as poles apart. What’s seen to be belonging to Nature is not approved as the result of human intervention and vice-versa. However, in deference to this view, this paper seeks to elucidate how ‘Nature’ and ‘Culture’ are not contrastive in their Nature but rather converge in many ways, through Narayan’s seminal work “Kocharethi: the Araya Women”, translated from Malayalam by Catherine Thankamma. A work that is a mouthpiece of the life, the ways and practices of the Malayarayars, who abide in the Western Ghats of Kerala. Therefore, keeping a cultural and environmental perspective, the paper employs a thematic and discourse analysis of the seminal work that brings forth the convergence and dependence of Nature and Culture.

KEYWORDS: Nature and Culture, Kocharethi, Convergence and Dependence

Received: Feb 12, 2021; Accepted: Mar 02, 2021; Published: Mar 26, 2021; Paper Id.: IJELJUN20219

INTRODUCTION

The anthropological categories of ‘Nature’ and ‘Culture’ are often viewed as a dichotomy in regards to the relationship between humans and their environment. What is seen to be belonging to Nature cannot be seen as the result of human intervention and, what is ascertained as cultural development can only be viewed to be achieved against Nature. However, this dichotomy exposes an inherent concept that can be characterised by the famous quote: ‘cogito ergo sum’ - I think therefore I am (Descartes, Bailey, & Johnston, 1998). That is, we human beings assert this dichotomy by wearing the crown in the hierarchy of the natural kingdom. An individual becomes the subject, and everything else, be it the rocks, the animals, the plants, or the water, become the objects. (Subject/Object Dichotomy). A fundamental dualism that not only sets up the ‘dividing line between humankind and the rest of nature but goes further in setting up humankind as the only principal source of value or meaning in the world’ (Eckersley 1992, p. 51). A perception rooted in human centredness that eco-philosophers define as ‘anthropocentrism’. Thus, essentially denying that Nature has any inherent worth and therefore shaping humanity’s structure of values under a human-nature dualism. However, in deference to this view, this paper sees how ‘Nature’ and ‘Culture’ are not contrastive in their Nature but rather converge in many ways. Ways that not only have spun our values, beliefs and norms but even our practices, livelihoods, knowledge and languages. All this because a mutual feedback exits between one’s cultural systems and the environment. A simple shift in one will lead to a change in the other. Such a conjunction is efficiently seen in many tribal societies, especially the Malayarayars who have their abodes on the slopes of the Western Ghats in Kerala. Narayan, the mouthpiece of the community and also the first tribal novelist of Kerala, brings forth this connexion between Nature and Culture through his seminal work Kocharethi: the Araya Women, which is translated from Malayalam by Catherine Thankamma.

Keeping a cultural as well as environmental perspective, the paper employs a thematic and discourse
analysis to bring forth the convergence and dependence of Nature and Culture. It creates the narrative that spells out the attractiveness of the ecocentric lifestyle. But it becomes necessary to state here that the meaning of ‘Culture’, which this paper adheres to, aligns strongly with Raymond Williams’ definition of ‘Culture’. He iterates Culture as - ‘a particular way of life, which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behaviour’ (Williams, 1961, p. 57). This ordinary common way of life, rooted deeply in Nature, forms the Culture of the Malayarayars. From their unique set of beliefs to their lifestyle, the mutual influence of Nature and Culture shines forth. However, time and again, the lives of the Malayarayars are understood only under Nature, and Culture dichotomy, where either only the cultural tropes of the community are identified (Sruthi & Kumar, 2019); (Sruthi & Pai, 2017) or the problems of acculturation (Paul, 2017); (V, 2019) and identity struggles (Kumari, 2016) are looked into. Past research range from examining Narayan’s work as tribal literature to simply recognising folkloric elements that bring forth the cultural traditions, rituals and customs of the people. But while such elements and identities are established beautifully previously, hardly has the connexion between Nature and Culture been addressed or examined, which is a necessity since the Culture of the Malayarayars itself becomes part of Nature.

To shine light upon this relationship, the text evidently links up the four key bridges that converge Nature with Culture and vice versa. These four key bridges are also the themes that were ascertained after the coding phase in the thematic analysis of the text (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The identified themes accurately reflected what was evident in the data collected from the text as a whole. They are - beliefs and worldviews; livelihoods and practices; and norms and institutions (Pretty & Pilgrim, 2008). These three major themes will be elaborated on below, but a fourth theme could also be traced from the codes identified (see table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S. No.</th>
<th>The Identified Codes</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>The Evident Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>ritual/traditions</td>
<td>pp. 58 – the entire page</td>
<td>Belief and worldviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>belief</td>
<td>pp. 51 – 3rd paragraph</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>myths</td>
<td>pp. 118 – 1st paragraph</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>sustainable living</td>
<td>pp. 31 – 3rd paragraph</td>
<td>Livelihoods and Practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>way of life</td>
<td>pp. 17 – the entire page</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>lifestyle</td>
<td>pp. 12,28,37</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>identity</td>
<td>pp. 85 – 1st paragraph</td>
<td>Norms and Institutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>marriage</td>
<td>pp. 190 – the entire page</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>power equation</td>
<td>pp. 90,115,136</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. The fourth theme can be identified as the ‘contrast lifestyle’, which includes the codes that show the lifestyle change, the injustice meted out and the un-controlled use of resources/greed.

This latter theme (fourth theme) shows the stark contrast in the life lived by the Malayarayars and the so-called ‘civilised’ plain dwellers. Even though the theme generated may not directly contribute to understanding the convergence and dependence between Nature and Culture yet, it provides valid substantiations for the mutual relationship. Moreover, it also stands as a reminder and practical option for the present times. Therefore, as each theme is expounded below, the evidence for it is showcased by the contrary lifestyle, which is deteriorating the delicate balance between Nature and Culture.
BELIEF AND WORLDVIEWS

Beliefs

As Raymond Williams specifies upon the ‘ordinariness’ of Culture, he also stresses the ‘active and creative capacity of people to construct the shared meanings and practices’ (Williams, 1958). These shared meanings form the basis of the ‘Culture’, which become the very systems by which people interpret the world around them. For the Malayarayars, the interpretation of their shared meaning is that Nature and Culture is a unit and not separate opposing entities. ‘It is always us, a feeling of being one with the hills and waters, animals and men’ (Jayasree, 2012, p. xvi).

They do not belong to any land, but yet the land is theirs, equally so, for everyone in the community. No question of individual rights arises over the land when the land is inseparable from their sense of collective identity. This collective spirit of the Malayarayars is what establishes the Nature - Culture convergence and dependence. The land provides for their needs and necessities, yet they do not take it for granted. From the crops that were cultivated to the houses build upon them, all aligns to the mutual relationship and not to the greed. However, the contrary is the lives of the civilised folks who only venture through the hills for their gains. Be it for uprooting teak and rosewood or for the selling of pepper. They only saw Nature for exploitation and went to the lengths of calling the inclusive way of life that directed the traditions and rituals of the Malayarayars as ‘uncivilised’.

Rituals, Traditions and Myths

Ritual, traditions, and myths form the ethos of Culture, paving the way for the very idea of ethnicity. While for the members of the same ethnic community, they are often a matter of heritage and pride passed down from one generation to the next. But, for the superior entity (Occident), it may just be another ‘uncivilised’ act of the ‘other’/ the subaltern. Rituals and traditions of the old that bear absolutely no significance for the present. However, rituals and traditions for the Malayarayars define their entire life – cycle. Be it the rituals - marking the birth ceremonies, the marriage customs or the funeral services. All these together assimilate the individual to the social fabric of the community. These rituals and myths that define their Culture are in close communion with Nature, without which it would not find existence.

The shrill calling of the theendari bird, which is believed to precede the beginning of menstruation in a woman, or the crowing of the chaviliyan, the harbinger of death, all are the myths that find their existence in Nature. Even in the case of religion, each Malayarayar household had specific family deities and yet more than the worshipping of hill deities, they believed in velichapad and miracle healers. Their form of worship was in union with their day to day lives. A united vision of being that lacked the so-called ‘civilised’ way of compartmentalising Nature and Culture. All these ways of Malayarayars come to light through the rich oral traditions from which Narayan heavily draws from. However, he does not shy away from critiquing the Hindu orthodoxy. Through the innocent origin story of the Malayarayars placed in the context of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata by Kochupilla Asan, Narayan showcases the deliberate attempt by the outsiders to mask the Malayarayars own origin myths. Attempts that tried to draw them away from their own stories, entwined in Nature and rather appropriating them in the Brahminical system of belief. Nevertheless, the Malayarayar rituals, myths and traditions are not just mere representations or signs of their beliefs that can be done away with; rather, they influence and at times are even synonymous to their way of living.
LIVELIHOODS AND PRACTICES

Sustainable Lifestyle and the Ways of Living

When Stuart Hall iterated his meaning of Culture, he included how it was the – ‘actual grounded terrain of practices’ similar to Pierre Bourdieu’s proposition about Culture – ‘as habitus allied to a network of shared meanings and practices.’ The commonality here, between the two views, lies in the idea of how Culture enfolds practices, which over time constitute lifestyle. A lifestyle that is not just about everyday life but one that defines one’s identity, their social relations and thereafter bestows meaning and value to artefacts within Culture. Therefore, if one looks deep into the lifestyle of the Malayarayars, it reiterates their Culture, which is yet again in close conjunction as well as dependence on Nature. From their practices in farming, clothing and eating, clear glimpses of a sustainable living immerse; Wearing clothes made from the tender film of the areca spathe and using containers made of the same to using the shaped leaves of the jackfruit tree as spoons iterate their natural way of living.

Keeping a self-sufficient economy, their significant income came from exchanging a part of the produce from their farm. Pepper being the most sought-after commodity, for which they were exploited time and again in different ways. But even though pepper brought income, the Malayarayars relied heavily upon the food crops like tapioca, yam and wild tubers. A rotation of crops that did not destroy the land. However, the greed of the superior European planters led to the vast depletion of the rich biodiversity by shifting the very mode of cultivation to monocropping. The ignorance of these planters about the mutual feedback between Nature and Culture was such a costly affair that it even cost Kochuraman and Kunjipennu their firstborn. Because when they set fire to the dried tall grass without even minding the consequences, the fire from the plain engulfed the slopes of the hills, leaving a forlorn ghost land behind. Such acts of the ‘civilised’ folks who believe in the dichotomous relation between Nature and Culture are absolutely detrimental. It is ironical to call such people ‘civilised’ and the people of the hills’ uncivilised’ for over the years. An identity thrust upon the people of the forest, owing to the detrimental power disparities.

NORMS AND INSTITUTIONS

Identity, Marriage and Power Equation

Identities constitute experience that forms culture. However, experiences also encompass the idea of representation – which thereby includes - the process of representation, the consumption of signs, the making of meaning from signs and the knowledge of meaning. Therefore, identities are the comprehended meanings from representations that ultimately form Culture. But a problem arises when these identities and meanings are caught up in the power dynamics. The superior entity defines meanings and identities. For example, consider the word ‘Adivasis’- referring to the first inhabitants of the land scattered across the country’s length and breadth. ‘But it was the European anthropologists who made a taxonomical listing of their physical features and living conditions and classified them under the unifying rubric, ‘tribe’ (Jayasree, 2012, p. xviii). A great degree of objectification and distortion lies in the history of this naming – from something unfamiliar to something familiar for the European. Nevertheless, countering this logic of the standardisation is the term – ‘Adivasi’. An identity that is not born of blatant power dynamics but of self-identification and assertion. An identity that has evolved as an experience and a culture that is closely intertwined and sustained in Nature.

The Malayarayar are also an Adivasi community who find their identity in the convergence with Nature. Each Malayarayar belong to an ‘illam’ (clan); these illam’s are not just their clan name but their identities that regulated marriages. For marriage between certain illams were only permitted, and those who breached the accepted customs became
Kocharethi: The Araya Woman - A Tale of Convergence and Dependence of Nature and Culture

outcastes. However, it is fascinating to note how these *illsams* that became identities of people were also derived from Nature. That is, the clan names or the name of the *illsams* came from either a tree or a rock. For example, ‘Varikkamakal’ - where ‘Varikka’ was the name of a tree next to their home, that eventually became their landmark with which they identified. Such convergence and dependence between Nature and Culture were noted not just in their identities but even in their thoughts, where the heartfelt description of their beloved, invoked strong images of Nature. ‘Her eyes were large, like the *karinkoovalam* flower’. Such invoking stretch across the book’s length, which reiterates the convergence of Nature and Culture and the mutual dependence between the same.

CONCLUSIONS

Thus, it would only be appropriate to conclude by restating how Narayan’s seminal work is truly a piece of art that brings forth not just the convergence between Nature and Culture in the life of the Malayarayars but the mutual dependence between the two as well; for Nature and Culture are just two sides of the very same coin and not a binary. They are not the opposite ends of a spectrum but rather two lines that at some point converge and yet run parallel as well. A perfect relationship built in harmony and cooperation rather than a competition which is truly the call for the hour. Because today when humanity seems to be hurtling down the anthropocentric highway, all but a brick wall of total disaster awaits.

Nevertheless, even now, the bumpy track labelled ‘ecocentric survival’ comes to the rescue. For it places welfare at the heart of all social, psychological and economic enterprises. It understands the world as a collaborating system of networks, ecologies and relationships. It recognises that human systems are a subset of Nature’s systems and will only survive if we co-exist in harmony. Thus, this research lends itself as the much-needed transition towards an ecocentric perspective. A perspective that makes each human being step away from an egocentric point of view and rather step up to become stewards of the environment. And therefore, this is the juncture that calls for further research. Research that in their multidisciplinary Nature would find a plan of action for better Nature and Human coexistence.

REFERENCES


